



a boy in south africa JULIAN SHAW WAS SO MOVED BY THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA, HE GRABBED A CAMERA AND DID SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

WORDS JACQUELINE DONCHI

Aids. South Africa. Thirty million will die. Generations wiped out. We've all heard the statistics, we've all watched Live Aid in our lounge rooms. But we're still mystified as to what to do next.

Documentarian Julian Shaw is testament to how much can be done if you get out there first and ask questions later. He was 15 when he packed up his camera equipment, negotiated an independent learning contract at school and flew to Africa on a mission.

"I admit to knowing nothing before I started filming," he says from his home in Camperdown, NSW. "I felt completely in over my head all the time for the first year. And I was. Learning about how these elements of apartheid had resurfaced in a different form in the 'new South Africa' was overwhelming. There is this all-consuming sadness about the disease there."

It was Pieter-Dirk Uys' theatrical satire at the Sydney Opera House that ignited Julian's fixation. A South African political satirist, Pieter created Evita Bezuidenhout – an hysterical drag queen with a serious agenda, who has become South Africa's most famous white woman and was one of the first to interview Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison. While performing at venues all around the world, Uys has recently taken AIDS awareness entertainment to over a million schoolchildren within his country and has become a national icon. "He's a magnet. He's even more famous in drag, you should see the crowds then!"

"I never wanted to make documentaries," says Julian. "But I listened to that voice inside when I saw his show. I was just overwhelmed with this irresistible, outrageous enthusiasm of his. His eyes literally sparkle, his life force and energy is supernatural. We related in that way, I can be pretty cheeky and excitable. But at 60 he has the energy of a newborn kitten. He completely outpaced me, as a teenager!"

"I love the guy. I went there with an open mind, I didn't want to lionise him, but he is an iconoclast and really my kind of guy," he says. "Pieter is venomously angry about how politicians can destroy life in his country, he is a patriot, and some might have this preconceived idea of a fey drag queen or something, but he is the most focused, hard-hitting, cunning and fearless guy I've met."

The three-year project turned out to be a process of elimination for Julian, who decided to ditch the idea of a big-picture doco in lieu of an in-depth profile on the life work of the notoriously private Uys.

"There's a moment that still gives me goosebumps where Pieter says, 'Nobody knows anything about my private life. I don't let anybody into my home with a camera except you'. Almost accidentally I infiltrated his universe in this deep way, and I do think being an alien let me see the world without fear."

Unlike more prominent champions, Uys takes a less global approach to AIDS education and political protest. "Geldof and Bono?" muses Julian. "Those guys are OK, and they do give plenty of time and money; they get their pictures taken at the right time. Pieter just keeps his head down doing his shows for schoolkids and working hard on a day-to-day basis. That's where the change happens."

Julian takes a philosophical view of whether or not his Western naiveté helped or a hindered the project: "My upbringing was very open-minded. Politics was never on the radar. In South Africa, six year-olds know all the major players in the political echelon because for them, the issues are a life-and-death matter. We have the luxury here that it isn't. But I think this film shows that bad politics doesn't just irritate, it can actually kill hundreds of thousands of people."

A born storyteller, Julian grew up in New Zealand before moving to Sydney with his family at age 10. "I was an All Black-loving Kiwi kid who loved drawing pictures and writing little books."

As a child, he would make carefully staged New Zealand's *Funniest Home Video* segments involving huge cakes and unsuspecting family members. "The presenter of that show came to our beach house in Waiheke Island once. I almost fainted! I put on my special T-shirt with koala bears on it to impress her. I think I was in love at five."

Now 20, Julian's looking forward to the release of *Modern Odysseus*, a "picture book for adults" that incorporates Colin Friel's masterful acting, Julian's photography and powerful flow-of-consciousness prose to create a vignette of modern life.

His hour documentary *Darling! The Pieter Dirk Uys Story* debuted on Foxtel in December and is currently making its way around the international festival circuit.

I ask Julian to look back on the experience of leaving his Western nest to document a crisis in a place renowned for underhanded ways of dealing with dissidence. Was he scared?

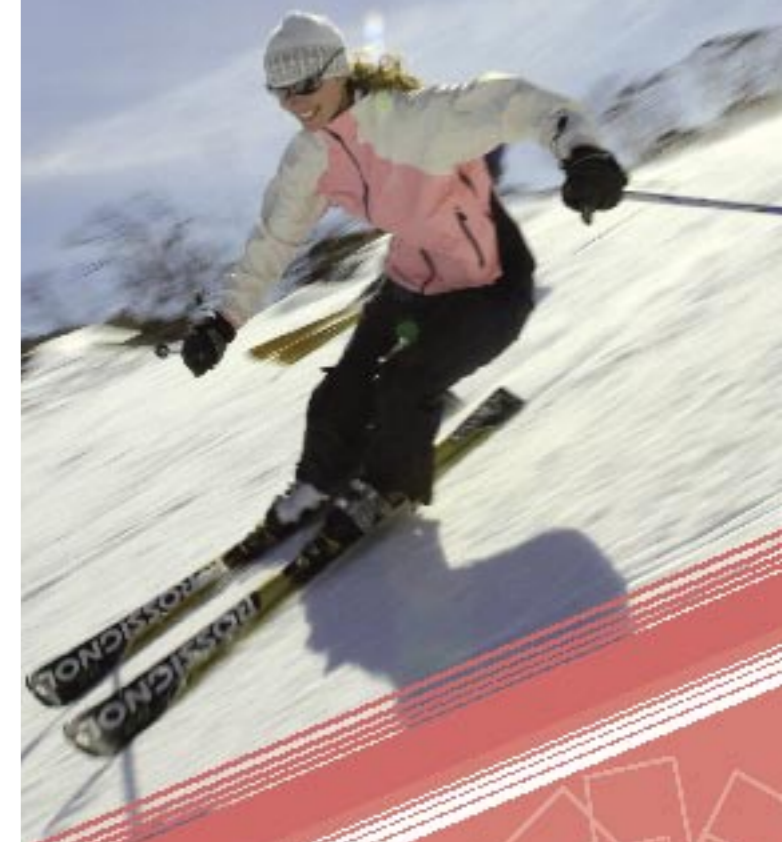
"Taking the safe route isn't in my nature," he says. "People tended to tell me I'd get my throat cut, being this green kid going to live in South Africa a one-man-gang with thousands of dollars of film equipment. I thought it was worth the risk."

"Australia feels so safe. I only survived Johannesburg because I was the most paranoid white guy in the world. I slept with a knife next to the bed. In the end, I was buggered from watching my back."

The one thing he wants us all to know about South Africa is, "As Pieter says, 'We are not just dying in Africa, we are also living'."

Keep your eye out for the DVD release of *Darling! The Pieter Dirk Uys Story*. *Modern Odysseus* is out in June 2007 through independent bookstores. •

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