

## Restoring the Others Humanity -An Academic Approach to 'Fixed'

-Richard Stapp

'Fixed' is a twenty-four minute documentary that deals with addiction and reveals the stories of three recovering drug addicts from different backgrounds. Wayne and Shane are recovering at the Salem Crossroads Centre, where they work at the kibbutz-style farm whilst absorbing the word of God to help them recover and let them grow confidence to return to society. 'Prince' is a drug merchant who still struggles with addiction himself and tells the story of trying to leave the lifestyle he has become embroiled within.

The documentary was produced by RagingFerret Productions whom are four final-year television students. This created an immediate dilemma for us, as students in dealing with such sensitive material and telling the stories of people who live in desperate situations with sensitivity.

'Fixed' relies heavily on the interviews conducted with its subjects and this allows them to drive the narration with their own personal stories. Thus there was the need for the subjects to be portrayed with sensitivity and for the producers to expose not only the tragedy in these people's situations but also the fact that there is still hope for them. A great challenge for the piece was to present the subjects as real people, to allow the viewer to engage with them on *their* terms and not those of the viewers. Through our repeated interviews we gained a closer bond with Shane and Wayne, and we felt it was vitally important to try and clear up what has been a tarnished image for those at Salem Crossroads. These recovering addicts are constantly marginalized by the local community and Salem's residents feel persecuted. Shane spoke of people not wanting to come into the centre's nursery, as

they were “drug addicts or murderers or something” and constantly asked us how he looked in the interviews and if he “looked like a good ou or not.”

Telling these stories was important to us as producers as we felt it is a documentary film-makers prerogative to use their medium in order to tell important social truths and to defend the rights of those whom can't defend themselves. Much was made of unspoken biases in A.C. Fick's course on 'Race, Representation and Ethics' that spoke directly of those whom the mainstream media commonly characterizes as different and unusual. People whom are different from the cultural hegemony that is presented by the conservative mainstream media are often cast out and vilified when portrayed within media. We felt that our subjects could identify with the structural disadvantages that the minorities were subjected to in that they had been denied their own voice with which they could tell their own stories. Without being able to tell their own stories, these people are immediately cast out and 'othered' by the media and negative stereotypes are created to surround them. Once these people are stereotyped, they lose their own individuality that all people are supposed to enjoy within democratic societies.

To serve the disenfranchised communities is an important facet of journalism and it allows for media to take its rightful place at the cornerstone of any flourishing democracy. The role of the media is obvious in serving a democracy and allowing people to have their own voices heard is of paramount importance, and we were glad to give Wayne and Shane a platform to tell their stories. Both were initially reluctant to talk to us, but both explained their choices to grant the interviews on the grounds that they could help those who were in danger of straying down the same path that they themselves had tread.

Thus we felt the subject matter of our piece was of fitting significance when given the mandate of trying to make a piece that is relevant in creating positive social change. Our subjects all ended their stories with messages of hope and showed their desire to change their ways and make a great effort to right the wrongs of their pass.

An important part of telling their stories in an effective way was to create a seamless flow of their conversations whilst moving in between a range of different arcs. We tried to do this by linking different conversations with similar words and cutting quickly between different conversations. Often we were able to create the effect that the subject was reacting to what had previously been said. This was of particular importance as we decided not to have a narrating voice-over. That decision stemmed from our objective to let the subjects tell their own stories. We tried to allow all the figures to be treated in a responsible and sensible way and not characterize any of them by using the set of established production norms, but to let them characterize themselves. 'Prince' was difficult to portray in a sensitive light as he requested to have his identity portrayed. Thus, he immediately appears as a sinister figure that is darkly lit and has an awfully threatening voice. However, we made a point of allowing him to tell his own story and highlight the tragedy of his own situation. He appeared during the arc about the drug merchants and the viewer would immediately look at the merchant portrayed as the villain of the piece. However, I feel that this feeling was quickly lost when 'Prince' spoke of his own addiction and horrible situation he finds himself in. Thus we were able to challenge another stereotype that would appear, of the sinister and threatening drug merchant. Our drug merchant is not a villainous and threatening figure, he is simply a figure

who has made a few costly errors of judgement and has subsequently found himself facing a dire situation.

This is what I feel is the triumph of 'Fixed', that it restores the humanity to those whom are disenfranchised and marginalized and put under pressure to conform to societal standards. Instead of seeking to understand and help those who do not conform to the global cultural hegemony, the mainstream media too often seeks to cast them out and vilify them on the basis of their differences. RagingFerret Production really hoped to restore a voice to those who have been cast out with this piece and allow them to regain their own dignity and individuality, which in turn would be able to make a positive social comment of hope for those who find themselves marginalized.