

Pulling Back the Veil: an Interview with The Family Director Rosie Jones

The phrase “Australian cult” feels like an oxymoron – surely we carefree Aussies wouldn’t get involved with a group of new age fanatics? But The Family, formed in the 60s just two hours’ drive outside of Melbourne, were exactly that. Rosie Jones’s documentary of the same name delves deep into their operation, and pulls no punches to expose the abuse of children by its leader, Anne Hamilton-Byrne.

Dominic Barlow: I understand that you encountered a member of the The Family while researching another documentary. Is that so?

Rosie Jones: Yes. She had been a teacher at a high school and had a mental breakdown. She had been taken to Newhaven private psychiatric hospital and been given ECT [electroconvulsive therapy] treatment by one of the doctors who was in the sect. And that gradually led to her doing yoga classes [with The Family leader Anne Hamilton-Byrne, who was a yoga instructor] and becoming a member. It just sort of arose that the story I was researching was connected to her. She was pretty bitter about her experiences in The Family and, of course, that just reminded me about the news reports that I’d seen back in 1987. So it took a little while for me. I mean, I finished that film and then when I was looking for a new subject I just remembered this because I find it so fascinating.

DB: The sect had its tentacles everywhere, enforcing silence and delivering retribution to anyone who spoke out. Were there any remnants of that in your own investigation?

RJ: Look, people are still a bit wary, because they did believe that Anne had a lot of powers. The person who would have been most affected by that would have been Roland [a child of the cult], because he only came out of the group probably three years ago, and he was very fond of his Auntie Anne. He still partly feels as though he’s done the wrong thing, that he’s broken the loyalty and the vows that they’ve undertaken at initiation. Once you are initiated, that’s a very deep thing for people. Also, the fact that we tried to get more current cult members to talk to us and they wouldn’t – it’s not necessarily that they still strongly believe, but they strongly believe they shouldn’t talk. Even husbands and wives weren’t allowed to tell each other what she’d said to them.



DB: Speaking of those vows, you use a recording of Anne saying them, and montages of UFOs and exploding stars to convey the power she held. When did you decide that this was essential to your retelling of this saga?

RJ: I suppose that's part of trying to explain to the audience what it actually is that they believed in. The part where there's the animation, that was really trying to put forward her philosophy, which is a little bit hard to grasp. She cut and pasted a whole lot of religions together to come up with her concoction, so we wanted to make sure that people got at least some sense of what it was that everybody believed in. And, because we didn't have a lot of footage inside the group, we wanted to put as much of Anne as we possibly could into the film, so that people might understand her power. Her voice, especially when she's saying the vow of silence – I think it's quite powerful.

DB: Did the re-enactments change in accordance with new information from the interviews?

RJ: We didn't do the re-enactments until quite late because we didn't have a large budget. We hoped to have [the film's structure] set in concrete, but we unfortunately weren't that far down the track by the time we had to do them. We had to be lean with what we did. They didn't really change because we knew what we needed. We didn't have a budget to be grandiose with it. We did more literal re-enactments that didn't end up in the film. I guess we were trying to keep it reasonably abstract. It's an awkward mix, I think, re-enactments and documentary. I'm happy with what we did.



DB: Do you see yourself doing more features in the future?

RJ: I think there's more to do with this film – I feel as though it hasn't finished. We've been talking to people about something more like a six-part series, taking it to television or the net, like *Making a Murderer*, something like that. Even before it's screened at MIFF, people are coming forward and talking, which I think is fantastic. We kept under the radar while producing this, simply because it is delicate and people are fragile and we didn't want to inflame anything, in the interest of the people that we've talked to. They've been amazing, and the amount of time and effort they've put into it is fantastic. It's delicate stuff.