



John Riber of Development Through Self Reliance shooting on location in India.

MOTION PICTURES PANEL

The Silver Screen: Images for Social Change

JUDITH SENDEROWITZ



Executive Director, The Center for Population Options. US. Ms. Senderowitz is the founder of CPO, an organization whose programs include promoting media support for responsible sexual behavior.

MOTION PICTURES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The motion picture industry in the United States draws the line between children and adults at the age of 13, at which time children pay adult prices and are permitted to view adult films without an adult chaperone. Since young people constitute a major audience for commercial films, it stands to reason that large numbers of teenagers are affected by what they see on the screen.

When I was growing up, dimly lit movie theatres were the setting for socially sanctioned early sexual experimentation. Movie theatres were perhaps the only place where society allowed adolescents to engage in tentative sexual communication without condemning it.

Today US teenagers are increasingly watching videotapes played in the living room—a setting which is probably more conducive to unintended pregnancy than movie theatres.

The motion pictures panel will give us an inside view on what goes into filmmaking in different parts of the world. ■

THE ENTER-EDUCATE CONFERENCE

THURSDAY, MARCH 30, 1989

Judith Senderowitz (CPO), *Moderator*

Sarah Pillsbury (Producer, SA)

John Riber (Producer, Zimbabwe)

Manuel Urbina (Ministry of Health, Mexico)

Abhinav Chaturvedi, (Actor, India)

SARAH PILLSBURY



*Motion Picture Producer.
Academy Award Winner.
Known for such films as
Desperately Seeking Susan,
Rivers Edge, Eight Men Out,
and Our Immediate Family.
Ms. Pillsbury is a board
member of the Liberty Hill
Foundation and the
Sundance Institute which
supports independent
filmmakers.*

"EVERY FILM HAS AN IDEOLOGY... but few filmmakers really take the responsibility to look at what their film is saying." *

When I returned to the US after a year in Kenya, I headed for Hollywood to tell the truth in film. I wanted to make the world a better place. With a friend, I made a dramatic short about two people with Downs Syndrome and won an academy award. This allowed me to go full-force in Hollywood as a producer.

All Films Have an Ideology

All filmmakers should look at what their films are saying, at what the underlying messages are. Films that spill blood and guts, such as Rambo, are not necessarily viewed as political. Yet they do give a

message to people. What bugs me is that it's usually only the films with progressive messages that are viewed as political, ideological, or controversial.

My partner and I look carefully into the subject matter and examine each scene, character, and relationship, trying to be aware both of the messages we want to get across as well as those that we might inadvertently be getting across. Our films ask questions. They seek the truth. They show how people develop courage. They are often based on true stories.

The Courage to Act

Rivers Edge was based on a true story. A boy in Northern California killed his girlfriend and took his friends to see the body. The friends didn't tell anyone for three or four days.

How could this happen? What was going on with these kids?

I found out sometime later when a script based on the story crossed my desk. It was written by a young man who was really inspired. My partner and I were disturbed that so many teenage films in this country are so frivolous and silly. We felt that this script really dealt with the issues of teenagers. Being an individual, an adult. Getting away from your parents. Getting trapped in your peer group. Trying to figure out what is right, what is wrong.

One girl knows the right thing to do. She tries to make the phone call but hangs up. She doesn't have the courage. The kid who finds the courage is the most unlikely in our minds; he hates authority, he smokes dope. But he emerges as the hero in the end.

Did the message come across? The critics appreciated it, but a lot of people found the film profoundly depressing because of what it says about the adolescent population in this country. After a similar incident in Boston, video rental figures went way up. The film continues to circulate through the videotape market.

What Is Best?

Our most recent film, *Our Immediate Family*, also deals with morality. It is about the relationship of an infertile couple with a pregnant young woman whose child they are planning to adopt. The adopting parents are rich, the birth mother and father are not. What's right for the child? For the birth mother? Who would be the better parents? Clearly it doesn't boil down to rich or poor.

We discovered when the film was almost finished that the storyline might inadvertently be saying that pregnant teenage girls should give birth to their babies and give them up to some rich white woman. Since it was not our intent to give an anti-abortion message, we added a few lines:

Birth Mother:

You think that women who have abortions are bad?

Adopting Mother:

Well, no, we don't think they are bad.

Birth Mother:

Do you ever think of having an abortion?

Adopting Mother: (nervously)

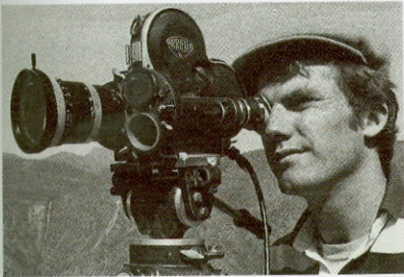
Well, I'm trying to get pregnant.

My partner and I are viewed as people who do tough projects. Executives always say, "Oh, what are you going to do next?" When we tell them, hoping they'll give us money, they just say, "Oh, interesting...."

It's a struggle. But we feel lucky to have made the films we've made. ■

*The words of my UCLA film teacher.

JOHN RIBER



Film Producer. Born in India, studied in Iowa, now living in Africa, Mr.

Riber started in the filmmaking business 10 years ago with the purchase of a \$50 motion picture camera. He and his wife,

Louise, specialize in making development films.

They have worked mostly in India, Bangladesh, and

Sri Lanka and are now living and working in Zimbabwe. Mr. Riber

*recently assisted the Government of India, through Johns Hopkins' support, to design and produce *Decision*, a film about early marriage.*

MAKING FILMS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Making educational films is a luxury that not many developing countries can afford. There is a real need in the developing world to produce good educational material for local consumption. Most educational health-related films come from the US or Europe. They may not be culturally appropriate, but they are cheaper.

My wife, Louise, and I are complete filmmakers. We supervise all aspects of production. Our major objectives are to:

- Produce developmental material for local use.

- Provide training to local emerging or established filmmakers.

- Demonstrate that you can make a good film cheaply, if you know the technology.

Working with local talent can be exciting, and even difficult, but it is definitely rewarding. While we are teaching technical skills, we are learning from our colleagues how to communicate in a cultural context that is foreign to us. When we produce films in languages we don't speak, we have to work very closely with English-speaking writers, directors, and artists in a cross-cultural context.

The Enter-Educate Approach

We started out making documentary films. We now believe that the dramatic or enter-educate approach provides a really good format for delivering social messages for mass distribution in developing countries.

- The dramatic approach is more flexible.
- Sensitive subjects such as family planning that might never be talked about in Indian villages can be acceptable when dramatized and shown in cinema halls.

The feature film industry in Asia is flourishing. Feature films for cinema halls can reach many more people in developing countries than TVs, videos or projectors which are not widely available in homes and schools.

"The" Literacy Film of Bangladesh

In 1982, the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh wanted a documentary for mass distribution to encourage young adults to become involved in informal literacy programs. The film industry in Bangladesh was phenomenal, hundreds of theaters across the country with young people, often in poor sectors, crowding in four or five shows per day.

We decided that we wanted to make a film to distribute in cinema halls, something that would appeal to our audience, a Bombay style film. We hired a commercial producer-director who

was able to secure big-name stars and a music director who would guarantee public interest in the film even before it was made.

The Dawn of Bor Holo Dor Kholo

Working with the commercial people and the Ministry of Health, we developed a very dramatic script about the trials and tribulations faced by a common Bangladeshi in his efforts to become literate. A simple story full of Bombay masala gimmicks with villains, heroes, heroines, song and dance. A story with carefully considered messages about illiteracy.

We called the film *Bor Holo Dor Kholo* (It's Dawn, Open Your Door). It was a huge success. It was shown in cinema halls and mobile film units. It was shown on national TV twice the first year—which is unheard of—and it is still being shown every international literacy day. In its first two years, 10 million Bangladeshis saw the film. *Bor Holo Dor Kholo* led to the development of two more sequels dealing with family planning and a third sequel on oral rehydration with the same character and location.

Maintaining the Balance

The main challenge we face making development films is how to combine or synthesize education and entertainment. Our films are supported by national or international development agencies who want educational materials. At the same time, the commercial people with whom we make the films complain of too much propaganda, too much dialogue, not enough entertainment. And we are somewhere in between. We want to make films that are informative and yet hold people's attention. The balance is tricky. It is a challenge, and we have been fortunate. Our latest film, *Consequences*, dealing with teenage pregnancy, is on its way to becoming the most widely-distributed African film ever made. ■

MANUEL URBINA



General Director of Family Planning Programs, Ministry of Health, Mexico. Dr. Urbina is a physician with training in public health. He was formerly Director of Information, Education and Communication and Head of Family Planning for the Mexican Institute of Social Security. Dr. Urbina and his department have co-produced a motion picture mini-series and radio soap operas as part of the communication strategy of Mexico's family planning program.

MOVIES, TV, AND MEXICAN FAMILY PLANNERS

The Family Planning Executive Project in Mexico decided to do a commercial movie and a TV series as part of its new family planning strategy. Our approach is holistic in that we are backing the high tech visual media with print materials and interpersonal communication activities.

We especially wanted to reach young people. Movies and TV were the media chosen because they are entertaining and they attract large numbers of young people, and because they are known for their potential in influencing human behavior.

From Taboo to Teen Pregnancy

Young people between the ages of 15 and 30 represent 30 percent of Mexico's population of 25 million people. During the past 25 years, Mexico has witnessed a series of changes regarding attitudes toward sex and sexual practices. The old taboos have given way to a dramatic rise in pregnancy among teenagers. Young people are exposed to information that enables them to grasp the true, global meaning of sexual relations for both individuals and couples. Although Mexican TV has largely avoided the issue, human sexuality, the subject is dealt with extensively in the movies and in home videos.

Our strategy focusses on reaching young people who are sexually active and able to bear children to offer them guidance in matters of sexual responsibility. The movies and TV programs are intended to address:

- Male and female roles in the workplace, the double standard and machismo.
- Stages of sexuality—adolescence, menopause, etc.
- Family building and cohesiveness.
- Unwanted pregnancies among young people.

Efforts had to be made so the Mexican public, which is not accustomed to receiving information on sexuality, would accept the messages. The scripts were developed by a group consisting of creative people—producers and scriptwriters—and experts in the field of health and family planning.

Let's Try It Again, a Comedy

The feature-length film is a comedy that takes place over a two year period and features a young couple who are unable to have a baby. Called *Let's Try It Again* (*Va de Nuez*), the plot incorporates themes on planning the right time to have a baby, communication between partners, value systems regarding parenthood, unprotected sexual relations, and support from family members. Real human beings waiver between right and wrong. Young peo-

ple overcome their own conflicts, rather than through the imposition of adult standards.

Judging by positive responses from critics and repeated showings of the movie, *Let's Try It Again* has not only been well-received and amusing but it also tends to promote communication among young couples.

Polite Society, a TV Sitcom

Situation comedy is a good format for portraying touchy topics. Each series of the 26 half-hour programs has its own plot and ending. They share the same characters and feature situations that occur frequently in Mexican society.

The main character of *Polite Society* is a knowledgeable, sensitive and understanding physician—a perfect role model. The plots focus on his relationship with his patients, fellow physicians and their wives. The action conveys to the audience a series of positive values: Equality of the sexes. Friendship. Healthy relationships between partners. Family planning.

A Joint Effort

Both the feature film and the TV series were joint productions. The Mexican Ministry of Health coordinated the project and provided technical assistance along with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) financial support. Private producers supported 30 percent of the feature film and 50 percent of the TV series. ■

ABHINAV CHATURVEDI



Actor, India. Star of Hum Log, India's first soap opera, Mr. Chaturvedi moved on to Buniyaad, a series that dealt with issues of morality and changing values. He has just finished his first feature film and is working on several others.

THE FIRST SOAP OPERA IN INDIA

They say actors are born. And so I chose to be an actor.

Then came *Hum Log*, the first soap opera in India, brought about through the inspiring methodology of Miguel Sabido and the efforts of David Poindexter who was instrumental in premiering the soap opera in India.

Hum Log really reflected the Indian lifestyle, so much that people confused me with the character I portrayed, a happy-go-lucky boy who wanted to make a fast buck. People said things to me like, "Look, take it easy." "What is the hurry? You can take all the time in the world." "Why did your father drink so much?"

The first 30 episodes were designed with family planning messages. People said, "We don't want to be preached to," and the storyline was modified so

that the family planning messages were more subtle. We had positive and negative characters. We did not preach. The people decided who they would identify with.

The series suddenly became a success. Immensely popular! For the first time, it was talked about nationally. We got thousands of letters. I got 25 or 30 each day. *Hum Log* did so well that another educational soap opera, *Bunniyaad*, was developed that dealt with changing morality and values.

Film in the Indian Context

The film industry in India is very big. Thousands of films in different languages are produced each year including the main language. The language in India changes about every 15 miles. Twenty states. Many languages. Many cultures. Local levels. Upper levels.

All films are basically social films. Successful films are those that are entertaining, films in which planned social messages are put across in a very subtle manner. People work hard all day. They want to be entertained in the cinema halls to relieve the pressures of life. They don't want to be told, "Look, you're wrong." Or, "This is what you need to do!"

The majority of feature films in India are musicals with five or six song sequences in each screenplay. The songs are usually dubbed in by professional singers and often become hits that are frequently requested on radio programs. Social messages are sometimes included in the songs. In fact a trend toward songs about drug abuse and other social problems is underway.

Actors Become Role Models for Society

Actors are in the hands of the director or scriptwriter. Actors have very little direct control over the decision of whether or not to include educational themes in films. Once that decision has been made, though, actors are crucial in depicting the changes in behavior that the viewing audience is expected

to make. Actors also become role models for society whether they like it or not. In India, the personal lives of Bombay stars are reported in detail by the mass media, and the public thus discovers intimate facts about these famous individuals.

My job as an actor is to keep my eyes and ears open, to observe what is going on around me, and to understand the character I am portraying. I have to know how a character fits into society and how it fits with the other characters in the script. I have to know my lines. I have to be aware of everything, the props, the technical equipment, the lights, the camera movement.

It's a wonderful feeling to be an actor. It is a process of constant learning. In just one lifetime, I get to be so many people, to do things that some people can only dream of doing. ■