

wider fields



Hello Dolly

Rick Shaw interviews Chris Johns

Rick Shaw and Chris Johns are two actuaries who have moved into much wider fields. Both have returned to Australia from working overseas and taken up new challenges, while maintaining connection with the actuarial profession. Rick is running a gallery and performance space in Marrickville, Sydney and an artist-in-residence program on NSW's mid-north coast. Chris has completed a masters in film at UTS and has made a film, *Hello Dolly*, about Naomi Edwards, another actuary whose career has ventured widely. Chris is hosting a screening of *Hello Dolly* at Rick's gallery in September to give actuaries an opportunity to see the film. The film will be accompanied by a performance by Naomi's stage persona Dolly Putin. Chris and Rick recently got together to discuss Chris's film-making ventures.



Rick Shaw (left) and Chris Johns



Rick Chris, tell us about your professional career and how you got to where you are now.

Chris Well, after completing the Macquarie actuarial course, I worked for two years with MLC and managed to save up enough money to take a year off to go backpacking around Europe. I had taken a beginner's French course at Alliance Française, which sparked my interest in languages and desire to live in a foreign culture.

Rather than studying French in Montreal, which was my original plan, I ended up working in life reinsurance for Swiss Re, travelling the world and learning languages for over ten years. The itinerary was a bit random but included a four-year stint in Zurich, four years in Mexico where I learned Spanish and collaborated on a couple of short films and a year in Paris where I finally learned French and soaked up the amazing local film scene.

Rick Tell me about the masters course at UTS, your next steps in film and your latest production *Hello Dolly*, the documentary about Naomi Edwards.

Chris I started the masters course about two years ago, after doing a one-year graduate diploma in film that covered script-writing, directing, producing, documentary, drama, film history, film theory and practice. During that year I was part of a team that made a film *The Sole Collectors* about sneaker collectors and became interested in documentary. I was also inspired by my lecturer Tom Zubrycki, a well-known Australian documentary maker.

The masters course is centred on the production of a single project. Three months into the course I read a very out-of-the-ordinary article titled *An Interesting Actuary* about an upcoming show at the 2006 Melbourne Comedy Festival. Here was a new comedian based in Tasmania who had managed to make headlines in *The Age* entertainment guide ahead of many well-known, established comedy acts and convinced Bob Brown to appear on stage as her straight guy in her new *Me and Mr Brown* comedy show.

I was fascinated and decided to research more about Dolly Putin. I was intrigued by the idea of an actuary performing as a stand-up comedian, impressed by the thought of an actuary using her highly-specialised (and marketable!) skills in the defence of the environment and startled to find that this actuary had worked at Deloitte in Sydney where I had just commenced part-time work.

At the time I was grappling with work/life balance among other things. I had discovered that moving from a senior position in a highly-specialised, financially-rewarding and well-respected profession to being a novice in the world of film with its lack of any financial safety net and intricate social networks,

involved making major changes in one's outlook on life and also a lot of reflection on identity.

I emailed Naomi and introduced myself and expressed an interest in making a documentary about her. Naomi was open to the idea and we met to discuss the idea for a film about Naomi's transition from corporate life to stand-up comedy.

I went away and scripted a treatment from that material, which was my documentary proposal. Next step was to spend a week with Naomi in Tasmania. We picked a week when Bob Brown and a couple of other performers who had worked with Naomi were in town. I went to Tasmania with a camera and some gear and basically shot a series of interviews.

Rick This was by now your masters project?

Chris Yes. I met Naomi in June and had until October to finish. I learned that when making a documentary it's easy to shoot hours and hours of footage but you will end up in the edit room with a hundred hours of film and no idea where to start.

Rick How much film did you shoot and what was the process for compressing it down to the final product?

Chris The current version is 21 minutes long. I shot about eight hours of footage and Naomi also provided a lot of archival footage from her shows, so all together I had about 20 hours of footage. I advertised for an editor and worked with a fellow student who had a lot of editing experience.

I produced a transcript, which is effectively a paper version of the film – in this case a ten-page paper document that set out the film using dialogue, time codes and shot descriptions, which was then assembled and edited. The editor has quite a lot of input into the creative process.

Rick So you gave your editor ten pages summarising what you wanted to do and 20 hours of footage?

Chris Yes. Because we had a lot of footage including archival footage and were reconstructing Naomi's life, the editor needed a lot of guidance on the director's desired emphasis. I thought the material was interesting and quirky and I wanted to play on the interaction between Naomi and her character Dolly. I wanted to get to know Naomi and interviewed Naomi and Dolly about Naomi. For an editor the idea was a bit esoteric so I need to map a plan to give her something tangible with which to work.

Rick Did Naomi have any input on the final version?

Chris That relates to the ethics of making a documentary. Naomi signed a release form giving me ownership of the



intellectual content of the film. Practice differs – sometimes the subject of a documentary may insist on reviewing the final cut. Naomi understood what I was trying to do. We had a very open relationship and she was happy for me to produce the film as I wanted. Only after I submitted the film to UTS was I able to send Naomi a copy.

Rick How nervous were you when you were getting Naomi's feedback?



Chris Pretty bloody nervous. For a filmmaker that is one of the hardest things: how is the subject going to react to your version of events? Although I try to give a balanced account, I had no idea how Naomi was going to react. I was very happy when I realised Naomi enjoyed the film.

Rick Tell us what happens now with *Hello Dolly*.

Chris I would like to get it on TV and am currently in the process of putting the film on the festival circuit.

Rick Do you feel your actuarial training and work experience has contributed to your ability to organise people, thoughts and processes required to direct a film?

Chris Actuarial training facilitates bringing an independent perspective to a project. That's helpful when making a documentary, where I am looking in a detached fashion at a story, a sequence of events and people's interactions and trying to work out what's really going on.

Rick I can see an analogy between a director and an actuary directing a team of analysts and other staff on a large valuation project. For example, actuaries often throw a lot of data at an analyst who takes time to make sense of the information and report back to the actuary. That sounds not dissimilar to the working relationship between a director and an editor.

Chris I think making a film requires a different sort of creativity to actuarial work. For example, in the edit stage there are many different ways to take four scenes and edit them together, with widely different results, potentially giving one protagonist an aggressive side, another more open persona. Cutting a scene three frames longer into a shot or lingering on someone's face can radically change a film's emphasis and how it will be interpreted by an audience. From that perspective it's very different to my actuarial work because there are so many permutations, the story can go so many different ways, it's a lot riskier and there is no right solution.

Rick Tell us about the upcoming screening in Sydney.

Chris I would love to show the film to an audience of actuaries. I've met a lot of actuaries trying to balance a job that gives them enough money to live, with a desire to pursue creative activities. A lot of actuaries know Naomi, a very successful actuary especially in terms of her rapid career progression, who has left the corporate world and achieved status as an environmental activist, where she has effectively used her actuarial skills to contribute to positive change and now she's a successful stand-up comedian. I think it's a fascinating and inspiring story. A lot of actuaries are high achievers and I think it's beneficial for actuaries to see that the actuarial personality with a drive for success and high-quality work can be applied in so many different fields. I found the process of making the film incredibly uplifting and I want to share that with as many people as possible.

Naomi's story touches on a myriad of contemporary themes such as downsizing, sustainability, finding community, the search for identity, reconnecting with one's family and finding one's artistic voice. But most of all it is a story of the awakening of social and political conscience and achieving its incorporation into every aspect of one's life.

The upcoming screening will be held at Tooth Studios in Marrickville on **6 September 2007**. Not only will we be showing the film but Naomi has agreed to fly up from Tasmania for a special performance, so Dolly will be in town! ▲

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The Institute will forward details of the screening via the Institute Bulletin. ● Tooth Studios is at 67 Sydenham Road Marrickville. Contact Rick Shaw on 02 9557 0582 or Chris Johns on 0424 459 696 for more information on the screening of Hello Dolly. Dolly Putin's website is: www.dollyputin.com