



Curtain Call – An Interview with Directors Eleanor Sharpe and Justin Olstein

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Justin Olstein and Eleanor Sharpe's Curtain Call had its first screening last week to a very positive reaction and the film's subjects, Terry and Carol-Ann Gill, are now some of the beloved stars of the Festival. Our review is [here \(http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/08/curtain-call/\)](http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/08/curtain-call/). Ahead of its second screening, we catch up with the directors.

First of all, congratulations on the first MIFF screening, where reaction was quite positive – how was it for you, with the film's World Premiere?

Eleanor: A little bit nerve-wracking – Terry and Carol-Ann had seen the film before, once, but this was new on the big screen with their friends so they were a bit nervous, and certainly we were a bit nervous because we've been working on this for a number of years on its journey onto the screen and an audience so yeah, it was a little unnerving.

Justin: Yeah, one of the things I was worried about beforehand was whether the audience was going to get "Terry and Carol-Ann fatigue", because they're 95% of the documentary, there aren't too many supporting characters if you know what I mean – I guess just having had such a long post-production process it got to the point where Eleanor and I were just like "oh god, if I have to sit through one more frame I'm gonna get quite bored" but of course the audience hasn't seen any of this, they're seeing it for the first time so they don't experience it like that. So there were a few nerves around that.

I guess if they do strike a wrong chord with someone in the first 5 minutes, you may have lost them. Terry and Carol-Ann are very 'take them or leave them' type characters

J: Yeah, so that's why we decided to start the film as we did, at the garage sale, starting at the end and then going back to the beginning. Just wanted some very strong... in terms of character and what the audience was going to be in for.

E: We had a lot of trouble deciding how to start the film – there were several great moments where we thought we could start

4:3 but we really wanted the right notes, and we were aware they are very 'take them or leave them' characters and that we could
t of the audience at the start if we weren't careful

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Yeah, and that start works well because at the end, when it happens again with the garage sale you remember the opening scene, but you have all this extra context and the story that resonates in a sad way. What I did want to ask was – the film wrapped up shooting in 2012... ?

E: January 2012, yeah.

So, how are the Gills? What have they been up to for the past couple years?

E: They're still going pretty strong! Carol-Ann is still going to the gym, she'll be 79 this year?

J: Yeah, she's 78 now...

E: They're still doing pantomimes in the church hall not far from their house which they enjoy, and it gets them out of the house which is a big thing for them, especially Terry who doesn't have too many hobbies.

So is that the church from the end of the film, they're still there?

E: Yep!

J: It's not quite the same, the church hall – its not as magical.

E: And its not a place they rent all year, they just rent it out a couple of times a year – its not like Terry can go on down to the Tivoli [Theatre] whenever he wants.

J: So it serves a purpose for them in terms of being able to continue, but it doesn't have the same sense of wonder as the Tivoli has, and its not their place.

Yeah in the film there are all those wonderful remnants of years past with a real sense of history, and of course the church hall isn't the same without that collective history.

J: Yeah, so it's bittersweet.

So what drew you to the characters originally?

E: Justin found them originally

J: I used to work with them as a waiter when I was much younger than I am now. I was saying at the Q&A – the first time I met them I wandered in off the street looking for part-time work, I wanted to know if they were looking for anyone and they were, and Carol-Ann was dressed as the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland, and in the very first conversation I had with her she was telling me about how she'd fucked Laurence Olivier, she'd fucked Burt Lancaster. In the first conversation! I sort of

knew at that point it wasn't going to be like any other work environment I'd ever been in, and when I heard they were in
4:3 of closing down I brought it to Eleanor and Waterbyrd Films and said if they were going down, they were gonna talk and not go quietly. There was never any doubt in my mind that they would be great documentary subjects and hold an audiences attention for 80 mins. What was your first impression?

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E: Mine was a little different – when I met them they were very quiet and sedate, so my impression was the polar opposite to yours.

J: I didn't know that!

E: There were no costumes or anything.

J: They warm up quickly, didn't you find? They really make people around them their family, even if their family is just a whole lot of swearing all of the time. Doesn't take them long to...

E: ...You get stuck in their world. And Justin was right, they did make amazing characters!

And just in that direction, Justin, your own history with them – how many years were you working for them?

J: About 5 years?

And just as a waiter, not performer?

J: No, no, no. A waiter, but a curious waiter. I found it so interesting, that place, as you saw in the film, its just full of showbiz memorabilia and all this kinda stuff to make you believe they are very successful artists, and in some respects they are. Though it may not be the art they wanted to go into, they just fell in to it. I always found that interesting.

E: And that's a big part of the film, those choices they made. They found it, and found they could make a living out of it. It's about regrets, and the choices we make.

There's that great line at the end, when they're together and Carol-Ann says "I could have been a star" and Terry sort of questions that, and I guess you do wonder a lot.

E: You do wonder, I love that part of the film. It's just so much about who they are and look, no one knows if she stayed in England what would have happened. I certainly think it could have turned out differently. She could have been a big star, shes not wrong. Life could have panned out that way.

J: But Terry's not wrong either – you don't know, even if you were there. He's so blunt with her, which I found really interesting. I really liked that part

I found they were some of the best parts of the film, when they're in front of the camera talking candidly with one another, their chemistry. They know each other so well, they entertain and exasperate one another.

E: They're a real double act

g with Justin for a second, did you ever consider making your involvement with the Tivoli part of the story. It's interesting that you do have a relationship with them, that isn't part of the film. Did you ever consider framing it around you, or was that a conscious choice not to?

J: No actually, it never crossed my mind at all. I've seen documentaries that do that, I suppose sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I guess we decided it didn't need that.

E: They're such a strong couple it wouldn't have added anything.

J: We're not Michael Moore!

E: It works sometimes.

J: But I thought it was a strong enough narrative on its own, and yeah I hadn't thought about it until you just mentioned it.

Ok and Eleanor, how did you get involved?

I run a documentary company with my friend Nick, we've been doing so for years. Justin wanted to make a documentary and needed help to do it so showed it to us. We went to meet these crazy people, and it all happened from there!

Now you're both credited as co-directors, and I think people sometimes have different conceptions of how those partnerships work. On a day-to-day, how did you distribute directing duties?

E: Honestly, we usually just pointed the camera and Terry and Carol-Ann and just pressed shoot. We had discussions of what areas we wanted to pursue, what we found interesting and what we didn't. It was really more about struggling to find the story, make it work. We shot so much material...

J: ...I think we shot 300 hours?

E: Yeah, so we had so much material we had arguments over what to leave out, what to put in. We ended up cutting some great stuff that didn't work narratively, even though they were fascinating by themselves, so that was a little bit heartbreaking, but that's always the way.

And you did that together, or was one person more involved in editing –

E: I think I threw a lot of the rough cut together, there was a point where Justin wasn't there early on but then he could come in with a fresh perspective and he could come in instead of me who has seen it over and over, just kind of...

...Come in with a pair of fresh eyes

E: Yeah. And then we got more towards the pointy end he was there more often.

J: I'd do little sequences at home and bring them in and see if we could slot them in. It was funny, we didn't plan the co-direction all that much, but it worked. It meant a lot of the days we could just have two cameras going, and some of the days

4:3 when we knew where we were going, like the last day at the Tivoli, we could talk about what we wanted and pre-empt what
ng to happen. But other than that, we didn't plan it that much...

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E: It was a pretty organic process, and it just kind of worked.

J: And that's how it goes with Terry and Carol-Ann – occasionally you have to cajole them for a response, but generally they'll take you somewhere and you'll see it in the edit room.

And on editing – that seems to be where the film was really created. There's no overarching narrator or anything else, it's quite impressive how the film still comes together. But at the same time, it's not a straight forward line – you jump back and forth between their past and their current lives. How did that conception of the narrative come about, because as you say, making anything out of 300 hours is impressive.

E: We knew going in it was a story about 2 people whose careers were coming to an end. And then there was the whole thing about the theatre closing and the evil landlord, which we thought was going to play a bigger role originally – we certainly tried to shoot more of that narrative, but it ended up being not quite as strong as the quiet death of their careers, as it was slipping away, without big bang moments.

J: And we thought we had more of those narrative moments than we actually had, cos we were going to try and speak to the landlord, the real estate agent but obviously they weren't interested. So in the edit, we realised early on that the narrative moments of them closing down don't really develop, so we changed the structure to make it more about them.

E: We always knew their backstory would play a big role, especially as we got to know them and their backstory got crazier and crazier.

Well its interesting how the story is envisioned one way and then develops in another and shifts itself to where it wants to go. Is that frustrating, or even liberating for you as directors?

E: I think both, when you see what youre shooting is not becoming what you were planning out it can be frustrating. But you need to be careful with making documentaries, you need to be careful to not impose too much what you think the story should be, and when it changes you need to be able to go with that otherwise youre really screwed.

J: We had a rough cut, starting at the very beginning with the Channel 9 news story, what was about to happen etc. Then a colleague of ours came in and told us that it's not really about the Theatre closing down, its about them. That I found kind of liberating, when we could be like "OK, this may work better than how we had it." So it was frustrating until then.

E: Yeah that was a big change, when we made it all about them. I think we now get about a third of the way through the film before we reveal that theyre closing and I think it's a stronger film for it.

Now on the logistic side – run us through the process of getting a film submitted, accepted and then screened at a Festival like Melbourne International Film Festival. How did that process begin?

E: We always knew that we wanted it to play on the Festival circuit, and MIFF was the obvious festival was the obvious choice

to enter into, though we will enter it into other Festivals. But it is a very Melbourne story, and we were in a bit of a rush to meet
4:3 bourne deadline, we only just scraped in.

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J: With a rough cut!

E: Yeah, a rough cut before we had done the colour-grading, sound mixing and so on. So that was a bit nerve-wracking!

And you were in contact with them while it was coming together?

E: Yeah, we asked if we could submit a rough cut and they were good about that, I think that happens a lot.

J: This was in March I think? Then we scrambled together the colour-grading and sound mix, and put out the DCP.

E: And it's a Melbourne story, so that home aspect made it a good fit of course. But we're going to submit it to other Festivals, including some big ones - why the hell not? - and it'll likely to the Festival circuit for a couple years.

J: Although some of the names like Daryl Somers won't be known outside Australia, so I do wonder how it will go at other Festivals.

E: I think it might go well in Britain, which does have that pantomime culture.

And it's an expat story, which is so common.

E: Yeah. I don't know about America though.

Now it's going to Foxtel as well. Can you tell us a bit how that came about?

E: Yeah, we pitched it to the ABC and SBS, and it didn't quite fit in with their scheduling and what they were looking for. But Foxtel Studio, which actually is SBS picked it up, which was great.

J: It was funny, one of the ABC comments, I think pitching for ArtScape, said "it's not a high art film". Which is always a bit of a barrier.

E: Which is kind of the point of the film as well, about not being high art.

Or even, what is high art?

J: Sure.

Now to finish, Justin I saw on your own website that you're planning to turn this story into a feature film.

J: I am! I'm not going to use this exact story, but go with this sort of theatre and drafting a story around that. Still early stages, but very early on shooting this I was quite keen to see if the story has any narrative fiction legs, and I'm developing that at the moment. So watch this space!

Right. and would you collaborate with Terry and Carol-Ann, or take it in a separate direction?

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J: I haven't mentioned it to them, I don't want to do that thing where I just literally take the documentary and then adapt it word by word and scene by scene, I don't think that would work. But I'm certainly interested in using that landscape and the two of them as basis for characters, I just don't know exactly how yet. I don't if I should mention it to them! I think they'd be too opinionated about how it should go, and who should play them etc, so haven't mentioned it to them yet.

Well that's interesting, because in the film they do take care in the image that they present of themselves.

J: They were happy when we showed it to them. It's always weird to watch yourself I suppose, but they knew what they were saying and what they were talking about, and they knew what they were getting themselves in for.

And you've spoken since the premiere, and they were happy with it?

E: It's funny, we showed them the first copy which they watched at home on the TV, and now on the big screen and they actually preferred it on the big screen. I thought that would be traumatic for them, but in a way that's where they think they belong!

Well in a way, especially for Carol-Ann, it would be coming full circle, seeing herself at a big MIFF premiere.

E: Her first comment after seeing the film was that she looked so old. Also probably her second, third and fourth comment was that she looked so old.

I was shocked to hear she's 79!

E: Yeah, she looks very good for her age.

J: She's had work done, which shes very open about.

E : And back to your earlier comment, about controlling their own image. Once you dig beneath their façade and the performance that they do all the time, we kept digging and digging and you realise there isn't another a layer under it, that's really who they are. And I think that's why theyre so worried about losing their theatre - they're performers, and who are they if theyre not performing?

B: And Eleanor, do you have anything in the pipeline?

E: Yes, we're working on a new documentary about the Australian AIDS memoir *Holding The Man* . So they've got a feature film in development at the moment, and we are doing a documentary totally separately, because we started that before we found out there was a feature film being made. It starts in Melbourne in 1974, it's about two boys who fall in love at Xavier College, an exclusive Catholic Boys School and spend their whole lives together and die during the AIDS pandemic. It was written by one of the boys before he died, after his lover had died and its just a really famous Australian memoir, and a quintessential Australian story, and a way of looking at the AIDS pandemic from an Australian perspective. So we're looking at that at the moment, and it might appear hopefully at MIFF next year!

Alright, well thanks very much for speaking with me. Is there any last thing you'd like to add?

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E: No, I think Terry and Carol-Ann said everything that needs to be said!

J: And then some!

Curtain Call screens again at the Melbourne Film Festival again on Tuesday 12 August at 6:45pm and tickets can be bought [here \(http://miff.com.au/program/film/5478\)](http://miff.com.au/program/film/5478).

Alternatively, the film screens on Foxtel's Studio (channel 132) Monday 18th August at 7pm.

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