

# Tyke Elephant Outlaw: Netflix opens door to world

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Tyke Elephant Outlaw, the feature documentary from Stefan Moore and Susan Lambert, has grabbed a Netflix deal and hit the headlines In Hawaii.



*Elephants on the loose. Image via [Pixabay](#).*

*Tyke Elephant Outlaw*, run at both the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals, is a feature documentary about the abuse, escape and slaughter of an elephant on the city streets of Honolulu in 1994. It is a tough but satisfying experience, as it teases out both the full story and the meaning behind the act.

It is impossible not to be moved by the story, but filmmakers Stefan Moore and Susan Lambert are both determined to move beyond our normal social consensus and explore issues from a variety of points of view. Long form documentaries are a great place to engage with issues and ideas in more depth, to manage metaphors in surprising directions. They value thought, and reward curiosity. *Tyke Elephant Outlaw* is a good example of the form.

As Stefan Moore said on the phone, 'We set out to make a layered film and a subtle film in many ways. It has become an advocacy film but we didn't set out to make it that way. We set out to look honestly at people's relationship with other species.'

'It is an allegory of what happens when you mistreat any species, even humans,' said Susan Lambert. 'We've always seen it that way, as a film that isn't partisan, that goes beyond the animal rights campaign.'

At the same time, it is not possible to watch it as an intellectual debate. The situation, described clearly and honestly, speaks for itself. Moore put the power of the story in a single statement. 'The bottom line - and nobody in the circus industry can dispute it - is that a ten thousand pound elephant which can kill you with one stroke of its tusk has to be afraid of you. And the way they accomplish that is a club with a spiked end called a bullhook. They have to know that if they get out of line, that club equals pain.'

'On top of that, elephants are kept on chains 22 hours a day. They are highly social animals who travel up to thirty miles a day in the wild, so this is an even worse form of abuse.'

Beyond the festival circuit, the feature length version of the film has been screened twice by *The Passionate Eye* on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The BBC's prime documentary slot *Storyville* has run the hour length version three times to highly successful ratings. DRTV in Denmark will run the film early next year, and sales are pending with a number of European networks.

Now, Netflix has come to the party as well. It has acquired exclusive rights to the US, and a non-exclusive license around the world from December 1st.

And specialist UK sales agent Dogwoof Pictures has sublicensed the rights to iTunes and Amazon among others.,

According to the filmmakers, Dogwoof is passionate about the projects it takes on, and has a valuable email list which is built from the audience for similar films. It is also excellent on Twitter and Facebook.

The missing piece of the puzzle is the Australian domestic exhibitor. ABC TV has not provided a presale, and won't take it as an acquisition either. SBS is still considering a deal but certainly has not rushed to embrace it.

Remarkably, the international rights are held by ABC Commercial, who provided a significant investment, and will take 30% of the proceeds from a deal with ABC TV and SBS.

'It actually is ABC Commercial who put real money on the table and it has been very successful for them,' said Moore. 'They saw the potential, and put their money where their interest was.'

So ABC Commercial, which operates to make a profit, has committed, but ABC TV, which is responsible for the cultural and media needs of Australians, is not interested. According to the makers, commercial FTA TV has replied with personally supportive letters but declined to buy the production - not surprisingly. '

The climactic images of Tyke dead in the street with over eighty police bullets in her huge body provided the impetus for local activists to build awareness over the next twenty years. The film explores that story as it covers our changing collective attitudes to the use of animals for performance, and reveals the guilty secrets behind their suffering.

Just days before the Netflix deal was closed, the Hawaii International Film Festival ran three sell-out screenings of the film. Two days after the last screening, the government announced that Hawaii is about to become the first US state to ban the use of wild performing animals - a decision which sets a precedent for the rest of the country.

We have to wonder what on earth the ABC has in its collective head. Although this story is set outside Australia, it covers an issue which is important here. Australia is one of those countries which has still not banned the exploitation and confinement of wild animals for entertainment purposes.

As Lambert said, 'The point of it is that we are a mature enough industry to make films about international stories, that are not necessarily shot in Australia. This film has suffered with broadcasters from not having Australian content, but it is a powerful story that raises important issues for Australians.'

The winner of the AACTA Award for best direction in a documentary for 2015 is *Only the Dead*, directed by Bill Guttentag and Michael Ware. The film also took the best editing and sound awards. According to producer Paddy McDonald, '*Only the Dead* was fully financed out of Australia. We had Foxtel which was a key support. Transmission Films has the exhibition rights here. Without Foxtel, we wouldn't have been able to make the film.'

However he claims that the ABC did want to presell the film, but simply could not provide the right level of presale for a film with a very expensive post-production process. They are interested in acquiring the film after the Foxtel rights have expired.

Again, the international sales agent is ABC Commercial, which has been dealing with Dogwoof. The film has been licensed to HBO for US cable release, which is a coup, and leaves the rights to both theatrical distribution and streaming services like Netflix available for sale. We can expect interest in North America because it is about US troops in Iraq, while Michael Ware was working for Time Warner and CNN.

The war in Iraq has become a piece of recent history. As McDonald said, 'My thing in life is that everything is about timing. Over four years is a long journey but we have been waiting for Mick to be ready to make the film.' He bites deep into his own flawed soul, that lives deep beyond his normal carapace as front line news journalist, perky and focused on the broad political story.

At the same time, Larry Zetlin has been patiently building *Hell No, We Won't Go*, his account of the resistance movement against conscription and

Australia's participation in the Vietnam War. But, he said, ' Both the ABC and SBS are saying they want strong contemporary stories.' They have both turned him down.

'I feel no bitterness or rancour about the ABC over this - life is too short,' he explained. 'They have their own reasons, and I am confident this program is going to be very good, and they will acquire it - obviously at a much lower price.

'I am pushing on. It is being made.'

There is no hard and fast set of rules that the ABC is consistently applying over these projects, and we can never rule out the power of personal taste in commissioning. For some reason the ABC simply doesn't like *Tyke Elephant Outlaw*, it probably did want a very ragged, confronting film about an Australian journalist covering the US army in a foreign war, and it hasn't managed to work out that the resistance movement of the Sixties which transformed our politics is relevant today.

But the outcome is disturbing. The ABC simply didn't have enough money to support *Only the Dead*. The story of the 60's resistance movement is left to the rag-tag penny-pinching work of voluntary production, an approach which most filmmakers find brutal and debilitating.

The documentary which is dumped completely is a well-made essay film, by a pair of filmmakers who have worked in this way for at least 25 years. These films tend to be expensive, slow and meticulous with substantial research, with a lot of craft and care. They are not zippy and colourful, with enticing presenters who skip from scene to scene and instruct the rest of us.

This style of film has survived in Australia over the long haul because Film Australia, the AFC and to some extent Screen Australia has been able to defend them against the broadcasters, whose priorities are driven by audiences. But Film Australia is gone, Screen Australia has cut its support for documentaries, and presales are tougher to get as money dries up internationally.

Each of these films is a response to vile behaviour by human beings. Each confronts indifference. They all add to our awareness of ourselves and our place in the world, and how we do or do not respond. They express an Australian view of the world. There is something sick about the way in which our national broadcasters are unable to bring them to the screen, and the way they avoid paying for them is simply tawdry.

Larry Zetlin, who is determined to be philosophical, reminded me that this is all about money, and we need to fight to increase the budgets of the ABC and SBS. That is true - and these decisions show how the attacks on the government broadcasters are affecting very different areas of the documentary community.

Image: Tyke, courtesy of Stray Dog Pictures.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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