

Honorable Mention, Peace Film Jury
Zitty Magazine Readers' Jury Award
Forum of Young Cinema, Berlin

CINEMA
CANADA

Documentary

Time, trust and money

*Inside stories about the production of A Rustling of Leaves:
Inside the Philippine Revolution*

AS TOLD TO PETER WINTONICK BY NETTIE WILD



Nettie Wild in the Philippines with a member of the N.P.A (New Peoples' Army)

This is a story about struggling with the art of making the impossible dream into a possible reality. It is a story about bravery. Time. Trust. Money. It is a history of the problems of producing documentary in these times in this country. It is a good case history/herstory.

From Third World theatre to film

The idea for *A Rustling of Leaves* first started as a theatrical experience. We were developing a play about Canada's involvement in support of Third World military dictatorships for economic gain. That led to a script about workers and bosses in the arms industry. A boss from the Litton plant goes to the Philippines to market a security system. The workers try to organize. We toured across Canada with the play. I learned of the vibrant popular theatre movement in the Philippines and with a Canada Council Explorations grant and as a stringer for CBC Radio I went there as an artist to explore my art form and a very interesting Asian nation. I also received a small investigative grant from the National Film Board's Pacific Region to research a film about popular theatre.

This was during the reign of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. I went to the mountains which were mainly under the control of The New People's Army (N.P.A.) in the civil war which has been raging for years in the Philippines. I was going to give a theatre workshop. The idea was to hand over theatre

Vancouver documentary filmmaker Nettie Wild's A Rustling of Leaves was reviewed in Cinema Canada, # 158. Peter Wintonick was associate producer and editor on the film.

skills to people so that they in turn could put on small issue-orientated plays for the mostly illiterate audiences. The end result was to be a performance. Often during rehearsals we would hear reports that the Armed Forces of the Philippines were patrolling in the area, so we would have to stop and move locations so the laughter and applause would not carry too far. A lead actor/mime complained that "the 'enemy' was getting in the way of art."

The local people, who accept the underground left as integral and important, as protectors and representatives, were instrumental in support and survival. I could also see that there was a tremendous mutual trust which had developed over the years between the people and their people's army. During that time of shared experience an important connection had been made. In the end that trust between those people and myself would be invaluable.

At that point I decided to make a film about these people and their stories. I typed a rough draft of a first proposal on a portable machine, tucked it into my shoe and walked out of the jungle. I knew then that I would be faced with many parallel bureaucracies in order to find money to make the film. But armed with a sense of history and trust and access, I left the Philippines for Canada.

An independent producer friend (Christopher James) was willing to help by putting in part time as an executive producer. We first worked on a budget and a proposal. I wanted to address the West's perception of the Philippines. I made the proposal really read like a novel, not that it was untrue, but that the characters were portrayed as real characters. I wanted people in the West, even though it was a "Third World" script, to understand that the stories were very accessible. The whole focus was to get inside the real stories.

We rewrote it several times and developed a plan for marketing. My goal in writing the proposal was to create a "selling" document that had a good production crew which could, in the eyes of potential funders, assure them of a guarantee of quality and make up for my own inexperience. There were two versions of the proposal - a straightforward one for television networks and a softer one for church-based support groups which emphasized the human rights aspects a little more. I was confident that because it was honest it could be designed for that one sympathetic and ideal person on a committee who could take the idea and run with it within his or her organization, guiding it through internal politics, people and decision-making processes. Our two targets for potential

funds were the Canada Council and the NFB's Pafps (Programme to assist films in the private sector) and its regional office. We were also looking for pre-production funds which meant courting a co-production with television.

Dancing with lizards: the television dilemma

In the United States I went to the Public Broadcasting System and the heads of current affairs and news for the three major commercial networks - ABC, NBC and CBS in New York City. It was really interesting dealing with them and it pointed out the difference between the Canadian and U.S. systems. When I talked to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation here in Canada, I could barely get in the door. I finally did get to see the head of current affairs at CBC. It was like talking to somebody from the moon. They would state it in these terms: "All current affairs on CBC is between 10 pm and 11 pm." Which means the National News and 40 minutes of *The Journal*. That's all. Period. He said he would take a look at the proposal and get back to me but he never did. They wanted to know if a Canadian was to be involved in front of camera. They didn't want to go with it because they said there was no room for it and because it had no budget and because it was independent.

I went to *The Journal*. They toyed around with the idea of putting me together with a *Journal* crew and being a part of the coverage with them. I would have to go down to the Philippines for a few weeks with a *Journal* journalist because they weren't confident in me as a journalist. In the end, I would have had to be happy with an associate producer credit, whatever that means. I guess I would have been a glorified researcher. They would not expand their time slot to incorporate independent productions. That was the CBC. The end. I had tried to see TV Ontario and CTV and I literally couldn't get in the door. The Canadians were very nervous about the whole proposal. I didn't even try the Knowledge network.

I phoned PBS and dealt with *Frontline*, their documentary flagship show. I heard that they were going to do their own three-part series on the Philippines. I phoned their independent producer and tried to convince him to do a four-part series instead and to include my film as the fourth chapter. When I phoned him with this idea he immediately flew me down to Boston. Very different from doors shutting in my face in Canada.

At the major American networks all of the heads of current affairs agreed to meet me within 48 hours. At ABC they said a production like this would be a million dollars, as did NBC. I went down to see this guy at NBC. He says, "So you can get inside the New People's Army of the Philippines?" The whole game in these TV networks, particularly in the U.S., would be to grill me to get as much information out of me as possible so that if I walked out of the door at the network they could do the story on their own.

Intellectually, you know that if you're going to dance with those lizards you have to be careful. But I was really amazed at how it played out. He was blatant. Really blatant. He went through the usual song and dance and then he said to me, "What's the worst case scenario that can happen in the Philippines?" And I said, "I guess at this point that the situation could become graver and the U.S. could become involved more militarily and the war would escalate and you'd deal with a situation where you'd have another Vietnam. Which would be bad for Filipinos and bad for Americans." He said, "No, that's not the worst thing that could happen." And I said, "Well, what do you think the worst thing could be?" And he looked at me straight in the face and said, "The worst possible thing would be if nothing happened at all, nothin' at all and there would be no news."

They were interested in taking the project to the next step except they started saying things like "of course, we need some of our people involved." Essentially it came down to who had control over the budget. If they put a million bucks into it then... We never got past that meeting.

The executive producer friend who was helping me out was going to England and took



the proposal to Channel 4. He was passed around from one commissioning editor to another and arrived at the desk of Rod Stoneman who was commissioning editor for the *11th Hour*, a documentary series. Rod was just going out the door, heading for Europe. My friend gave it to him with the words "just see what you think." Rod took the proposal and eight hours later phoned from Paris and told us that they would be willing to buy it for \$50,000. We were happy. That then meant that we had cash in hand. The combination of Channel 4's cash and the NFB's offer of Pafps equipment and lab services meant that we could get a crew on the plane to the Philippines. We were getting very pragmatic.

Which story: the Cory circus or the marginalized left?

I arrived in the Philippines thinking I would go to one area and film all the stories and characters in the underground left. What happened was that I arrived in the middle of a presidential election and Cory Aquino was becoming a phenomenon. The left had chosen to play the wrong hand in a poker game of a very fast-moving political scene. Marcos and Aquino were running against each other for president. People thought she had a chance to form a possible coalition. The ground shifted. The left had made their legitimate demands. She balked at their platform. They boycotted the election,



she won and the rest is history. Not only did Cory end up taking power but the left was marginalized completely by that move.

In being marginalized two things happened. The press didn't pay any attention to the left whatsoever. More particularly, the underground left was completely paralysed by the turn of events. Since I was already there to film, I was in a dilemma. Do I throw a project that I knew and felt was an important story – the story of the legal and underground left which had proved itself as representing the struggle for the important general issues in the country – completely aside? Or should I do a "Cory Story" about the political surface and the political circus?

What I decided to do was the story of the left. Even though they had lost this particular political hand, they were still an important story and I wanted to continue to focus my film on them. I knew that CBS and NBC wouldn't. People sensed that things hadn't changed despite the Cory-euphoria; Marcos cronies still retained important power positions. I felt that if I hung in there and maintained my focus it would be possible to come up with a film that not only looked at what change really had happened but also who would bring about real change. I contacted Channel 4 about these changes in direction and to their credit they understood and accepted it.

There has always been a strong legal left in the Philippines manifesting themselves in huge

street demonstrations and in agricultural and industrial union activity and in student organizations – all that was going full tilt. I arrived at the end of a ceasefire in 1987. After the ceasefire broke apart there was a period of decision-making for many people. They had to decide whether to remain in the legalized sphere or move underground.

Trust is so very important. There's a real difference between this kind of documentary and news. I decided that it was important that time was on my side. The difference between our film and the way mainstream media cover the Philippines was that I was able to follow a "story" of the particular people in the Philippines in real time. It was quickly apparent to me that if I wanted to get at the root of what was important, namely, if I was a Filipino and I really thought that change was important, what would I do?, then I would have to take the time to consider the possibilities. By following people's stories we could, in an engaging way, follow all the options open to people. People not dissimilar from people in the West.

In order to do this the crew and I would have to follow the stories through a beginning, middle and end. That meant being there in real time – not just three weeks with professionals. The revolution wasn't going to jam itself into three weeks. Events were not going to play themselves out just because I was there with my crew. This was key on all levels. But it was going to be very expensive to retain a crew for eight months who earned topnotch wages.

A crew of one

I realized that if I was to come up with a form of filmmaking that was very accessible to my subject matter, I would need appropriate technology. I needed a crew who could be on call; people who were really close to me who could fly back and forth. It meant picking up and learning how to use a camera myself because I was the one who was willing to put in the necessary time. It was my project. I was the lunatic who was committed to it. I couldn't expect other Canadians to leave their lives for eight months. I had to be prepared not only to produce and direct but to record the sound and shoot the thing as well as be the chief bottle-washer and political negotiator as well. It turned out that I was going to be the interim crew in the Philippines between bouts of having a professional crew there.

The Philippine community has had little experience with 16mm film. It's more experienced in video and in 35mm so it was very difficult to find the right experienced people. Most film people there are involved in the commercial media and were rightwingers or conservative. Our photographer-turned-cinematographer (Jojo Sescon) had put himself in the front lines of the civil war to cover the story in stills. He was sympathetic to the issues and the views of most of the people in the

Philippines. He felt the story was important to him as a Filipino and as an artist. He really wanted to move into film and this one certainly was a challenge. We trained him and a soundman, as well. I went from a full crew on the first of a three-part shoot to a smaller one on the second leg to a crew of two at the end.

When you are filming popular struggles the decision that the leadership has to make – whether to let you in or not – is always a big question. If they don't let you in then their stories don't get beyond their own borders or even out to their main cities. If they do then the question arises as to what kind of context that particular filmmaker will put them in. At that point the whole element of trust comes in again. They were very open with us. Much discussion took place about how I saw things. It was a very complex series of discussions. Other news crews had come and gone before – essentially using images without context or introduction in a rapid turnover of cuts and this had provoked much discussion.

When the ceasefire ended with a massacre of agricultural workers demonstrating for land reform, the country was ominously back at civil war. Instead of my being able to deal with the left's coalition, the National Democratic Front, in an office in Manila, I had to deal with a leadership in underground exile. At this point I still hadn't been able to film the original people in the mountains that I had wanted to film. There were difficulties because of distance and because of increased military activities in some areas. Communication was bad. I had not yet developed the sense of trust with the underground leadership in Manila that would be necessary to go film in the mountains. I was told my access to the mountains would be limited.

During the pre-production period between shooting I had to live as cheaply as possible. A PBS crew from the U.S. was staying at the Manila Hotel which is the most expensive in the Philippines and possibly in Southeast Asia. I had taken my equipment and stashed it with them because I knew it would be secure, but I was staying in the back cupboard of a tailor shop, 108 degrees at night, for \$5 a week. A bunch of sewers were working and living in this tiny sweatshop. There was one phone that I could use and I would contribute a little money towards the food. So after hearing that my access to the underground was going to be limited, I crawled back to the sweatshop and cancelled the crew waiting to come from Canada. I was depressed because I felt that three years of work was going down the tube.

I had to come up with another movie. This forced me into a position of rethinking the film. In the end it expanded the film. We were a third of the way into the shooting. We were too far in to stop. We'd committed film stock and time and were committed to Channel 4 and the funders and support groups and everyone else. I realized that a plan B would not be impossible.



The legal left; the vigilante right

In the left there were various stripes of thinking ranging from militant dogmatism to more moderate positions more open to having the story explored. There was also the legal movement which was trying to figure out whether or not there was any advantage in pursuing legal ways of working on the basic issues. There was a huge debate on the left at the time as to whether or not to run electorally. Some said, "Forget it. It's not worth the investment in a political campaign. We'll put our hearts into it and if we're really successful the right-wing death squads are going to try to shoot us. Or if we're not very successful people simply won't vote for us. We don't have the money to compete against these rich candidates who can buy TV time and rent planes and buses. Poor people can't play the game of the legal option."

It was at that time that I realized, Ah Ha! Our film had been caught up in that bigger debate among the left. I decided to make the film deal with those problems, with that debate.

That's when I decided to look at who was one of the best examples of people working legally on the left with a track record of dealing with the biggest issues at hand, putting his life on the line and going for the legal alternative. I came up with Dante Buscayno, former leader of the New People's Army who was now running for senator in the elections. I had known about and covered his release from 10 years of solitary confinement in Marcos' jails. It was just sheer instinct that told me to follow his story and the story of the Partido ng Bayan, the legal left party he belonged to.

I had also already been aware of the right-wing vigilante movement. It was an extreme example of a kind of foil of both the legal and paralegal left – whether you were a union organizer or a progressive priest, etc. The right-wing was an important element to film.

Instead of one story my film had to include at least three major elements.

Off we went to hit the campaign trail and film vigilantes. Production was a nightmare because we were filming a full-fledged campaign which had a budget of two cents. I hired a jeep. At times not only was it the only press jeep – it was the only jeep on this low-budget People's Party campaign. Sometimes we were carrying not only the film crew but the entire campaign – posters, banners and candidates, all stuffed inside our jeep along with the cameras. It was a very tense time because the part of the campaign we chose to film was the left-wing candidates travelling into right-wing vigilante territory.

There were security precautions. People were worried about assassination attempts. One time when we were going down the road the jeep in front of us backfired and it sounded just like a gunshot. Dante, instantly, within an eighth of a second, was on the floor of the jeep. We all laughed at the time. But these of course were the very instincts which several months later saved him from a real assassination attempt. It was a very, very tense time.

It was excruciating to shoot. We slept two hours a night. On floors of church basements and in people's huts. The schedules were chaotic. It was an absolute nightmare to cover. The campaign was dealing all the time with logistics, with how pathetic it was for the left to stay on top of a very expensive political campaign when they had no money at all. There we were tagging along and filming this. Again it was a matter of trust. There were times when, just by the fact that we were there all the time and asking probing questions, there were people who became suspicious of us. I had to fall back on my relationship with Dante all the time because while it was annoying to have a film crew along all the time, he knew in his heart what we were trying to do.

Concurrently, we filmed the right-wing vigilantes, trying not to cross back and forth between right and left too often because I knew

that the vigilantes were wary of our motives in filming them. If we thought covering an underfunded political campaign was difficult, it was nothing compared to shooting the vigilantes. We put ourselves up in a motel outside the outskirts of their home base, the town of Davao. We were very aware and very nervous that we were probably being followed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines to see if we were making any connections with the underground.

We took a motel-house as our headquarters. It had an amazing cast of characters including a guy who lived upstairs dressed up in running shoes, T-shirt and M-16 automatic rifles. We never did know exactly who these people were. We assumed they were affiliated with the right-wing death squads. There were people in the house across the road who would walk past the venetian blinds talking into walkie-talkies. All of the town was crawling with security. Not just because of us but because that was just the general state of war there.

Threats, harassment and murder

We filmed the right-wing radio disc jockey Jun Pala, which was an experience because you're dealing with a man who baldly confesses that he is working with the right-wing vigilantes. He threatens people over the air with harassment and hints at possible death if they don't co-operate with the vigilante movement. This guy's playing hard-ball. We went and filmed him one day and tried to get him to explain to us what in the world he was up to. He performed. These guys on the right had a certain self-assurance and arrogance about being winners. They are the top dogs down there now and they had no reason to be embarrassed about my questions or what they were doing – they were proud of it. We filmed him talking on the air, going through his usual routines.

We had heard that a union organizer had been killed. We left the radio station and piled into a jeep and went back down to the village where the union organizer had been killed. Sure enough, it appeared that he had been chopped to death in front of 30 witnesses by the local vigilante group. The interesting thing about that story was that we could have just stopped with the radio interview. The D.J. was outrageous and sensational – he was great film. This is what I mean by sticking with the story. But we chose to follow the labour organizer murder story. We had a hunch that it would lead back to the radio station because there were hints that Jun Pala had named him on the radio. There were also hints that the military had been either right there or at least in the immediate vicinity during the killing. I thought there would be a possible tie to the military, and by extension the government, into the vigilantes' murdering of legal left organizers. So we chased the story in our press jeep.

We were told that the death squads were

roaming around the area. We were told to check out the local army outpost. We went in our jeep, with our press sign very visible, to question the army about what had happened. The barracks were up on a hill. We turned the jeep up the hill and there, lo and behold, were the Armed Forces of the Philippines and with them about 20 vigilantes. We could see them together. So we parked the jeep and I went to check this out with the cinematographer. We walked our way up to talk to these characters and all of a sudden all 40 of them opened fire at us.

There were literally machine gun bullets pinging everywhere around us. The crew immediately hit the deck of the jeep. We were caught in the open. Dust was being picked up by the bullets. They were literally bouncing off the ground all around us. The cinematographer hit the dirt. I told him in no uncertain terms to start filming. He told me in no uncertain terms where to go. All I could see of the jeep was the soundman who poked his microphone over the edge of the window like a submarine periscope waving around trying to catch some sound.

When we rolled our way to the side of the road we realized that in fact these guys were not shooting directly at us. What had happened was that they had been "questioning" an N.P.A. suspect. (We judged from the look of the guy that they had been torturing him.) When we had pulled up in our jeep, all the attention of his tormentors turned toward our jeep. The suspect took advantage of this instant of his captors' lack of concentration and he ran away from them, jumped off an embankment, ran straight toward our jeep and passed it into the jungle. Of course when the Armed Forces opened fire they were shooting not only at him but also at us. This was our introduction to the military.

We dusted ourselves off and sauntered our way up to them. At that point they were a surly bunch of angry guys, having lost their prisoner. I started asking them about the killing of this labour leader. When we had finished our interview, I felt by virtue of the fact that the vigilantes, who witnesses had said had been responsible for the killing, were there with the Armed Forces and in the way that the commanding officer had answered our questions and by the way people were acting, that these people had been responsible, in some way, for the killing. Then I took that information back to town and spent more time with the right-wing radio D.J., Jun Pala. At the end of the interview session I put the question to him, "What was he doing on the radio threatening people? These were real threats and people were ending up dying because of it."

On the run in the jungle

We finished filming the campaign and the Canadian cameraman left. I had received confirmation that I could go back to the mountains to film the underground left, but I had no crew. There was nobody who had the



time or the inclination to go film. This is when I decided that I would have to shoot the thing myself. This is when the hotel workshops happened. I was promoting myself to camerawoman. I became trained on the Aaton and Bolex. This meant that the assistant cameraman and I had to learn in three days everything that could be learned about a 16mm camera and lighting and filmstock. I trained an American woman stills photographer, who would do sound for a couple of weeks. So the three of us took off to the mountains. I had originally planned a three-week shoot. We ended up staying eight weeks.

The logistics of shooting in the jungle made the other stuff seem like a picnic. There was just basic stuff like how do you get all the equipment - 3 cameras, 5 lenses, tripods, walkman sound-kits and microphones, film and sound stock, changing bags, cans, backpacks, clothes, dental floss, jackknives, notebooks, still cameras... you name it - lots of stuff - through the jungle. We ended up hiring local farmers to carry our stuff. When we got to the location I ended up training members of the underground left to do translation, production, sound and all of sudden we were in the middle of mud filming with a crew.

One of the main promises I had made was that we would at all times be able to run if the villages were attacked by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. We weren't going to sit around to become a security risk because we were flopping around trying to find equipment and run with it. We weren't in a position where we would be able to negotiate with the Army if they arrived. Those things happen very fast. We would be perceived by the Army as the enemy and accordingly we would have had to face the music. I also didn't want to leave our equipment behind as a donation to the Army. The routine

became that every night we would bury the equipment and our exposed and unexposed film stock in holes in the ground protected by cases, tarps, garbage bags and trees. We would sleep with the spring-wound Bolex cameras with three-minute loads and our small sound kits so that no matter what happened, we would be ready to run.

Once, after about six weeks of people looking at me as if I was pretty strange because my demands were very strange (being the demands of a filmmaker), I was asleep in my hammock. My heart lifted one more time when a young member of the unit came running in and shook my hammock saying, "Quick. Quick. Quick. Come and shoot." I thought something terrible had happened. I didn't know why this guy was shouting. Perhaps the Armed Forces of the Philippines was coming and we were in danger. I went running out and he pointed and said, "Look. The light is perfect. It's magic light." So you see even he had begun to "think film". After a while everyone was getting used to dealing with a film crew.

I learned through all of this how to shoot and ask questions at the same time. It's hard for anybody to talk to a camera, particularly for people living without media. They talk to people, not to cameras. Every time I looked into the lens the interviewee would look away. They talked to other people who were sitting around, or to the trees or any other living thing. They weren't going to talk to a piece of dumb technology, a camera lens. I got to the point of looking overtop of the camera to maintain eye contact, which makes for a strange interview technique.

We got stuck in the mountains, frozen in the crossfire of a civil war. It was all high adventure for me, but it left everyone in Canada in a fair state of anxiety about me. The equipment lenders were starting to worry about their equipment because we had overstayed our schedule. The production people in Vancouver would say, "For God's sake, you cannot film everything that moves in the Philippines. You've got to come home." But I would say, "But I have to find out how these stories end. I've got to get one last interview. I've got somebody who can speak from the underground. I've got to get this and I've got to get that." Channel 4 and the NFB were saying as well, "Well where is she? Where is this film?" In every case when the situation was explained to them afterwards, to their credit, everything was O.K.

Postscript

The whole business of Time, Trust and Money. Those three things extend into post-production. I thought it was going to be a four-month edit. It ended up as seven. Many, many times when the Channel 4 deadlines said we should stop the edit, we just couldn't stop. The film wasn't finished to the degree of complexity that we

wanted. One of the things that I was faced with was that I had come back from the Philippines with an enormous amount of footage which told three main stories. To be able to weave these stories meant we no longer had a television hour-long documentary. We had a feature length documentary, so we had to break the news to Channel 4 on that one. It also meant that it would expand our budget and the time necessary to put it all together.

The most important thing that happened in the editing process was the same thing that happened during the shooting. We extended our film to include many more people. They either fell in love with it or thought it had something important to say and I think each one felt that they could say it in their own creative way.

The film premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival in October. Now it is being launched. I'm looking at eight months to a year of babysitting the distribution of it. People always say, "What's your next project?" Well, distributing it is my next project. It has to be approached with the same vigour as the rest of the production. I thought I'd get depressed not being able to go directly onto something else, but in fact getting it out to an audience seems to be the point of the whole enterprise.

It's frustrating when television broadcasters other than Channel 4 only want a 52-minute film. But I'm working on them. The churches have prioritized working with the film for 1989. The Anglicans, the United Church, possibly the Catholics and a number of others, are willing to provide the backbone for organizing committees to get audiences out to see the film in different communities. This is the real grass-roots organizing that I learned in my theatre days and I think it's exactly the same kind of organizing that'll have to be done around the distribution of the film.

But right now, as we speak, I have literally and exactly 10 dollars left to my name. This means that I have no money to effectively distribute the film. The next few months will be dicey for me. While nobody's kidding themselves that it's going to be a gigantic economic success in terms of millions of dollars in return, I've got to prove to distributors that people want to see the movie and I have to prove that with 10 bucks literally left in my pocket. So right now I'm doing a real dance. After having been producer, director, production manager, sound recordist and camerawoman at various different times on this film, I have to now figure out how to be distributor and publicist and spokeswoman and a whole other gambit of skills which I hope I have to get me through this final phase of being an independent filmmaker.

A Rustling of Leaves was invited to the Forum of Young Cinema at the Berlin Festival and will be screened at repertory houses across Canada this spring. •