

RAT RACE PRODUCTIONS:
SELF-REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS OF "*COST OF DEATH*"

by Theresa Hayward

ROLES IN PRODUCTION: PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, INTERVIEWER.

As producer I felt responsible for the end product. I knew I had to rely on my crew to pull together and help us achieve an end product but I never knew it would be such a trying process. After brainstorming different ideas and sharing them with the class it was clear that the funeral story had the most interest, the visuals would be rich and there were a number of angles that could be explored.

After coming up with a basic hypothesis and doing some research on the internet and on personal level with people we knew, we began working on our proposal. I then delegated research. Jess went and asked staff on campus and contacted lecturers in the Xhosa department. Pete and I went to speak to funeral directors to get a rough idea of how much people were spending and to start making contacts with people in the industry. We also went to the CSD where Cathy Gush put us into contact with a suitable case study.

Before the shoot even began we were having issues with group dynamics mainly due to the rumours of a possible group restructuring. It was difficult to get work done knowing that tomorrow you may be pulled out of this group and have to start on a completely different story. This also made it difficult for me delegating as I did not want one of my group members to make contact with a source and then not be around for the interview so I ended up taking a lot of responsibility in terms of contacting possible sources. Once the restructuring saga was over we continued full steam ahead and held our first interview with Russell Kaschula and Dr Mpalo. As director I did not take full control over the environment, mainly because I was interviewing and trying to relax my interviewees. Therefore I relied on my crew to pull their weight, be professional and film the interview properly. The lighting and sound took a long time to set up but was good (until the drilling started later). During this time the cameraperson was setting up the shot and the camera. Once getting the go ahead from sound and camera the interview started, however it was abruptly stopped when I was told that there were problems with the tape. It turned out the recently packed tape had not been rewound. And so the issues with the cameraperson's abilities began. Turning a generally relaxed interview situation into an awkward moment listening to the tape rewind!

After capturing the footage from the first two shoots with the editor it became evident that I, as producer, would have to confront the cameraperson and find a way of improving camera skills. A meeting was held during which rushes were crited and group dynamics were blamed as the main reason why the cameraperson was not doing her job correctly. As director I also offered to give more direction when on shoots. I expressed my concern with the cameraperson to the executive producer the next day which resulted in a viewing of rushes. This helped all of us in the crew to look at our own camera work and see how it could be improved. It particularly helped boost the moral of our cameraperson to see that we all make mistakes and there is always room for improvement. Over the next few shoots there was a definite improvement in camerawork.

When our main case study pulled out it was difficult to understand why and therefore I arranged a meeting to discuss this with her. With Jess present I explained why it was so important for her to appear on camera and listened to her concerns of the

shame it would bring on her family. We came to a compromise that she would still be interviewed provided she had a copy of the questions before hand and that it was as a social worker who has seen people facing these issues in her community. The case study's interview was moved to a day when we already had two interviews scheduled. After setting up camera and getting sound ready our case study said she had misunderstood us and that she would not be able to go on camera. This was extremely frustrating for me as we had put so much time and effort into using her as our case study. We had written our first proposal around her, had spent endless cell phone minutes on the phone to her and wasted almost two weeks waiting for her interview. As frustrated as I was as producer, as the interviewer I had to accept and respect her refusal to be interviewed and move on. This was one of our biggest lessons, "never put your eggs in one basket". Fortunately when she had pulled out the first time we had started to make a back up plan for a case study. Unfortunately our back up case study was only willing to do the interview and she would not let us into her house or her life. On top of that she was only available on Wednesday's at 17h00 as she works two jobs. We originally planned to film her on 13 May 2007 she cancelled on the day due to mother's day this incident in itself pushed our shooting schedule into the week that we had initially planned to be editing in.

As interviewer I felt intimidated at times before the interviews especially when I had to interview Matebese and also when I had to interview Professor Kaschula (as he started out as a journalist – and its always weird a journalist interviewing a fellow journalist). This intimidation put pressure on me as interviewer to be fully prepared before the interview. Fortunately Matebese was a lot easier to talk to than I had initially gauged, as was Kaschula. In interview situations I was torn between interviewing and directing, this resulted in me having to count on Pete a lot to help me make director's decisions such as where best to place the guest and what shot to direct Jess to take.

The funeral shoot was definitely the most visually pleasing and afforded us with the opportunity to get some amazing footage. However as it was a funeral we had to be respectful and professional. It was extremely awkward when we first arrived as we did not know who was who, the grieving husband was trying to be the perfect host which totally confused me and I only found later that he was in fact the deceased's husband. One of the things that challenged me on a cognitive level was trying to understand Xhosa culture for what it is and not always compare it to my culture. For example I view it as unsympathetic to pay respects to a family that has just lost a family member and expect them to serve on me, in my culture I would be taking a meal over to the grieving family and making them tea. I also found myself challenged to see each case that we looked at as individual and not associate it to stereotypes of what a Xhosa funeral should be.

The fact that we were an all 'white' crew at a predominantly Black funeral made us feel like we didn't belong there. As a crew we were really fortunate as it was an awkward situation (awkward because one it was a private moment and we did not know the deceased and because it was a different culture to ours) but the family was very welcoming and tried to make us feel uncomfortable in their environment. This feeling of not belonging and exploiting another's culture also presented itself when we went into the township to film establishing shots of Joza and again when we were confronted with the issue of our first case study pulling out. It was at times like these

that I wish I had a better grasp on the Xhosa language or that I had a Xhosa person in my crew so that I didn't feel like such an outsider when I go into situations like this. Despite these personal feelings of been isolated from our subjects I do feel like we overcame this in the final piece and I don't feel there is any sign of us as media producers being isolated from our subjects.

One extremely awkward experience I had was a confrontation with Spokazi Shweme whom I had earlier been in contact with in order to arrange an interview and permission to film visuals which she had declined to allow. Jess and I were in Beaufort Street filming the limosine hearses at Shweme and Shweme on the street when I was told that Miss Shweme wanted to know what I was doing. The conversation that followed was very threatening from both sides and I walked away infuriated because I knew I had every right to be filming in a public space. I feel that this encounter will help me in the long run because I know in the future as a journalist I will probably have to deal with confrontations of this nature on a regular basis. And through my meetings with our first case study I have realised that I need to work on my interpersonal skills in order to be able to convince people (and in a way I suppose manipulate my subjects) more.

Our paper edit was insisted upon by the editor and fortunately so otherwise I would have been lost when I had to take over his role. The paper edit took place first as a brainstorming session where we worked on a basic introduction, middle, solution, end. I feel like Pete should take the credit for getting the paper edit done he had a real vision for the piece and where it was going and worked in the ideas and suggestions of the rest of the crew.

In terms of group dynamics again. I get extremely irritated often as I feel like Jess's only input at times is criticism and I never feel like it is constructive criticism. Pete and I ended up doing most of the paper edit together and we did question where Jess was with her narrative skills when her crew needed them. As producer I had already planned to spend the editing days alongside the editor to help him make editorial decisions as they cropped up. I feel that had Jess, as the cameraperson, been present during the editing process we would have been able to tap into much more of the visuals for cutaways than we actually did, although I had a pretty good idea of what visuals we had as I had done a fair amount of capturing and had been present on every single shoot. I feel that her input would have been substantial as she was the one who actually took the shots and knew exactly what she had shot.

When Pete got sick my initial response was to continue to work towards deadline without him, whereas Jess' response was to give-up and get an extension as it was not our portfolio. I find this to be a serious issue in our crew. As we are a group we are meant to run together and to pick one another up when someone stumbles. I find it really disheartening when I am ready to put my life on hold for our group yet other members are not. I just don't see the same level on commitment from all crew members. I know I'm committed and I know Pete is too – this was confirmed for me when he came in three times to try and help me edit despite the fact that he was green in the face and convulsing with fever! But Jess is all talk and no action and I'm really worried about the 24-minute documentary will Pete and I be forced to count on one another yet again...

We are working in mock-reality conditions where we are expected to be as professional as we can. Yet, ultimately, we are not professionals, we are a team first and foremost. Support is fundamental and when it came to crunch time I did not receive my full crew members support – I didn't expect it from Pete at the time, but I did expect it from Jess. I strongly feel that the paper edit was the only reason I was able to pull the piece together in time, and I could have really used Jess' input in terms of the cutaways – two heads are always better than one, especially creativity wise. I think this is why the *Raging Ferret* crew always do so well because they support each other all the way. We are trying to be professionals here and work towards our mock-reality deadlines. Yet I feel that if this was a real-life situation, I would not have had to step in as editor when my editor fell sick, I would have hired a new one, who maybe would have been slower but would have at least had a firm grasp on the editing software. I also respect that because we are working in mock-reality conditions I was given a 10% cut rather than been cancelled completely (failed) due to not having the product ready on time.

When I look back at this cycle I am really pleased at what I have managed to learn. I have been challenged in more ways than I thought possible. I may not have been able to achieve everything I wanted (especially in terms of editing) but I know if given enough time I can do it and that is probably my biggest motivation to keep pushing myself. I think this cycle has helped point out my weak areas in all the roles that I undertook and with this knowledge I can work towards improving my overall performance.