

Tibetan truth through the eye of the lens

Film-maker Lara Damiani is drawn to stories with powerful messages, Simon Weaving writes

In 2006 writer Lara Damiani came to the conclusion that the video camera was mightier than the pen. Within a year she had scooped an on-camera interview not only with the Dalai Lama, but also with outspoken Tibetan freedom campaigner Lhasang Tsering, who broke a three-year media silence to speak with her about the steady decline of Tibetan culture since Chinese occupation in 1949. Damiani is now shaping those interviews and more than 20 hours of film footage – along with more than 1000 photographs – into a feature length documentary called *No Currency in Compassion*. Damiani radiates passion.

After a stint working in the fishing industry in South Australia she became a freelance writer. But the medium lacked the leverage that Damiani was looking for. “For many years I wanted to be an author,” she says, “I always wanted to write about things that had powerful messages and I had written a couple of books but never got them published. I got disillusioned with writing and collaborated with a friend who is a film director. We started up a business working on corporate and government projects and so I was working locally and learning the skills of film-making.”

It didn't take Damiani long to direct her new talents at a cause she believed in. “I always wanted to do something that had some meaning, and I've always been passionate about human rights and social justice. The issue of Tibet had always fascinated me in particular.”

What finally stirred Damiani was a viewing of Michael Franti's call to action documentary *I Know I'm Not Alone*. Franti is a musician who took a camera and a guitar and walked across the war-torn Middle East talking to everyday people about life and the human cost of war. “It was really inspiring,” Damiani says, “and I saw it at a time I was reading the *Tibetan Book of Living And Dying*. I was having coffee with a friend and



Australian film-maker Lara Damiani shows the children at Dickey Orphanage in Lhasa how her camera works. **Picture: Claudio Raschella**

I said ‘That's it! I'm going to make this doco. I am going to Tibet.’”

Damiani emailed Bob Thurman, father of actress Uma Thurman and head of New York's Tibet House. She got an immediate supportive response and then raised enough money to go to India for a first round of interviews and filming, focusing on the 10th March National Tibetan Uprising Day activities. She returned to Australia broke and realised she needed more. “This time I got a loan and I went to Tibet with Claudio Raschella, a friend who is a photographer. When we got there we realised that you could not interview anyone. No-one was prepared to talk in

front of a camera.” The pair became increasingly frustrated about the lack of civil freedom, and concerned about their safety and the constant presence of soldiers. To film evidence of the destruction of Tibetan culture they pretended to be married and on their honeymoon, declaring on their visas that they were chefs. “We couldn't tell anyone what our real reason was to be there,” she says. After Tibet, the pair went to Beijing to get some footage of the Chinese side of the story, before returning to Australia.

Although she was now totally immersed in what had become “The Tibet Project” Damiani had never managed to organise an interview with

the Dalai Lama himself, something she realised would be crucial if the documentary was to reach a serious audience. She didn't give up.

“I had been trying since February last year to get an interview with his Holiness” she says “and I had exhausted every avenue I knew of – his office in Canberra, his office in India, as well as Bob Thurman and his contacts. I kept getting told ‘no’, that he had too many demands on his time. Then, when I went back to India for an interview I had organised with Tibetan Prime Minister, a friend kept dragging me along to the Dalai Lama's office. We went three or four times and finally got a meeting with his personal secretary. After explaining what we were doing, he asked us how much time we would need with the Dalai Lama. Claudio jumped in and said ‘five minutes’ and he said he'd see what he could do. The next day there was an event at the temple with the Dalai Lama, and we were there filming. We had a fluky position at the front and I have a feeling that the Dalai Lama might have seen us and seen what we were doing, because we got a call that afternoon that we could have an interview for half an hour.” Damiani grins. “It ended up being one hour, and at the end of the interview when we were having some photos taken, he kept squeezing my hand and saying how much he appreciated what we were doing. Everything seemed worth it for that moment.”

Back in Australia, Damiani is now \$60,000 in debt and looking for help to finish off the project. She has found help from a number of generous supporters, including graphic designers who have established a website for *The Tibet Project* for free, and actress Kerry Armstrong who is narrating the documentary. “There's something passionate that gets people when they realise what's going on in Tibet,” Damiani says. “They are an amazing people who are not angry or bitter. They just get up in the morning and do what they have to do and they smile all day long. They deserve better.”

■ For more information, visit www.thetibetproject.com