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Inside out: Arthur Dong gets to know gay-bashers - director of film 'Licensed to Kill' - Interview

Bob Blanchard

Twenty years ago, documentary filmmaker Arthur Dong was attacked on the streets of San Francisco by gay-bashers. He narrowly escaped, and his attackers sought out another target -- a priest they found around the corner, whom they bludgeoned so severely that he suffered massive head injuries.

Dong became a student of the culture of hate crime, obsessed with the subject. The walls of his San Francisco office are lined with shelves of books and files of tattered newspaper clippings documenting case histories.

But in all his years of research, Dong found almost no studies on the perpetrators of anti-gay violence. Invariably, published material on the subject focuses on the victims' point of view.

Dong decided to make Licensed to Kill, a tough-minded film that explores the complex nature of hate crime and homophobia in America, to try to understand the gay-basher's point of view. The film is full of fascinating and disturbing interviews with convicted murderers of gay men. In their own words, six murderers -- some remorseful and some not -- explain in harrowing detail why they chose to kill another human being because of their feelings about homosexuality.

At forty-three, Dong has already won a Peabody Award, and he's been nominated for an Oscar and an Emmy. In January, at the Sundance Film Festival, Licensed to Kill won two major awards: the Filmmaker's Trophy for Best Documentary and the Best Documentary Director Award.

All my films focus on social and cultural issues as played out through individual lives," says Dong. That's always driven my work because that's how I learn best about issues, that's how I learn best about humanity: the human spirit and the human struggle."

Dong wrote, directed, and edited Licensed to Kill, and he is arranging a series of national screenings throughout the year.

According to the most recent survey by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, violent attacks against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people continue to increase. The national numbers are driven by huge surges in reported incidents in Los Angeles (55 percent), Virginia (206 percent), Detroit (29 percent), and Cleveland (64 percent). In the last three years, the United States documented more than 200 murders of gay men, where the judge cited homophobia as a major factor.

"Licensed to Kill is really about heterosexual institutions in this country," says Dong, "specifically those that perpetuate anti-gay violence. What I've created, hopefully, is a vehicle to start discussion -- I created this film not to provide the answers but just to start asking the questions. The film raises issues of gender and masculinity: What are the traits or behavior patterns you must exhibit in order to be called a man in this society?"

Dong says there is a "core of contempt" for gays and lesbians in America. "Why are we still seen as second-class citizens? This undercurrent of contempt seems to be getting stronger as we become stronger."

Licensed to Kill breaks new ground by exploring the psyches of convicted murderers of gay men. In 1995, Dong received a Rockefeller Fellowship -- money to think for a year. He wasn't required to finish a project, just do whatever it would take to develop an idea for a documentary. He decided to attend a series of trials in Tyler, Texas, for the murder of a twenty-three-year-old gay man. Tyler is a small town, and despite the brutality of the crime, the atmosphere in the courtroom was rather casual.

One of the defendants in the case saw Dong in the courtroom every day taking notes and snapping photos. The defendant became curious and started talking to him. "I got to be friends with this very polite young man," says Dong. "Here was this nice young kid, and witnesses came up on the stand and described the horrors they had experienced at his hands. I couldn't reconcile that. It was then that I knew what I wanted to do; that was the genesis of Licensed to Kill. I needed to talk to more of these murderers to try to understand why they would commit these crimes and possibly murder someone like me."

Dong mailed out interview requests to convicted murderers of gay men. He received twenty responses, and six interviews ended up in the final version of the film, which includes videotaped confessions of perpetrators, news reports, courtroom scenes, graphic evidence from police files, home and police videos of actual gay-bashings and killings, and childhood photos of the murderers.

The film's narrative interweaves Dong's prison interviews with the testimony of an eighteen-year-old telling a police detective how he stabbed a gay admirer twenty-seven times, stole his credit cards, and went on a shopping spree. His major purchase was a pair of Nike sneakers.

Perhaps Dong's most chilling interview was with Jay Johnson, a convicted double murderer who wrote in his journal of his ambition to be a serial killer of gay men as a means to cleanse society. Johnson -- raised in a strict religious household and deeply conflicted about his own sexual orientation -- persuaded himself that the murders he committed were "a constructive, moral thing to be doing."

"I let each man lead me through his past, his crime," Dong says. "My only agenda was to provide each man with a safe place to tell his story, to tell the truth as he saw it. I wasn't about to judge them. I relinquished control, let go of my ego, so I could truly be in the company of these men on a one-to-one basis. Each one in his own way was very articulate in terms of talking about his life, his crime, and his feelings about homosexuality."

What I learned from making the film," says Dong, "is the normalcy of this type of hate crime. These perpetrators are not monsters or demons. They could be your neighbor, your nephew, your uncle, your brother. The interviewees were not fanatics or some fringe element of society." And he notes, "A lot of this violence happens, not in cities, but in very suburban settings -- lawns, trees, nice houses, birds singing, kids playing in the back yard."

In the film, Dong confronts each murderer with the question, "Why did you do it?" "No one had a clear-cut answer to that question," says Dong. "So there are some ambiguities built into the film."

Still, Dong does provide clues.

"Almost every man connected his actions to a larger social and cultural context." They cited police who hate gays, things their teachers said in school, and the messages they heard from political and church officials.

Licensed to Kill paints a frightening portrait of an America where homophobia is a deeply ingrained part of life, the template rather than the exception. An America where hate is taught, encouraged, and passed father-to-son, from generation to generation. It is learned in the home, at school, at church, from the media, and from peers.

The film depicts an American society deeply confused about sexuality, where repressed individuals are given tacit permission to vent their frustrations by performing acts of violence against gay Americans.

The film also suggests that there are no winners here; murder is a self-destructive act. All the interviewees -- mostly young men just starting out -- have destroyed their own lives. One interviewee tells Dong, "basically my life is over."

Dong recognizes that his film has a limitation. Initially, Licensed to Kill was conceived include material on lesbian murders. "It was disappointing; we weren't able to deal with it on a three-dimensional level because none of the murderers of lesbians would grant us interviews," says Dong. "In editing the film, we started cutting in incidents where lesbians were killed or beaten, but it felt like tokenism. That would be another film; it should be another film."

Dong served as his own independent producer and is distributing the film himself. His goal for the rest of the year is to create an audience for it.

"This is an ongoing project," says Dong. "The distribution is an extension of the creative process -- that means marketing the film and getting the message out. I want as many people as possible -- especially heterosexuals -- to see this film."

Dong believes an edited version of the film is a must-see for high-school kids. "More than any film I've ever made, I have a real specific goal for this film. I hope the film can stop one gay person from being verbally abused, physically assaulted, or killed. If it can change one person's behavior and stop him from committing this type of hate-crime, then the film will have done its job.

"That's why I'm a filmmaker," says Dong. "It's knowing that you've created work that might just make this a better world. I don't know if it will, but I hope that it will. I believe in the power of film. Film is the only weapon that I have, so it's the one I'm going to be using for a long time."

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