Interview with Director Jennifer Fox

What is the story of the film?

Well, the story is about Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and his son Yeshi Namkhai over two decades, beginning in 1988 to the present. It is a universal, classic father-son story about a father who wants to save his traditional culture and history by passing them onto his son and a son who wants nothing more than to be modern. Yeshi was born in Italy and in the beginning –at age 18 when I began filming him – wanted to escape his father's mission. But Yeshi goes through a transformation over 20 years, and joins his father and becomes a teacher in his own right. So, it is this archetypical story that can speak to a wider audience.

How did you begin the project?

I met Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche in 1985 when I was 25 years old and began studying Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen. At age 28, I took a much needed hiatus from filmmaking to travel with him on and off for four years as his secretary. During that time, I began to film his everyday life—his family his teaching, and his travels from an insider's perspective. Everyone knew I was a filmmaker—I had just finished **BEIRUT: THE LAST HOME MOVIE**—but since I was alone with a little camera, I didn't make much of an impact and I am sure they didn't take me very seriously. It was a time of great technological changes. I remember I bought the very first small broadcast quality camera to film him on his journeys. It was a high-8 camera that went on my shoulder and I had some rudimentary radio mikes, so I could be a one-woman crew.

Were you already thinking of making a film when you began filming Rinpoche in 1988?

Honestly, I didn't know. I just felt it was such a precious moment where I had such access that I shouldn't miss it. Namkhai Norbu was such an unusual spiritual master. He was playful and funny—not at all what people expected. Yet, his methods were helping so many westerners to understand this very high esoteric tradition, called Dzogchen, and apply it to their lives. He put his whole life energy into saving his spiritual tradition, which was in threat of extinction due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. It looked like he was single handedly trying to transplant a whole culture to the west. Yet he never seemed sad even though he himself had lost his family, friends and his entire world. It was so moving to watch this heroic effort. I wanted to make something about him, but I wasn't sure how it would unfold.

What about Yeshi, when did you begin to follow him?

I started filming Yeshi at that time extensively as well. I was fascinated by the story of his reincarnation and thought it would be the basis of a good film with his father's story. I remember a conversation we had walking on the street in Rome in 1989 where I said, "I know the film I should make: It would be a story about you and your father. You would go back to Tibet and accept your reincarnation and then you would start to teach." And he said to me, "Forget it, it will never happen." He was very clear at that time that he wanted his own normal life, with a normal job and a family. But still, he talked about the

fact that he had signs of his previous reincarnation and that he was a practitioner. He just did not want to be a Master with all the trappings being a Master entails. He had watched his entire life how hard it was for his father to be in this role.

Despite Yeshi's words, I kept filming Yeshi and Rinpoche over the years, but every time I thought about it, I didn't feel I had enough of a story to make a film, and I questioned how to convey the spiritual on film. After many requests from Babeth VanLoo at the Dutch Buddhist Film Foundation to continue this film, I finally agreed to face making something larger in the millennium. I knew there weren't many years left to tell Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's story and I doubted Rinpoche would allow another filmmaker inside his private life and family. It seemed clear I was the only one who could make a film about him because the family knew me so well and was so used to me already. So, I continued filming on and off for seven more years and something amazing happened: Yeshi began to change. Suddenly, we had the story container that I had been waiting for to be able to make the film.

How is this film special?

In the world of high religious leaders, it is incredible to see the access Chögyal Namkhai Norbu gave to the film. I can't imagine any other teacher, allowing themselves to be filmed both in their public life and private for 20 years. Both father and son were enormously courageous to allow the camera inside their lives so openly on a day-to-day basis. It is a direct outgrowth of their approach to the Buddhist teachings. Norbu Rinpoche never wanted people to make a false hierarchy. He never wanted people to construct a fantasy of what is a Teacher. So in the film he allowed the camera close to show his real person, warts and all, and the real way a teacher works with students to help them evolve and awaken. He allowed us to film him even when sick in the hospital or facing real problems with students. This is not a "fluff piece", as we say in America. The film shows how hard it is to be a teacher, transmitting this enormous lineage to the West. By letting us into their ordinary lives you get to see the normal problems they face as father and son. They are struggling with the same issues fathers and sons (and all parents and children) struggle with everywhere: such as cultural differences, generational gaps, differing expectations, hopes and dreams. The film also shows how aging affects both father and son; how it softens and changes them, in ways that are both profound and universal. Yet it also shows their unique world of Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen and how the teachings affect both of them at different times. It shows how the tradition of spirituality is so alive, that it enters into every aspect of their lives, waking and sleeping, dreams and visions. The access is just incredible!

Why have you filmed for so long?

I always knew the film's strongest narrative would be to show Rinpoche's life over time. There is something universally powerful about a man putting his life energy into saving his spiritual heritage. Seeing Rinpoche developing over 20 years provides a very strong narrative. When I started to film him he was 49 years old, and I have followed him till now he is 70 years old. When I began to film Yeshi he was 18 years old; he is now 39. We can see the effect of Rinpoche's efforts and the Community growing and also the problems of a bigger community and the personal price Rinpoche pays. There is a lot of

to experience in the film, even if it's not all verbal, through seeing him struggle and age. We learn about the precious human body, about the meaning of life, and integrating our existence. Rinpoche faced death over the years. He was able to survive cancer and various other illnesses. So, he is teaching about death in the formal teaching context, but also through his actual life where we see a man facing impermanence. I think in documentary you can convey the most over time when you see people change. The viewer can observe that through mundane life we see a larger world and that 'the personal is political'. So this film shows Rinpoche and Yeshi in a very ordinary way, even as they are very special people, and are facing very large issues like saving a spiritual culture from extinction – which is at the heart a very political message without the film actually talking politics.

I heard you filmed over 1,000 hours, but how do you deal with so much material?

Well, anyone who knows me knows that I have a history of shooting large amounts of footage for my projects! But there is no use shooting material if it is lost when you get to the edit. So, over the years I have developed an extensive logging process customizing the Filemaker Pro Program to make sure everything is searchable on a database in the edit. For this film we logged months with a large team of interns lead by a young woman, who was becoming a filmmaker and spoke Italian and English. The key was that she was a Buddhist student already and so could understand the terms and help the loggers log properly. Every world has its own language and the special terms can be daunting. Even know we knew that most of the Buddhist terms would be cut out from the final film, you have to use them to organize the material properly. My whole goal is to enter the edit methodically and calmly, with everything prepared. Then you can have 50 hours or 10,000 hours, it makes no difference. What I always strive for is to let the essential story boil up from the material. My goal is to protect that story essence against all the external forces and to listen to what the film wants to be. As a filmmaker, I am less a director than a midwife, trying to allow the birth to what is essential and existing since the beginning in the footage.

How did this frame of father-son story change the possibilities for the project?

Once Yeshi began to change, we had an incredible story arc. Suddenly broadcasters began to be interested. They said, "Oh we get it now; it's a universal story about a father and a son. The prodigal son. All our audiences will understand that." Being that the goal was always a wide audience, we finally had the story container that people could relate to. We started out in millennium with the Dutch co-production with BOS, the Dutch Buddhist Television Channel, and then by partnering with co-producers Carl Ludwig Rettinger of Germany and Andres Pfaeffli of Switzerland we have gotten TV distribution in France and Germany with ARTE, Swiss Television, YLE-1 Finland and have just sold to the American Documentary strand POV that airs on Public Television. Now we are working on the Italian distribution with our co-producer Marta Donzelli. So all this is sort of a domino effect. We are also working to have it show in cinemas in many countries, especially in the US, Germany, Switzerland. It will be distributed on DVD both for home use and educational use and there will be an interactive website. So the goal of getting the film to a wide audience is being realized.