

The Making of *Queens of Pefferville* – a self-reflexive essay...

When I first set out to make this piece I did not really know what I was getting myself into. I knew it was going to be a colourful piece with interesting characters but I did not realise how complicated it would be to weave together. When I first proposed this story idea it was a piece on two gay men who were putting on a drag show in aid of a friend who had died of AIDS. I assumed that their friend had died recently within the past two years. On further investigation I found that the friend, Angelica Collinki, had in fact died over a decade ago and was a good friend of the founder of the Curt Warmberg Haven Wellness Centre, Eurina "Totsie" Stowman, who was one of the organisers of the drag show. This changed the angle of my story and instead I decided to focus on the participants in the drag show and explore their identities as gay Christian men. However in the edit, due to lack of cutaway because of technical issues such as drop out on footage and lack of backup cutaway, I once again had to change the angle of the story. The final edit follows a group of young gay men in the build up to a drag show which they hold in order to raise funds for an HIV/AIDS centre in their community.

Producing a piece on my own was a challenge as I did not have the protection of a group as one usually does in a crew when going into a foreign setting. As a multi-tasker it is more difficult to build a relationship with your subjects as you are trying to take on the role of director and put the subject at ease yet at the same time you have a camera in your hand. I did not take my camera to the first meeting I had with my subjects because I wanted to get to know them first and allow them to open up to me. At that initial meeting eleven of the drag show contestants arrived and it was immediately evident who would be comfortable talking about themselves on camera. The first character I chose for the piece was Ashton Joubert, he was working for a Christian organisation as a peer group trainer and was raised by his grandfather who is a pastor. The second character I chose was Terence Spalding otherwise known as 'Magmieda' or 'Santana'. Terence is a teacher at the local high school, his father was a Xhosa man tried to beat Terence's gay tendencies out of him. The two characters work well together as they are friends and have shared many experiences together yet their families accepted them differently. The introduction of the master of ceremonies for the drag show, John de Lange, builds on the need for people to accept gay people for who they are and not judge or try to change their ways. The two characters were

very open about their lives and not guarded when I asked them personal questions. One of the most difficult parts of this assignment was having to ask difficult questions whilst interviewing and trying to make sure that the sound levels were correct and that the shot was right. This was not helped by the fact that I had a broken tripod which would not lock and therefore unexpectedly panned whenever accidentally bumped.

I had many technical issues on my first shoot due to faulty equipment, every time I pressed record there would be stripes over my first few frames of footage, in some cases up to four minutes of interview bites were lost due to this. As I was in East London for the week to film I did not really have a budget to travel back and forth to Grahamstown to fix the issues of camera dropout and due to this I lost a lot of footage on the actual night of the drag show.

When I interviewed Ashton and Terence they were weary to let me come into their homes as they both lived with extended family therefore I planned to get cutaway of the two of them preparing for the show and ask them questions whilst they were doing makeup and putting on shoes etc. All of the contestants were meant to arrive to prepare for the show at 16:00 however when the show started at 19:00 they had only just arrived and therefore the show started late and it was a frantic rush to get ready so I did not really get the shots I had originally planned for. However I did manage to capture the hustle and bustle of preparing for the show. To the organisers and my surprise Ashton dropped out on the night claiming that he did not want his community to see him dressed in drag as it might reflect badly on his Christian identity which was a complete contradiction to what he had told me in the interview a few days earlier. Unfortunately I left East London the next day so I never got the opportunity to ask Ashton what really happened on that night. I did capture the organisers stressing out because he and seven other contestants had not arrived.

Producing this individual piece forced me to step out of my comfort zone as I surrounded myself with homosexuals in order to get a better grasp of what issues they have to face and how they identify themselves. I never felt unsafe when I was in their presence but when I was alone filming cutaways of Pefferville I felt unsafe as the area is known for its high level of gangsterism, violence and theft, as a single white female I felt insecure at times. Yet I overcame this by staying close to the Curt Warmberg Haven wellness centre (the haven) and taking as few valuables with me as possible.

The people at the haven centre do amazing volunteer work in the community and I was glad to be able to add some information about the haven in my piece. This also

helped me to structure in the fact that these men were doing this show in aid of charity in an attempt to make a difference in their community.

After capturing my footage, logging tapes and typing transcriptions out I really struggled to find a direction for my piece as I felt there were elements missing that I would need to go back and shoot. For example I still had no cutaway of Ashton other than him rehearsing for the drag show, I needed shots of him in church and with his pastor. After pitching my story to the class, even though I had hoped I had enough footage to go by, I realised that if I was to explore the Christian element of their gay identities I would need to go back to East London and pick up cutaway otherwise I only really had talking heads. I planned to go back for one last shoot however due to the fact that I had the camera for the first week of the vacation I no longer had any say over its use and therefore due to pressures on the camera and the lack of budget to return to East London I failed to follow up on my story and therefore ended up having to work with the footage I had. This stretched my editing skills to the limit and I really struggled initially. The pressures of working simultaneously on the 24-minute documentary and the 5-minute individual project took their toll. After reviewing my first rough edit with my executive producer I realised that the structure I was trying to make work was going nowhere and had to start again by going back to my transcriptions and mapping out a more succinct edit plan. I did not want to use voice over in my piece as I wanted my characters to tell their own story without too much of my interference, this is always difficult to do as real-life subjects don't often answer questions the way you would need in order to edit them together nicely. Therefore in the introduction of the drag show I had to use the newspaper clipping to introduce the idea of the men doing a drag show for charity because none of the clips where they explained what they were doing the show for were succinct enough to use.

I really wanted to call the piece *Queens of Pefferville* as the winner of the drag show was announced as the queen of the show but I struggled for a place to put the title as I didn't want to give it away. I wanted to use the champagne glass model in my structure therefore the show is only introduced after the first minute as it is a turning point for the piece. First the two characters talk about what it is like to be gay and then Terence's interview image dissolves into an image of him dressed in drag and the title appears. This method of titling the piece and having Terence's image fade into him as a drag queen also helps the audience to recognise him because in

drag he is disguised and if I had separated the two images the audience would not have known that he was the same guy in the introduction of the piece.

In the end the piece works, it may not follow my original story idea completely but it is similar and we have been taught in journalism that a story is never stagnant it constantly evolves as you spend more time on it. I really enjoyed working on this piece it was a lot of work but looking back I have learnt a lot in the production of this piece.