

A Self-Reflexive Analysis of my role in 'Fixed'

-Richard Stapp

Completing 'Fixed' was one of the most difficult and challenging tasks I have ever been involved in. The amount of work involved in producing a 24-minute documentary is incredible, and producing 'Fixed' was an invaluable experience to me as a young television producer. This was obviously the first time I had been involved in such a hectic project and I learnt an incredible amount in a variety of different disciplines from undertaking interviews with sensitive subjects through to the editing process and making a story flow seamlessly for 24 minutes, which seem like an eternity. There were also multiple concerns over ethical issues and group dynamics which made the production of 'Fixed' an invaluable learning tool.

My chief role during the production of 'Fixed' was that of the interviewer. I made the calls and organised the interviews. This led to me building up a rapport with the Wayne and Shane, which was important as we had repeated trips to Salem. Building a relationship and an understanding with them was vital, as the more relaxed and trusting they became the more they began to open up. It was important to have a few general interview discussing broader topics with them before delving into more serious and personal examples. Wayne was notoriously cagey and always spoke very generally and it was a challenge to get him to bring himself out in a lot stronger way, which was not the case for Shane. Shane was very open and forthright from the get-go. Although Noel Banfield had told us there was no-one else willing to talk to us, we managed to persuade Shane to talk to us after he became inquisitive about the camera and what we were doing there.

Another interesting aspect we were on the look-out for was Banfield's warnings that the recovering addicts would look to manipulate us and use us as a vehicle to further their own situations. We frequently had Wayne and Shane mention their estrangement from their families and that they hoped their words could act as a warning to others who are drugging. The more we interacted with these two though, the more I began to realise that this wasn't really the case with them. Wayne and Shane always made themselves available to us whenever we arrived and spoke candidly. In the end, as with most journalistic pieces, it remained the journo's using the subjects as a vehicle for our own benefit.

I was nervous about conducting the interviews as the need for sensitivity was paramount. It is a tricky endeavour to get these people to talk about where they have gone wrong, particularly in the light of their position as social outcasts. Shane spoke particularly of his bitterness about the privileged students and scholars he sees in Grahamstown, and this made us feel uneasy as these were the positions we were inhabiting. The 'us-and-them' dichotomy that existed in their stories were eye-openers, as they spoke of experimenting and beginning to use drugs heavily at our ages. Wayne had even been awarded a bursary to study at University before he began drugging. This was an added dimension that, us as students, had to overcome in order to gain a bond with our subjects.

My involvement in the technical aspects of shooting was limited as a result of my interviewing. We were all active in the editing process, which was invaluable as we were all able to give our own different perspectives and debate in the correct fashion as to what decisions to make and directions to move in. Our main problem was with the pacing of the piece and trying to eliminate all the talking-heads, which we attempted to do via slow cut-aways to various shots of the farm or Wayne in the kitchen and Shane watering. This added a little bit of colour to our talking heads, but I think we were able to get away with it due to the different interview locations. Although editing in this way can be time consuming, I am very confident that it does produce the best results as we all had very different opinions which when put in conjunction with each other were able to produce a better final product.

Time management was obviously of vital importance, as our individual pieces were also in their final stages. Although we had tried to get started a few weeks prior to the deadline, it was difficult as our project kept taking new directions. In the end, it was inevitable that we would have our traditional all-nighter the night before deadline, and this was even compounded by simultaneously finishing our individual pieces. Although we had to spend all this time working on the piece, we never really felt pressured as we were confident of the quality of our final product and thus we were really just putting on the final touches such as disfiguring 'Prince's' appearance, subtitling and finalising the sound etc. This took us a lot longer than we thought it would as it takes a lot longer to 'clean up' a 24-minute piece than it does a 10 or 5 minute piece, for obvious reasons. It was encouraging however, as we all pulled together and kept working hard, despite the extreme stress and pressure involved in a sleepless night and extreme pressure of trying to cram such a lot of work in at the last

minute. The on-line editing and attention to detail was a good indicator of the strength of our group structure and all of our collective efforts being put in to good effect.

An interesting ethical question was raised in our decision to pay 'Prince' to speak to us. Bryce was the only person in contact with 'Prince' and I did not meet him. I think I would walk right past him if I saw him in the street. There is an obvious problem with paying a drug addict to speak to you but it soon became clear that this was not the case. 'Prince' spoke of his desire to stop selling drugs and that he was not using them anymore, so our concerns that we were paying for his addiction were disproved much to our relief. Although I was sceptical about the concept of paying for interview, I soon gave-in, perhaps a little greedily on my part, as I thought our piece was struggling without his inclusion. I was worried of the lack of variation in the piece and felt it desperately needed exactly what 'Prince' was able to offer. In the end I was very happy with his contribution to the 'Fixed' which Bryce filmed in his room on his own, without the rest of us to disturb and unsettle 'Prince'. Protecting his identity was an important aspect of our dealings with him as 'Prince' was very worried about speaking to us, not about being harassed by the police, but from his own distributors whom he claimed were far more dangerous. There was panic caused when another member of the TV class saw our rushes of Prince and teased us that he too would be asking 'Prince' for an interview. This caused alarm as 'Prince' had been promised complete secrecy.

This was another aspect of 'Fixed' which made me think more critically of my actions when I come into the professional industry. From a technical aspect, I feel that we did really well in the piece and our learning there was invaluable. There were a few minor problems with the boom-mike in one shot and various little niggles but I feel that on the whole were largely successful in producing a quality documentary. The learning's gained during the production of 'Fixed' will stand me in excellent stead for my career in other areas besides the technical issues. I feel that the concepts of safety and protection for sources and participating within a strong group structure which allowed for multiple producers to give their different perspectives to create an important, interesting and valuable documentary.