DIRECTING MUSIC-BASED DOCUMENTARIES
Curtis Levy on The Matilda Candidate and Hephzibah

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Abstract

This article features an interview with director Curtis Levy who discusses the creative process in his music-based documentaries and the storytelling challenges inherent in musical characters and music subjects. Levy’s documentary film, The Matilda Candidate (2010), follows the comedic journey taken by the filmmaker as he stands for election to the Australian Senate on the platform that the popular folk song, ‘Waltzing Matilda’, should become the national anthem. The Matilda Candidate is a ‘hybrid’ style documentary incorporating interviews, archival footage, essay reflections, comedy and observational techniques to tell its story. In the second part of this article, Curtis comments on another music-based documentary, his multi-award winning Hephzibah (1998) that investigates the life of the American-Australian concert pianist and human rights activist, Hephzibah Menuhin (1920-1981). Levy indicates how he uses music to enhance the viewer’s response and other layers and forms of storytelling to engage TV audiences.

Keywords
Curtis Levy, The Matilda Candidate, Hephzibah, music-based documentaries, Australian documentary film

Introduction to Curtis Levy

Curtis Levy (born 1942 in Melbourne) is an Australian independent film producer/director who has made several films for television and cinema release. He studied Arts and History at Monash University, majoring in Asian and Indonesian studies and was the editor for the student newspaper, CHAOS. Before graduating he commenced employment as an assistant producer at Channel 0, a commercial TV station in Melbourne owned by Reg Ansett (that later became ATV-10 under control of Rupert Murdoch). His interest in film developed during his travels in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, where he worked as a unit manager on a drama series and as an assistant director on a number of documentaries. On his return to Australia he joined the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) where he made several radio documentaries. After transferring to ABC Television as a researcher, Levy progressed to directing documentaries for the ABC and Film Australia. In the mid 1970s Curtis made films for the Australian Institute of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS) in Canberra, where he directed four documentaries, including *Sons Of Namatjira* (1976) about a group of Aboriginal artists living in a camp outside Alice Springs.

Curtis’s interest in stories from Asia has led him to make five major films in Indonesia, including *Invitation To A Wedding* (1995), about Islamic dissidents in Indonesia and *Riding The Tiger* (1992), a three-part series examining the origin of authoritarian rule in Indonesia and nominated for the Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for Best Documentary and Winner of the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) Award for Best Television Series. In 2001 he completed *High Noon In Jakarta*, living for four months in the Freedom Palace in Jakarta to make an intimate portrayal of the President of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, and the film was selected as a finalist at the Hollywood and Banff Film Festivals and the ATOM Film Awards. Other films Curtis Levy has made in Asia include: *The White Monkey* (1987), a film about an Australian priest charged with multiple murders and imprisoned in the Philippines by the Marcos regime; and *Breakout* (1984), about the mass breakout by Japanese prisoners-of-war from their prison camp in Cowra, which won the Award for Best Television Documentary at the Chicago International Film Festival. In 2004 Curtis co-directed (with Bentley Dean) *The President Versus David Hicks*, a film about the Australian Taliban fighter incarcerated in Guantánamo Bay detention camp. The film won the AFI award for best documentary and an Australian television-industry Logie award, and was screened at the Hot Docs International Film Festival in Canada and Full Frame Film Festival in the United States of America.¹

The following article features a Curtis Levy interview² discussing two documentaries in which music is featured in contrasting ways, commencing with a recent film, *The Matilda Candidate* (2010), followed by an earlier biographical work, *Hephzibah* (1998).

### Part I: *The Matilda Candidate* – Film Overview

‘Waltzing Matilda’ is Australia’s most widely known bush ballad, or rural folk song, and is widely perceived as the unofficial national anthem of Australia. The title is Australian slang for travelling by foot with one’s goods in a ‘matilda’ (bag) slung over one’s back. The song narrates the story of an itinerant worker, or swagman, making a drink of tea at a bush camp and capturing a sheep to eat. When the sheep’s owner arrives with three police officers to arrest the worker for the theft (a crime punishable by hanging), the worker commits suicide by drowning himself in the nearby ‘billabong’ (watering hole), and then returns to haunt the site. The original lyrics were written by poet and nationalist, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, in 1895, and the music by Christine McPherson during a meeting at Dagworth Homestead estate near Winton, Queensland. It was first published as sheet music in 1903. Extensive folklore surrounds the popular song and the process of its creation, to the extent that the song has its own museum, the Waltzing Matilda Centre in Winton, Queensland.³

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² The interview took place at Levy’s home in Balmain, Sydney, January 21, 2010.

The Matilda Candidate, directed by Levy, was produced by Helen Pankhurst and Christine Olsen with Levy, and funded by ABC TV. The film was screened during the Documentary Fortnight at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, following its premiere at the 2010 Melbourne Film Festival, as well as on the ABC for a special Australia Day broadcast. The documentary features the filmmaker himself, along with his campaign manager, Jo Smith. The story follows Levy’s attempt to run as a candidate for the 2009 Australian Senate elections on the platform that the ‘Waltzing Matilda’ song should be the national anthem and—more broadly—that Australia should become a republic. Levy uses the campaign as a narrative vehicle to explore aspects of national identity and, specifically, Australians’ support for becoming a republic. He looks at the historical parallels between the period in which ‘Waltzing Matilda’ was first written and Australia in the first decade of the millennium. In the 1890s, leaders of the six British colonies occupying the Australian continent started to promote Australian federation. ‘Waltzing Matilda’ was circulating at a time of various federalist activities and referendums, leading to the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act that came into effect on the 1st January 1901. The Matilda Candidate explores Australia’s changing relationship with Great Britain, which is a recurring theme in the nation’s post-colonial history.

Curtis Levy Interview - Origins and Intention of The Matilda Candidate

Adolfo Cruzado (henceforth AC):

What prompted you to use the song, ‘Waltzing Matilda’ as the starting point and central motif for the documentary?

Figure 1: Curtis Levy with Jo Smith on the hustings. Photo courtesy of Olsen Levy Productions.
Curtis Levy (henceforth CL):

My research was not initially about the actual song, ‘Waltzing Matilda’. I originally wanted to make a film about why Australians were so scared about wanting to be a republic. I read an article about the song written by the historian, Inga Clendinnen⁴, and she looked at some of the historical background of the song and I realised there was a burgeoning republic movement back at the time when the song was originally written, and we had a dilemma between being Australian or British, and there was a resentment of British control. So, the song lent itself to a broader, more universal story, and we wanted to use that as a microcosm of a bigger picture.

AC:

How do you explore this dilemma in the nation’s character in the documentary?

CL:

The film looks at some of the reasons why we stuck with the British throughout over two hundred years, and that we continue to feel insecure and have a fear of outsiders; in particular back then it was the Asians, the Chinese in particular, and now it’s the Islamic people coming to Australia. Today, a lot of people are afraid, so we have the Australian Navy fighting off refugees and putting them on offshore islands. So, we've always had this fear of outsiders. In the film, the actual campaign for the Senate part was humorous, if not comical, but we then go off to some more serious tangents throughout the film, looking at Australian history and its character.

Working with the Music Composers

AC:

How did you work with the music composer to enhance the story in the documentary?

CL:

In The Matilda Candidate, we had Caitlyn Yeo as our composer. The complexity of the various elements in the film presented some challenge for the music and Caitlyn did a fantastic job. We showed Caitlyn the film while it was very rough, so she got an idea about where we were heading, and so she could think about it before we got to the fine cut. It happens with a lot of films that they call the composer in at the last minute and the composer doesn’t have enough time to come up with an original work, or to develop ideas that are in tune with the images or the mood of the film. The Matilda Candidate is quite difficult for a composer because it was running a fine line between humour and serious content. There were times when we wanted the audience not to be sure whether we were being serious or when it was being a ‘send up’, being satirical. We wanted the audience to maintain a belief in

⁴ Clendinnen (2006).
the subject, but we also wanted the music to give pointers to the undercurrent of humour running throughout the film.

AC:

Filmmakers often have difficulty talking about music, having to use different descriptions, a different language to convey ideas about music. As a director and producer, how do you overcome this challenge?

CL:

Yes, the language (of music) is very difficult. For example, in the first draft of the music that Caitlyn delivered, I guess there was a slight misunderstanding about what was intended in some scenes. The first time she looked at the film, we gave her the chance to respond to what was appropriate, then we realised that it was better to steer more towards a certain direction so that we could get the subtleties in the changes of moods, the balance between the more humorous and serious sequences. The opening sequences we worked on quite a lot. [Fig 1] It was the scene where I am walking down the street with Jo Smith, my campaign manager, and putting up posters. One of the posters falls down, and the camera focuses on the poster falling down after we walk off. The original version of the music was a bit too serious, and the audience would think, ‘how sad that the poster fell down’; but in the final version of the film, the music picks up on the humour, not high slapstick, but giving an indication that this film is not going to be entirely worthy and serious.\(^5\)

AC:

Apart from the original score by Caitlyn Yeo, there’s also quite a variety of other music in the film...

CL:

The original composition scored had to blend occasionally with some live performances we created especially for the film, of women playing ‘Waltzing Matilda’. For example, there’s the blues version written by Abbey May, a wonderful singer from Western Australia; and Holly Throsby also came up with a version, which she played in our re-enactment. Holly was playing the role of Christine McPherson, the woman who created the original music for ‘Waltzing Matilda’, and we see her with a harp, which she had to play on camera, and she had to learn to play the auto harp for the role. These performances were blended with recorded versions from the archives, such as Eric Bogle’s version of the song and a very funny version of Barry Humphries’s Dame Edna Everage, singing and dancing to ‘Waltzing Matilda’.

Music and Story

AC:

How did you integrate the original story of the song, about the itinerant worker who jumps into the watering hole, with other interpretations of the song’s story?

CL:

In *The Matilda Candidate*, a lot of the story was worked out before we started. The song is so iconic, probably the most iconic Australian song, so it is imbued with all kinds of meaning before, without me having to interpret it at all. It meant certain things to certain people. What I did as a director, was bring a lot of different meanings and uses of the song into the one film, and blended in those uses to the themes I was trying to elaborate. For instance, ‘Waltzing Matilda’ has a very patriotic use; it is used a lot in wars by Australian soldiers, old diggers, and so I wanted to combine the telling of that story by an old digger with my message, a political message that we are always following other people to war, into stupid useless situations. Earlier on in the film, this digger is talking about how he used to sing ‘Waltzing Matilda’ when he was charging Japanese soldiers with bayonets. By singing the song, that gave the soldiers courage. Well this example, this interpretation, has the opposite meaning to when the song was written. The original version of ‘Waltzing Matilda’, written by Christine McPherson and ‘Banjo’ Patterson, it’s said to have been written as a love song.

AC:

And there’s also a political ghost story?

CL:

When ‘Banjo’ Patterson arrived at the sheep station where he met Christine McPherson, only three months before, there was a shearers’ strike. Historically, around the same time there was also the story of the suicide of the swaggie shearer called Samuel Hofmeister, a German shearer. His nickname was ‘Frenchie’.6 There is a strong theory that ‘Frenchie’ is the ghost in story of the song ‘Waltzing Matilda’. So we built on that theory in the documentary. We use the music rising over the mist of the billabong, where the actual swaggie was supposed to have committed suicide [Fig 2]. In the film, the voice of the ghost comes over the mist, in German, talking about what it meant for him, and that he doesn’t mind having an anthem written about him because as a German, well, the British royal family was originally German, and nobody seems to mind the fact that we have an anthem about them! So there’s also the possibility of political intrigue, but done in a light-hearted, satirical way.

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6 It is not unusual for Australian nicknames to be ironic or contradictory.
Levy’s *The Matilda Candidate* preceded other documentaries, one of which features music built into the narrative. However, the approach to music is somewhat different due to the documentary style and its sources, as Levy explains.

**Part II: Hephzibah – Film Overview**

In 1998, Levy made *Hephzibah* about the internationally-acclaimed concert pianist and human rights activist, Hephzibah Menuhin. A child prodigy, like her violinist brother, Yehudi Menuhin, she toured the world giving piano concerts from an early age. When Hephzibah was just 17, she and her brother married an Australian brother and sister, Lindsay and Nola Nicholas, heirs to the Nicholas fortune accrued to the family as manufacturers of Aspro medical products. Hephzibah left her cosmopolitan life in California to move to an Australian sheep farm. For a time she managed to commute between the farm and her concert commitments in Europe but a post-war visit to a Nazi concentration camp radicalised her. Hephzibah’s newfound political views alienated her conservative farmer husband. Hephzibah had an affair with a Viennese sociologist, Richard Hauser, and after a traumatic divorce she left her husband and two sons on the farm and moved to Sydney. Hephzibah and Richard later made their home in London where they established a Centre for Human Rights and campaigned for world peace.

Curtis Levy’s mother, Joan, was a close friend of Hephzibah and the filmmaker gained access to valuable archival material, including home movies from Hephzibah’s early married life and her letters. Hephzibah is
reflective and articulate in the letters, extracts of which are read aloud in the film, by the actress Kerry Armstrong. Several interviews are featured, notably those with Yehudi and Yalta Menuhin, her talented siblings, and they discuss their sister with clearly heartfelt emotion. The film also includes interviews with Eva Cox, Richard Hauser’s daughter, and Clara, Hephzibah’s daughter, who speak with commendable frankness about their memories of her (see King, 2010).

The documentary feature premiered at the 1998 Sydney Film Festival and had long-running cinema releases in Sydney and Melbourne. Its first television broadcast was on November 8, 1998, on SBS in the Masterpiece series. The film has been screened at numerous international film festivals and sold to several countries (Fig 3). Hephzibah won the AFI Award for Best Documentary Film, the Silver Wolf Award for Best Video Documentary at the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam, and the Australian Film Critics Circle Award for Best Documentary Film.

Figure 3: Hephzibah film poster. Photo courtesy of Olsen Levy Productions.

Curtis Levy Interview – On Hephzibah

AC:

Let’s talk about your other docos where music played a major element in the story.

CL:

Hephzibah (1998) and The President versus David Hicks (2004) both used music very strongly to build up the emotional involvement of the audience with the subject. Hephzibah was a natural one for music because she was a musician, a celebrated concert pianist, as well as a human rights activist... Hephzibah leaving her family—especially her kids—behind was, at the time, considered very daring, so it was an emotional story. She was like a

8 SBS is the Special Broadcasting Service, Australia’s multi-lingual television station.
character from a Henry James novel. Many people have been emotionally affected by the story of Hephzibah’s attempt to make the world a better place, in her role as a human rights activist and as a concert musician. It made many people realise what one person can achieve, given the right kind of commitment.⁹

Use of Music and Editing

AC:

The film made use of a rich variety of classical music, both within the story of Hephzibah as a musician and as an underscore to the documentary.

CL:

There were quite a few changes in mood throughout the film, and we had a big array of Hephzibah’s music performances to choose from, playing music from famous composers like Brahms, Schubert and Beethoven. We were able to adapt her music to the scenes, to heighten the mood. Often we didn’t have a lot of footage to work with because she is dead, so we just had images of locations, plus the archival home movies and photographs, and interviews with her relatives about her life. The music strongly enhanced all those scenes. We also had an actress, Kerry Armstrong, reading Hephzibah’s letters, and she had a very emotional voice, a very empathetic voice.

AC:

Can we talk about the role of the film editor in constructing story and how they use music?

CL:

*Hephzibah* was a film where everything was set up, like a jigsaw puzzle. It was a matter of working out the use of archival material, photographs and letters, everything coming together. I had a wonderful editor, Veronika Jenet, who did *The Piano* (1993) feature film with Jane Campion and other films. Veronika is very sensitive about music, going through the music, helping us decide what music to use where, she was fantastic. It’s always a surprise when you see the image with music, how it can be transformed, one way or the other. I’m always amazed at how what you might think of as a prosaic sequence can become magic. People were very moved by Hephzibah’s story, and the music would have been a large part of what gave it that emotional response.

On Documentary Form and Styles

AC:

You’ve worked on many different forms of documentaries. Describe how you built the *Hephzibah* story from various found elements?

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⁹ Levy expands on audience engagement in his 2002 chapter.
CL:

Most of the films I’ve directed have been observational, yet *Hephzibah* is one of the best films I’ve made, if not the best. It is a more structured, more set-up film, where almost every shot we were able to mould and design. We built everything from found elements rather than following an ongoing story happening in front of the camera. That’s something I wouldn’t want to do too often because it’s a risky business, just relying on found elements. It is much easier to make a film where everything is happening in front of the camera, like the more observational types of film. In most observational films I’ve worked on, I’ve had to rely a lot on the cameraperson, being at the mercy of their skills; whereas, in a structured film, it’s all up to the director really. Some of the best observational films, the director is the camera, like the Maysles brothers, one of whom was camera, the other sound.¹⁰

AC:

Let’s talk about the importance of storytelling in docos. Why do you think stories have an impact on an audience?

CL:

A story has to provide the kind of foundations for people’s interests, like in plays or books, and it’s the way you tell that story that’s the most important. This is the same in documentaries. Some observational ‘reality’ TV, or observational films—not that the two terms are interchangeable—can be quite boring if the filmmaker hasn’t juxtaposed ideas, or told a story. I like films with unusual juxtapositions, where you have sudden changes in moods. I don’t like seamless films usually. I quite like to jar the audience occasionally. Some editors have been brought up in a school of seamless editing, and not a kind of self-conscious changes of moods and ideas. I try to work against that school of editing.

AC:

Can you expand on the unique challenges for doco makers trying to tell stories from actual events?

CL:

I think too many documentary filmmakers don’t realise they need to do a lot more work on the story. This is as important as the amount of work put into the way they are filming the subject. For me there’s not a lot of difference between stories for a doco and a feature film, the need for strong stories. It’s not enough just to observe someone’s life, the way they are living it—that is, unless they have an extraordinary life. Usually the pace of real life is very slow, often mundane. So a lot of construction has to go with the representation of someone’s life and you have to think out various ways to create emotionally engaging stories. I’m not saying you need the three act arc that feature films have, but we need to be conscious of how we can

¹⁰ US-based Albert and David Maysles produced cinéma vérité styled documentaries as a team in the 1960s to 80s, with Albert on camera and David on sound.
change the moods, to use certain parts of someone’s life to build up strong emotions towards some kind of climax.

AC:

The arguments about aesthetics, about how the documentary director interprets the raw material are always interesting.

CL:

Documentaries are not as easy as feature films where you can write out before hand what you need. In documentaries we have to work with the material in front of us. This doesn’t mean that we can’t manipulate a lot of things to create deliberate moods out of what we are seeing or capturing, with the use of music, sound, voiceover, etc; music being the prime tool to change the emotional response. Some filmmakers don’t think out the development of the story. They think it’s good enough to follow an action of the subject, pick up what you can and put it together without going with an individual’s interpretation, from the director. I’m not a purist at all and believe the director can play around with the material, to use elements to heighten the audience response.

AC:

Documentaries are a unique form of storytelling because of the perceived relationship to ‘truth’ or actuality.

CL:

These days, the forms of docos and narrative features are closer together. A lot of feature filmmakers are shooting in doco style, trying to create a documentary effect. And some documentary makers are far more intervening in the way they tell their stories. Going back to the 1960s with the Maysles and Pennebaker,\(^\text{11}\) who are still working,\(^\text{12}\) their technique was more purist than the filmmakers of today. But even in the film Salesman [Albert and David Maysles with Charlotte Zwerin, 1968], which is my favourite documentary, it has a strong sense of drama, a strong sense of pathos. In the way it was edited, they were working with a strong undercurrent throughout the film. The Salesman story was about these middle-aged men trying to sell bibles door to door. It was a fabulous film, so I don’t want to run down those classics, but today we are more free-wheeling, using the many resources available. Digital video editing has allowed us to do things that people would never have thought of doing with film editing. Filmmakers play a lot more easily, and there’s a greater tolerance amongst audiences of suddenly seeing images that had nothing to do with the image before, throwing images into a sequence that may seem alien to the story. People are ready to be disrupted, disorientated. And it doesn’t disturb people as much as probably it did twenty or thirty years ago.

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\(^{11}\) Donn Alan Pennebaker (Penny) is widely considered to be one of the US pioneers of cinema verite documentary filmmaking, whose films (since the 1950s) often dealt with popular music.

\(^{12}\) David Maysles died in 1987 but Albert continues to produce film work.
Conclusion

*The Matilda Candidate* and *Hephzibah* garnered audience interest both locally via SBS and ABC TV, as well as critical appreciation at international film festivals. There is a growing trend in documentary towards 'hybrid' forms, with popular films by Michael Moore, Nick Broomfield and Louis Theroux adopting a style where the documentary-filmmaker is the active central subject within the film storytelling. The use of comedy and satire for the purpose of entertainment in these documentaries (sometimes called 'mock docs') has also attracted debate regarding the potential conflict with documentary’s notions of truth and objectivity (Ronson, 2006: 403). Levy’s central role in *The Matilda Candidate* can be seen as part of this trend. This film is notable in his filmography because of Levy’s personal and political interest in the subject of Australia’s foreign policy and relationship to Asia. In addition, relevant to this article, the use of music in the structuring of the story is a crucial element in the impact of the documentaries discussed above. These examples suggest that producers and directors of music-based documentaries can succeed critically, with audiences and the market, if they are attentive to the storytelling challenges inherent in music and music subjects.

Bibliography


