

ABC TV CANCELS PLANS TO BROADCAST DOCUMENTARY ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The ABC has withdrawn a formal offer it made to Ronin Films to acquire a documentary called HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT, by Australian filmmaker, Inka Stafrace. The offer was accepted by Ronin, but was later cancelled by the ABC on the grounds that the documentary was, in the words of the Head of Television, Kim Dalton, “an opinion program” about a “contentious” subject and that it conflicted with the ABC’s policy of “impartiality”, as required by Clause 6.6.3 of the ABC’s Editorial Policy. Dalton stated that the ABC was unable to find another program that balanced the views expressed in the film.

This cancellation is of concern for several reasons. The film is an exploration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and makes a pro-peace statement, strongly and refreshingly expressed. It is personally narrated by the filmmaker and she shares her experiences within the conflict zone. The film was independently produced and self-funded, although small amounts of marketing money were donated by both the Jewish and Palestinian communities in Australia.

The film focuses on the details, particularly the human costs, of the occupation of Palestine by Israel. It is not a case against Israel, the Israeli people or the Jewish community. The bulk of the film expresses the thoughts of human rights activists (both Israeli and Palestinian) who live in the region as they discuss the realities of the situation in the West Bank.

The ABC’s policy, as stated by Kim Dalton, suggests that a pro-war film would need to be presented to balance this pro-peace film, but such a policy would logically require a pro-government film to be shown every time any film about revolutionaries is aired. The call for balance defies logic and contradicts the ABC’s own routine programming decisions.

Israeli military objectives routinely dominate our mainstream mass media coverage of the conflict. Yet, in the words of the filmmaker, Inka Stafrace, *“If any article or news grab of violence in the region fails to mention the occupation, it is fundamentally un-balanced”*. The Palestinians have only limited independent media access to

the West, unlike the powerful influence of the Israeli government's press office. The very showing of HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT would provide an opportunity to contribute to the "balancing" of dominant media reports on the conflict in this country.

The film has received many expressions of support. Dr Jake Lynch, Director of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney, and a member of the Advisory Board of the Sydney Peace Foundation, makes the following comment: HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT is *"extremely impressive. ... A signal contribution to peaceful media representation of this conflict"*.

The Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) have prepared a study guide for HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT, intended for use in secondary schools. This guide provides further opportunity for the issues raised by the film to be discussed and analysed.

Clearly the ABC is afraid of some form of political repercussion if it were to show HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT. The cancellation of the broadcast highlights the need to have a national television network which is truly independent in terms of its editorial content. Whether the ABC's fear of backlash is a threat coming from government or from the community, our national broadcaster should not be subject to intimidation of this nature.

Senior management should be able to stand by the decisions of qualified and experienced ABC staff who are making informed assessments of programs offered to them. It also seems that it would be good business practice for senior management to honour agreements made by their staff in the course of the professional conduct of their work.

Interestingly, while the free expression of political opinion (such as anti-war arguments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) seem to be inhibited in ABC television, the same constraints do not seem to apply to radio: a pro-peace programme recently aired on ABC's Radio National.

Finally, it should be noted that "balance" is an inherently problematic concept. "Balance" implies that there are only two sides to any story, yet in the case of the complicated Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are infinitely more viewpoints than just two.

What we need from our national broadcaster are programs that fearlessly challenge and provoke debate. The ABC's policy of maintaining "balance" on "contentious" issues runs the risk of halting dialogue and censoring innovative points of view rather than stimulating them, as it so clearly has done with HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT. The Australian public should have access to the film. Our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict calls for the film to be shown.

Dr Andrew Pike, OAM
Director, Ronin Films

24 May 2010

Note: DVDs of HOPE IN A SLINGSHOT are available from Ronin Films (www.roninfilms.com.au)