



Has Anyone Seen The Cameraman?

One Darwin Fellow's experience of filming TV documentaries

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In summer 2009, I was asked to present documentaries for the History Channel about two of the ancient world's most charismatic and legendary rulers: Alexander the Great and Cleopatra. It seemed a

great opportunity to take the study of ancient history, and particularly of these two figures, out of the library and put them back where they came from: in the incandescent landscapes of Greece, the wide open plains of Anatolia and the deserts of Egypt. For three weeks, the film crew and I roamed Greece, Turkey and Egypt to make the documentaries. The experience was the opposite of

anything I had ever imagined! First of all – the gaggle of make-up artists, hair stylists and wardrobe experts I had envisaged (enthusiastically) to make sure I had of everything (no time to clean dirt off in between shooting days) and turned up on the first morning to be put in front of the camera without so much as a breath of foundation! This was followed by being told to remove my sunglasses, hat, then face into the sun and then suffer reflectors being bounced out to make sure there was even more light reflecting on my face (apparently TV viewers like to be able to make their shadow on sunglasses just melt off). The final insult was being asked if I could stop answering to much as I did not look good on camera. Given that we went on time filming in 50 degrees centigrade heat, that I was absorbing into the blazing sun and being fried alive by the additional sun reflectors, this was useful (driving) Now all I had to do was remember what I wanted to say...

TV historical documentaries have an

odd way of respecting the presenter's independence and originality. While the director and producer don't ever tell you what to say, they do ask you to focus on concrete on particular issues, pitch an event in each piece. Though the work is practice most of the time, it sometimes leads to a bit of fun in which the director works a little more emphasis on this, a little more odd animation of that. "Describe Alexander's feelings at the moment of his death – would he prodigiously angry, bitter, pained... Or my favourite what was it like to be seduced by Cleopatra?" How on earth would I know! Nevertheless...

Locations can also be a problem – with the best will in the world, it is almost impossible to socialise in the country in which the filming will take place and who sort permissions, travel arrangements and locations, in short, when "for everything. A good five is worth their weight in gold in film crews, to save money only want to spend the minimum amount

of time on location and so if things aren't well planned out in advance, it causes huge problems. But when the best films, especially in countries like Egypt, can't choose locations which, having used no problems to filming, suddenly change their mind on the day and demand thousands of dollars to film. At these moments, the film schedule is thrown out of the window, a slew of phone calls are made and new locations are found. In the meantime, scenes to be shot in 2 days time land for which I had not yet prepared and now shot that day and it is up to everyone to keep up and do the best they can. It can be an exhilarating experience heading through the streets of Cairo to a new location just found on the front of someone who knows the face through his gun. It can also be just plain terrifying as, with only minutes of filming left, the director says action and you have had only the briefest period to think about what you want to say.

Make no mistake, documentary filming is an extraordinary privilege.

You gain access with a film crew to some of the rarest and most interesting people, places and artifacts in the world – it is my biggest regret that we had so little time to appreciate them in the aftermath of a shooting schedule. But documentary-making is also hard work. I was given plates to handle, mountains to climb and water to cross all the while trying to get complex bits of ancient history across in accessible, interesting chunks. We travelled 10 hours in a bus to film for 1 hour in the middle of the desert. We arrived in one country at 7 am that morning, but for me, it is worth it because TV is a fantastic way of communicating the fascinating nature of my subject to a wide audience and because I know it was TV documentaries like these ones that hooked me into studying the subject many years ago.

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