

TBC ● Jennifer Fox

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JENNIFER FOX
Interview by Julia Overton

Jennifer Fox is an American director, producer, cinematographer and educator known for her internationally-acclaimed documentaries *Beirut: The Last Home Movie*, which won best documentary at the Sundance Film Festival, *An American Love Story* and *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*. At the 2011 Sydney Film Festival Jennifer discussed her latest film, *My Reincarnation* with Julia Overton at a post screening Q&A.

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Jennifer Fox was a student of Namkhai Norbu, who she met in 1985 when she was 25 years old. Fox spent 20 years documenting the life of the Tibetan Buddhist monk and his Italian-born son in what became an epic father-son drama, spanning two decades and three generations. *My Reincarnation* touches on spirituality, cultural survival, identity, inheritance, family, growing old, growing up and Buddhism as it follows a Tibetan spiritual master and his Italian born son, Yeshe, who stubbornly refuses to follow in his father's footsteps.

JENNIFER FOX: Namkhai Norbu was enormously open to anybody. I became his student and then in 1987 my first film came out, *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* which was a very difficult film to make. *Beirut* was a film about a family in the war in Lebanon – it took me about six years to make that film and afterwards I

went on the road with it for about a year and a half. I was totally burnt out, and thought I would never make another film again and I sort of fell into an informal job as Namkhai Norbu's secretary in during my filmmaking sabbaticals. We travelled around the world. I bought my first laptop – they were just coming out then. Namkhai Norbu loves technology so he was excited too, and I would do all his correspondence. There wasn't even email yet, back then, but we could send letters and faxes.

It so happened that I had this very precious access and I thought, 'Oh my god, I have to film something. Could I make a film?' It wasn't articulated that I was going to make a film, it was more: here's this access and it may never happen again. At that time it was also the beginning of the small format camera and it was the first time that we had small cameras that were broadcast quality. So I was able to buy this Hi8 and throw it in a bag and I would just film – alongside other duties like cooking, writing, doing Norbu's travel notes and booking him into hotels.

His family totally embraced me when we went to Italy because they were so grateful somebody was helping him. He already had some health problems, very classic for Tibetans. He was suffering high blood pressure, so someone taking care of him was a big help. It was there we came up with the idea that maybe I would do a film about the father and the son. When I approached Yeshe [Namkhai Norbu's son] saying 'I know the film I will make, it's the perfect film, you'll wake up, accept your reincarnation, go back to Tibet and it will be a great drama'. He said 'Forget it; it'll never happen.'

That was 1989 and it was about 17 years later that he did just that. So for a long time, I had a lot of footage and no story. I kept on trying to get rid of the film thinking 'This is impossible, it will never make a film.' There was no narrative because there wasn't any conflict. For those of you who are filmmakers, it's very hard to tell a story without a narrative conflict. It was in the new millennium, when I had all this footage, that a broadcaster came to me and said, 'Jennifer, you have to pick up the camera again because Namkhai Norbu is going to die and somebody has to film him before he passes away'. I said 'No, I don't want to film him, it's impossible, there's no story, I can't do this.'

She begged me and, of course, I felt enormously guilty. I had this access and finally the guilt kicked in and in 2002 I started filming again and I started travelling with him and he said ‘Sure, no problem, you can film any time.’ Rosa, his Italian wife, said ‘You can film any time.’

I filmed for a good five years again and nothing happened. So again, I was like ‘Oh my god, what are we going to do?’ But I had a broadcaster and I had to deliver something, so we started editing – but still there was no narrative. The problem was there was no general story.

It was about that time, things began to change with Yeshi, [as predicted 17 years earlier]. Luckily, Yeshi began to ‘wake up’ [spiritually] and I started filming again for about two or three more years. We finally had a drama based on the father and son and that’s the film that we have today. So it was a very long time coming.

JULIA OVERTON: As a filmmaker that was probably very agonising because you didn’t know A, whether you were going to have a story and B, if you got the story, who was going to support you. So you had to do it all on your own.

JENNIFER FOX: It was definitely, absolutely the hardest film I’ve ever made. It was a good 18 years before we got real funding.

JULIA OVERTON: 18 years?

JENNIFER FOX: Obviously I made other work in between. It’s just that you simply can’t fund a film until you have a narrative. Moreover, a film doesn’t appeal to a general audience until you have a story. I was always very clear I did not want to make this film for just a Buddhist audience. It would be a film that could go to anybody of any denomination, even an Atheist. It had to be a film for a general audience.

JULIA OVERTON: Could you talk a little bit about the wife, the mother’s role in all of this? I found that absolutely fascinating because she obviously gave up her entire life to follow.

JENNIFER FOX: The question of the mother's role is really interesting. Rosa is a very shy, introverted person, fabulous with a great sense of humour. Also quite the Italian mum, the caretaker, a little bit in the background. Rosa never wanted – she doesn't at all ever want – to be in the limelight. In fact it's quite the opposite, she wants to be as far from the limelight as she can get. What I was amazed at was that she allowed me to film in her house to the degree she did, at her dinner table over and over again. She gave an enormous amount for someone who is completely camera shy.

What I discovered, that I didn't know, is that she's sort of the secret force behind Yeshi and that she's really giving him CliffsNotes, as we say, and instructions on how to manoeuvre along the path. She does the same thing with Rinpoche, as well. I remember one thing that just cracked me up, back in 1989, the only fight I ever saw her and Rinpoche get into was when Rinpoche was travelling a lot and teaching. She thought he should teach more in Italy and that he needed to come back to Italy. They had a little fight. I filmed it and she was very strong and of course she won.

He ended up changing his schedule because she was very clear that he now had to take care of people in Italy too as there were needs there as well. She won the fight; it was over in like five minutes. The only piece of footage in my entire life I have ever accidentally erased was that footage and I can never figure out how it happened. I think that is a very lovely little mysterious thing. I actually also think she probably would never have wanted me to use it, so I don't know how it happened, but it is gone.

JULIA OVERTON: She's an extraordinary, strong woman. She's lovely.

JENNIFER FOX: Very strong, very, very strong. I actually don't think anybody could have survived that lifestyle but her. I certainly couldn't. I was two years travelling with him and that was it. I was off the boat. Very, very hard to be with a public figure like that where, as Yeshi says, 'Your home is not off-limits'. People were sleeping on the floor of Norbu's bedroom. It's also very Tibetan that you never say no. If you ask, he feels he must respond – he must try to do something.

He answers all his emails to this day. Even if it takes him a week, he writes you back. It's very Tibetan.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: When the family saw it what was their response. I'd love to know that.

JENNIFER FOX: I think that's a really important question. I'm a little strange as a filmmaker. I've never made a film that the subjects didn't give approval on, from my first film to now. That's quite radical, as we know. It has a lot to do with the fact that I'm really not interested in making a film – that will be in the world forever – that the subjects can't live with. I have no interest in that. So this film, like all my films, meant Namkhai Norbu and Yeshe had final approval. In fact, I had no written agreement with them. I had no release from them for 20 years. But I was always in contact with them and I was always giving them updates.

I'm sure Rinpoche thought 'This woman is never making this film' because I kept filming him. I remember once in about 2005 he gave me this little present of a horse for my birthday. He said this horse means 'voie d'avant,' which means go forward. So I think that he really thought it was never going to happen. But anyway, I would always update them. I finally showed them the film when it was at fine cut stage in Italy in Arcidosso, Tuscany, where Rinpoche has a house. I went over to Rinpoche's house and Yeshe and his wife Egla came, the kids came, Rosa was there. We all sat on this big family bed in front of the widescreen TV and watched it. Rinpoche laughed the whole time. They loved it and were like, 'It's fine, good, where do I sign?' They signed and that was it. They didn't ask for one change, which actually has never happened. Usually my subjects do ask for changes, but they didn't ask for anything.

When Rinpoche was recently here in Melbourne, teaching, we had a preview screening as a fundraiser. He's really happy with the film and he said he thinks it's a film for all people to see as it's a very good introduction to the teachings because it shows the teachings in a real, ordinary way, not at all as ritual, but something you integrate into your life.

Yeshe was at our first festival, the Leipzig Film Festival in Germany. He's very happy with it and Yeshe will come to America for the American opening.

So they've been very thrilled and happy with the enormous success of the film internationally.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: One of the most moving parts of the film is when Yeshi arrives in Tibet. I wanted to ask you what was that like, being there and filming that experience?

JENNIFER FOX: That's a perfect question, because it's a perfect filmmaker situation. I wasn't there. The big scene that you've been waiting for 20 years to happen...Yeshi went secretly and he organised it really fast. He didn't tell me, he didn't tell anybody and he took, luckily for us, his brother-in-law, Luigi. Lucky for us because this layperson was a very good cinematographer. So we got this footage and quite honestly when I saw that footage, it was the first time I knew I had a film. It was beautifully shot. Yeshi hadn't even seen the footage. They had two cameras. There was Luigi and Meemar (the Tibetan who's in the car with him). Meemar couldn't shoot for anything but Luigi really could and we were able to blend his footage seamlessly with my professional footage. So when I saw that footage, I have to be honest, I cried. Not just because we had a film, but because I was just so moved.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Your journey with the film is quite tumultuous, it seems. I'm very interested to hear about the financial journey along the way, too. You alluded to that before, but it sounds like there's a lovely story in that, as well.

JENNIFER FOX: Filmmaking in America is about as hard as it gets. In Australia you don't know what it is like to have as little funding as we have for the number of filmmakers we have. I've been making films for 30 years and I can say that American filmmakers in general are the most muscular of all because it's so hard to survive. This film is a good example of that. I filmed for 12 years before any funding ever came in. Quite honestly, I never looked for funding for this for those 12 years because there was nothing that spoke of a general film.

As I mentioned, this Dutch broadcaster came in wanting me to make a film but it was particularly for her. I was very keen to make one for a general audience. We did get a little money from Dutch broadcasting and also a grant from an American foundation that gives money to spiritual subjects. After that, the film was turned down for every single application I made over six years. Nevertheless, I took the money I had and I'm very light – I mean, I'm my own cameraperson, sound person and producer.

So a lot of what you see from America – we don't have very strong producers because usually there's not enough money to split the producing and directing – is people doing what I do, directing and producing. I actually like producing. I'm not complaining; I like the game of trying to fund a film that nobody thinks they want and then ending up proving that in fact they really do want it. So this film is actually quite a good example of that.

When we had Yeshi's story – after we were turned down by every American foundation and every broadcaster – we were able to pitch a new film/story and I started again. Luckily, I was able to bring in a couple of co-producers. One was a German co-producer named Carl-Ludwig Rettinger and we decided that we would pitch this new father son story to ARTE. I have a very good track record with ARTE luckily, and so did Carl, so between him and I in 2009 we brought ARTE in on the project.

JULIA OVERTON: ARTE gives you Germany and France?

JENNIFER FOX: It's a German, French television sale, but we brought them in as a co-production. So it was quite a major point. Notice it was 19 years into the filmmaking of the project. We also brought in a Swiss co-producer and we brought in Swiss television. I brought in a Finnish co-producer and Finnish television, so then we had Finland, Holland, France, Germany and Switzerland. We tried quite hard to bring in Italian money for obvious reasons and thought we were bringing them in. We did not have any further American money until about eight months ago when the film was finished when American TV came in. So with those moneys, we were able to edit the film. The edit and post-production was extremely expensive on this film. I shot over a thousand hours of footage. All that had to be logged,

it had to be organised in multiple languages: Tibetan, Italian and English. Also because it's all about this other language of Buddhism we did enormous logging and created a huge file base because I wanted to work with a non-Buddhist editor on the film. It was really important that the footage was accessible for anybody to get at. We thought the Italians were bringing in a percentage of our budget right up until the film actually was technically finished last October and started to do festivals. We thought they were bringing in about \$100,000 and at the last minute it turns out they weren't able to deliver. So as the main producer, I ended up with \$100,000 debt on the project when it was technically finished, which meant that – with a lot of trepidation – we launched a Kickstarter campaign this February aiming for \$50,000 (because we didn't know what would happen).

Kickstarter is this new idea of crowd funding where you have a web based campaign where anybody can donate money from anywhere in the world. You give incentives like pre-selling your DVD or art objects for example. Our Kickstarter campaign completed at the end of May and we ended up, amazingly, raising \$154,000. We broke all the Kickstarter records. We are the top raising Kickstarter site ever for a finished film. We're the second highest raising documentary of all time and we're the fifth highest raising film, fiction or doco, and we're the ninth highest raising art project, so we got a huge amount of press. We erased \$100,000 debt and we raised around \$50,000 towards our American campaign. I would say 20 to 25 per cent of that will go to pay off Kickstarter, Amazon and the cost of

delivering all those goodies. We probably have about \$20,000 to go towards our American campaign, and believe it or not, we're still raising money. The film is actually being distributed theatrically in America, Germany and Switzerland so far. I very much hope it will come out here in Australia too. It's already been bought in about six territories for television and I hope it will also come to Australian TV.

It's been a really hard road and I have to say, I have never made a film this hard before. But it is all about really reinventing your strategies towards producing. Whenever you think you can't; look again. I'm very, very excited about crowd funding. I think it gives enormous opportunity to literally let the audience vote for your film, as this crowd funding campaign did for our film. It's an enormous message to put out to broadcasters and theatricals showing people want this film, they want to see it and they want it now. It works particularly well with films that have a niche audience and that aren't on general topics.

My previous film is about being a woman today. It wasn't made for a crowd funding campaign but something like that or race car driving, a film about a very specific kind of cancer would be perfect because you can target an audience and people who might really want to see that film out.

JULIA OVERTON: *The Age of Stupid* was one of the very early ones that did that and there are other companies, apart from Kickstarter, aren't there?

JENNIFER FOX: There's IndieGogo, which you can do right now in Australia. Currently you have to have an American bank account to use Kickstarter, but anybody can donate.

JULIA OVERTON: There are two sites you need to know about: one is *IndieWire.com* and the other one is *AboutDocs.com* and they both give you a wealth of information on films, making the films, raising the money for the films and anything else that goes with them. They're wonderful. It's no excuse not to know, because they're all free, those sites.

JENNIFER FOX: Absolutely

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The Kickstarter story is very inspiring. But before that process during the 19 or 19 and a half years, what kept you going as a filmmaker?

JENNIFER FOX: That's a really hard question to answer. First of all, I was making other films and I do teach. I make a lot of my living from teaching and I teach all over the world. That means that I could make this film without having the pressure of having to support myself. Of course, with my other work I take a salary from that, but I don't work for hire. So that means when I'm not working on my own film, teaching fills in the gaps. For example, this summer I'm teaching at New York University and in the fall, I have a teaching fellowship at the University of Zurich. It's a good way not to put pressure on your art. I also shoot my own films, so that means I'm a really cheap filmmaker in that sense. However, I don't edit my own films and I really don't want to edit my own films because I need distance and I happen to work with very high priced editors. So a lot of my energy is expended supporting that side of the whole post-production process.

Psychologically, what kept me going, I think this film was so gruelling because I kept thinking I didn't have a film. Once I took a broadcaster onboard, then I had to make a film, but then I thought, 'Who am I making this film for? Am I making it for five Buddhists? No, that's not what I'm making.' So I had to keep going back and also pushing the broadcaster back and saying sorry, I can't deliver the film. I can only say this film has been a real exercise in faith and a different kind of faith than my other work. All work takes faith, but I think I had a few more light bulb moments on this one than on the other films.

My last film took about five years to make, but five years seems manageable compared to 20. So I don't know. I really believe that work is created out of the light inside of an individual, saying 'I have to make this film.' There will always be people saying that you shouldn't make it; that's just a given.

I think artists are a bit perverse in the sense that if you tell me I can't, I will. At least I'm going to die trying, so that's a bit of my motivation. I'm not sure I would function very well in an environment where everybody loved what I was doing. I'd probably go crazy or something. You always look for a few people to give you

feedback and tell you that you haven't completely lost your mind and to keep you going.

JULIA OVERTON: I wanted to ask you a little bit about why you made your first film?

JENNIFER FOX: I never finished university because I took a sabbatical from the first university I was at and then was headed for film school. During that sabbatical, I came to Australia and I hitchhiked around the country like many people do and had odd jobs. I dug holes for fruit trees up in the Daintree rainforest, I worked on a cattle station and I bought a motorcycle. Then I worked on a yacht going up the coast and then I also worked as an assistant scuba diving instructor. So I sort of did everything and then I went back to New York and went to film school for a year before I dropped out to make my first film, *Beirut: The Last Home Movie*. It was almost as gruelling as this film. I had many things that I thought I was going to do, but quite honestly, the easiest way to answer the question as to why I became a filmmaker is my mum was a professional musician and an artist and my dad is a businessman. Basically, I turned out to be this perfect unity of both of them because I really like business, clearly, and I really love making things. I grew up very supported artistically by my mum and gran in every way and encouraged to make things. So when I was in school, I was originally going to school for writing, I took my first film class and it was like oh no, that is it.

With film, you can never achieve, you can never get to the end of the rainbow. With writing, it felt – this sounds stupid – as though I would be a journalist. It felt like I could achieve journalism, but I could never achieve filmmaking. So it just felt like it was something I could spend my whole life investing in because I would never be good at music, writing, fundraising, producing, images. Film just felt so big and immediately after taking that film class I decided to go to film school, but then didn't spend much time in film school, dropping out to make my first film. I really am in a way self-taught but not really because I had this artistic background.

JULIA OVERTON: It was what you were driven to do.

JENNIFER FOX: Absolutely.

JULIA OVERTON: It's interesting that it was the complete picture, rather than the words. Because I think it's very much the generation that you're of that everyone before that wanted to write their first book and now everyone wants to make their first film. So how did you survive whilst you were making your first film, because that was a long and torturous journey?

JENNIFER FOX: I survived that one off my family to be very honest. I had a little money – my grandfather had died and we went to Beirut on that money. It's a very strange film about three sisters in a palace in the middle of the war in Lebanon shot in 1981 seven years into the war. It's an old film, but you can actually still buy it. It won Sundance eventually and Cinéma du Réel and played all over the world. It was in the Sydney Film Festival back then. That film was shot on inherited money and then I came back to America and started fundraising. It took me five years to make that film. It was a very hard film. I had no idea how to edit a film. I did know how to shoot a film, but I can say we edited that film three times and it took three years to edit it. So it was pretty gruesome. There was a lot of blood on the floor at the end of that one. If it hadn't been successful, I would probably be, what do they say, throwing pizza right now and doing something else.

JULIA OVERTON: I'm impressed with your attention to the audience. I just wondered if you could talk about the fact that once a film is finished it's just the beginning of the journey. Obviously, with your Kickstarter campaign, you're very aware of that because you've got a lot of obligations.

JENNIFER FOX: Yes. I don't know why, but it was always very clear to me that you had to really work distribution. Maybe it's that American thing where you just have to hustle or else your film doesn't get made. Likewise, you really have to hustle to get them out in the world. I'm actually in a film about filmmaking called *To Heck With Hollywood* and that film is about distribution and hustling. It's actually quite a good film by Doug Block. He's very much in the American independent

scene. That film came out in 1991, and it's about the hustle of distribution and fundraising.

For us, finishing a film is only the beginning of getting it out there and I learned very quickly that the fantasy that somebody will save you – that you make your film and then you just sit back and it will be done for you – is so wrong. Even when you get distributors, usually they don't do it well enough and they need your help or often you can do it better than them, I hate to say that. Or they rob you blind – sorry, but true. So typically, I pre-sell my films quite a bit internationally on television. So by the end of the line, we are ending up with several broadcasters. Why? Because selling them after they're finished, the price goes way down.

You can bring in maybe between \$50,000 and \$100,000 before a film is finished, the price goes down to between \$10,000 and \$30,000 after a film is finished. So that's one thing that's very important to try to do, to bring in broadcasters as you're making your film. When a film is finished, classically you try to do the festival circuit. The festival circuit brings prestige, people write about it. That leads hopefully to attention and sales. You try to bring in a sales agent. Typically, I self-distribute in America. That's because if I don't do that, the film's distribution shrinks and part B, I get no money.

If I give it to a distributor, most of them will write off everything they make with their overhead. The US has a very good theatre circuit. If you put the work and the time in, you can actually get your film into 20 cities, 40 cities, 60 cities, 120 cities. America's a huge audience, but you usually can't get a distributor to do that work because it doesn't pay for them. We could talk for hours about distribution. It's something I love.

I'm really into the idea of how you win in distribution, but it also is something that is incredibly detailed. Interestingly enough, doing a Kickstarter campaign is not so dissimilar to a distribution campaign. I think the reason our campaign did so well was because I've done so many campaigns and the team I brought together, had done the theatrical campaign for *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*, (my most recent film before this one) – a six hour piece that we took out to 20 cities in America – so even though we had a lot of experience, Kickstarter was a whole new frontier. It is a lovely fantasy that somebody will do it for you but that rarely, rarely

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happens and generally, if you find that magic person, they take all your money. I'm sorry to be so brutal, but it's really quite true.

JULIA OVERTON: I think you're a fantastic example because you love it and no one can sell your film better than you, no one can make your film better than you, and then, you don't have anyone to blame. You can just do it yourself and get on with it.

JENNIFER FOX: You know, I have very little tolerance for people who say they don't like fundraising. It's very, very hard to be a filmmaker if you don't like fundraising. I would love a perfect world where somebody did it for me, but as an American filmmaker, that's not going to happen. Much better to enjoy it than to suffer.

This interview is edited from a transcript of a Q&A session held at the 2011 Sydney Film Festival and is reproduced here with kind permission from Jennifer Fox, Julia Overton and the Sydney Film Festival.

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