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Director's cut

Why does a young, creative and commercially successful filmmaker plan to leave the industry she has extensively trained for and worked in for seventeen years?

'I wanted to see what vengeance, or an "eye for an eye" actually looks like. To tell you the truth, I don't like it. And I will never portray violence in any form or for any reason ever again.'

This is Gaylene Barnes' reaction to her own short film *Mother's Day* (2006). Gaylene is planning to turn away from

a profitable career in film and television, returning to her first artistic passion of painting. This interview explores some of the rationale for this change in direction. It looks at her reasons for making the explicitly violent short film *Mother's Day*, and the ideology behind her next major project, an animated black comedy, *The Mobile Meat Processing Unit*.

continued on p 12

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Director's cut —an interview with
Gaylene Barnes (*continued from cover*)

Born in Southland, New Zealand, 1970. Fourteen years in the film and television industry in various roles such as director, designer and editor. Nominated twice in the New Zealand Screen Awards—'Best Documentary Editing' for *Out of Sight/Out of Mind* (2005) and 'Best Production Design' for *Scarflies* (1999). Recently involved in the successful TV series *Hunger For the Wild* as editor, as well as designing and creating the titles, graphics and animations for the series. Gaylene Barnes completed a Diploma in Fine Arts in Computer Art from Otago Polytechnic (1991) and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from University of Otago (1996).

The technology of computer art captured her desire and Gaylene quickly discovered that she was very good at it. With enthusiasm and determination Gaylene added to her skills, learning how to be a graphic artist at Television New Zealand. She clearly leaped to success, making mainstream commercials, rock videos, and, notably at the age of twenty-six, was the production designer for Robert Sarkie's feature film, *Scarflies* (1998). With seventeen busy years in the film and television industry, to say her CV is extensive could only be an understatement.

Gaylene has furthered her studies, is in the process of raising a daughter and yet has always found time and energy for her own work alongside her commercial enterprises, as in *Prison of Infinite Space*, a multi media CD, exhibited at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (1996). 'I am not driven to be a big, famous director. I like to be doing other things: painting, gardening. When I worked as a production designer and art director it was exhausting, twelve hours a day, six days a week; it is impossible if you have got kids. Although I love directing and the technology



Gaylene Barnes. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

of filmmaking, I am looking at perhaps phasing out of film over the next three years, getting into my painting.' Such a decision from an obviously talented and successful filmmaker is surprising, though.

'I have little faith in television as a medium. Only one or two people in Auckland decide what programmes are shown on each network channel. This is an incredible amount of power, as they influence over eighty percent of New Zealanders (television watchers).' Gaylene acknowledges there is a place for quality documentaries and stories but still sees mass communication as very dominant. She continues: '...because of that fact it is faceless, not intimate. I want to go back to one-to-one communication. That is why I am studying medieval techniques of painting. My other belief is that in the next five to ten years, when oil depletion kicks in, television and such technologies are going to become redundant. Technology is going to get very expensive, accessible only to the elite and then it will be a waste of time.' Gaylene sees a need for herself to retrain for a time when she believes things will become more locally orientated again, particularly leisure activities and



Sally-Nina Moore as The Mother in *Mother's Day* (2006) short film.

communication processes. With this in mind Gaylene plans to return to her rural roots, intending to become an organic farmer, living with a greater respect for ecology and giving priority to simplicity.

Gaylene describes an ongoing conflict she has had between 'earth, the organic' and a love of technology. 'I have been in conflict for years. A lot of my artistic career has dealt with that, so it is like completing the circle going back to the farm.' She also relates a personal battle with 'the spiritual' and our 'destructive human nature'. 'Where is the faith that Jesus spoke of: "if only you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could move a mountain"?¹ I don't think this kind of faith exists today... I don't read the Bible that often—but the other day I read about Christ getting grumpy when one of his disciples couldn't heal a man's son. Christ said to him "How long am I going to have to be here among these humans with no faith? How long do I have to put up with you?"² I laughed and laughed at the thought of Christ being grumpy and frustrated—that "we" could not see or truly believe.' Gaylene further poses the question: 'How much more would God's anger, perhaps rage, have been at these humans killing his perfect son?'

Rage, leading to violent vigilante justice is the theme of Gaylene's short film *Mother's Day* (2002) which, taken to its antithesis of forgiveness, polarises ideas. As viewers we enter a foreign environment, with an unknown person. The camera films only what the character sees. The reason for this is initially unclear,

the plot a mystery. We witness the searching for, and murders of, seven individuals. A list is repeatedly checked and crossed as murders are completed. Like it or not, the viewer is along for the ride, watching the character's confidence and seeming need for violence grow. '...and we eventually find out WHY she kills. We learn that her reign of terror was born out of revenge for her (very young) daughter's rape and murder. As a filmmaker, I wanted to ask the question—what do we do with the rage that is born from the violence that is thrust upon us? Where does it go? Will revenge acted out help lessen our rage?' Gaylene continues: 'I also wanted to examine the public desire to know who sex offenders are in our community, and look at one of the possible consequences of such public information being available.'

With *Mother's Day* Gaylene asks some very topical questions of the audience. These questions invite discussion of complicated social, moral and personal issues. While examining her own feelings and stance, she does not provide any set answers, but hopes to continue the debate. I asked if her motivation in making the film was from any personal experience. Gaylene replied: 'I know people that have children ... parents of abused children. It haunts me, our shame, our human "species" ... that other humans do that ... I am a mother and contemplating this (in order to make the film) I had to put myself there. What if that happened to my daughter?' From a Christian perspective: 'The Mother (in the film) is the "Father"—her only child killed'. It reflects '...the rage of God at us, what we did to his son. Rage of a father whose perfect son was killed ... we live in faithless times, rational times and I am a rationalist full of dichotomies...' Gaylene sees the film as more about rage itself than forgiveness and how we are to deal with rage. She expands: 'I did not think it at all possible to forgive the murder of your only child, yet God forgave us... But we can't deal with it; to forgive to that level, we need God to help us. We need mercy, grace. God gives the gift of faith... I need the gift of faith to believe and that's something I am waiting for.'

Gaylene seems to favour filmmaking that examines tough issues, presenting them in new ways. In *The Mobile Meat Processing Unit*, a short animated black comedy, due for completion in June 2008, she bluntly defies values of popular modern materialism. 'The film is a parody on the drive for industry to succeed, sucking up all life (as it does so). One day, on an idyllic farm, the meat processing unit arrives; in an attempt to achieve the target weight of meat and receive a "bonus pack", the mother of the story is willing to sacrifice all animals, husband too and perhaps her own daughter ... or is she?'

On the surface this seems to be a parody of the New Zealand sheep and cattle industry. What is Gaylene's personal drive or philosophy in making this film? She replies, 'I subscribe to the philosophy of "enoughness", let's just use enough and not more than we need. With just enough we would be a lot happier. We need to do it; the world is running out of resources. This (the film) is still a statement of: what the hell are we doing here?'

Janet Joyce

1 The Bible, Matthew 17:20.

2 Ibid., Mark 9:19 and Matthew 17:20.