



Q&A with Monsieur Mayonnaise Director Trevor Graham

One of six **MIFF Premiere Fund** films for 2016, *Monsieur Mayonnaise* will have its world premiere at this year's festival. Written and directed by Trevor Graham (*Make Hummus Not War*, MIFF 2012), the film follows artist and filmmaker Philippe Mora (*Mad Dog Morgan*, MIFF 2015; *Swastika*, MIFF 1973) as he produces a graphic novel about his late father, mayonnaise sandwiches and Nazis!

We sat down with Graham and asked him a few questions.

You filmed Philippe Mora for three years as he uncovered his family story. Tell us about your relationship with Philippe and why the Mora family is so intriguing.

Philippe is an avid Facebook user. He posts an eclectic mix of stuff: biographical, family photos, art works, graphics old and new, film stills, film clips, musings on history and art and the Nazis – an enduring subject. It's via Facebook that I was drawn to his work and the story of this film. Social media delivered a new idea to my iPad.

I'd also known of Philippe's prolific career as a filmmaker. I had seen his first documentaries *Swastika* and *Brother Can You Spare a Dime*, when they were released in Melbourne in the early and mid 70s at the Melbourne Film Festival. But I knew nothing of Philippe's art works. So it was the combination of personal story, jeopardy, film, politics, art, history and love of the culinary arts that led me to his work. We exchanged lots of emails and messages, skyped one another and decided that we wanted to work together. Over the course of the three ensuing years we have had a true creative collaboration, from in front of, and behind the camera. We tangoed.

[Philippe's mother] Mirka Mora's family story of *only just* evading Auschwitz "by a week" and escaping to rural France (Burgundy) for the duration of the war, I found particularly poignant. Chance and luck are dynamic forces in Mirka's family story: coming to Australia as post-war refugees, establishing restaurants and being instrumental in fostering Melbourne's burgeoning art scene – it highlighted the precious cultural and social contribution that migrants and refugees make to Australian life. Their story – fleeing persecution – is for me a parable of our own times: people crossing frontiers in search of safety and freedom.

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Uncovering the role of a father's secret past in World War 2 is a major theme of the film. Ultimately *Monsieur Mayonnaise* is about a son seeking to comprehend what happened to his parents and his place in the world now. It's about the extremes of human experience, inter-generational memory and the role of creativity in representing and engaging with horror and terror.

There are also universal themes at play in *Monsieur Mayonnaise*. I think we all have a fascination, particularly as we get older, about where we come from.

I have to also confess that I have an endless curiosity about WW2 and the Holocaust. This is because my dad too fought the Nazis and he, like Georges Mora, didn't want to talk much about what happened. I also grew up in Melbourne with a lot of Jewish friends whose parents were survivors of the Holocaust. My first girlfriend's parents were Jews from Berlin and Romania, and at a young age I was forced to ask myself, "What if this were me or my family?" There can be no answer to this question. Perhaps that is why I made the film.



Philippe Mora is on a quest during the documentary, but also on a creative journey developing the graphic novel. What decisions did you make about how to incorporate the illustrations into the film?

The graphic novel is central to the story. So we had to see it taking shape over the course of the film. This involved going on the road to research the Mora family history and painting along the way was essential. We decided that Philippe should paint in key locations central to the story: Paris, Berlin, Leipzig and Melbourne. But as you see in the film most of the painting is done in Philippe's West Hollywood studio.

We deliberately chose a style of cutting between Philippe in European locations, painting, or researching his family history, and the past, which is represented through the choice of archival footage. This wasn't just fancy editing; it was a principal idea in our film language, that we are deeply connected to the past, not just in terms of family, but socially and historically and that the Nazi past has its echoes in the present in Europe, particularly with the current mass migration of refugees. To quote that old cliché, "those who don't understand the past are doomed to relive it." In this sense I see *Monsieur Mayonnaise* as a cautionary tale.

There is also the tradition from the Impressionist era of painting 'en plein air'... Philippe doesn't paint what he sees on location, he paints how he imagines the past. I call his works memory paintings. In another sense they are history paintings, but from a personal and comic book perspective.'

You've made many documentaries. Is this the first one about a filmmaker? Does it present a different challenge?

The challenge was to integrate some of Philippe Mora's films, the relevant ones, into the story of the comic book that is central to *Monsieur Mayo*. So the challenge was about finding the right moment to interrupt that forward-moving story of the comic book and family story, with a tangential tale about *Swastika* or *Howling 3*. But telling stories is like that. Dropping hints, clues, sowing story lines, tying the threads together, they are all part of the storytelling recipe. This isn't science. It is largely trial and error in the edit room, but based on having some strong ideas in advance of how it might all come together – all the elements at play during the shoot. I also like to write a lot before shooting – setting out on the computer screen and testing a story.



You manage to inject quite a lot of humour into this film despite the horror of the Second World War. This is something you also did with your previous MIFF Premiere Fund-supported film *Make Hummus Not War* (in the context of the Middle East conflicts). How difficult is it to get the right balance?

Humour is as important in life as it is in films – a very subjective viewpoint but never-the-less true. If you want to move people in a film you also need some laughs. They are actually part of the same dynamic, humour and pathos, but it's tricky stuff when it involves the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Philippe and Mirka were great in this respect as humour is important to their lives and creative work. 'We laugh so we don't cry' is, after all, an old Jewish expression.

Balance ... hmmm ... again it comes down to trial and error and what instinctively feels right. I felt there needed to be humorous moments throughout the entire length of the film to help sustain it. This is about entertainment after all. There can only be two or three moments in a film where the heights of emotion are peaked. So it's a matter of finding where that happens in the story. But these are things I also think about when writing a story and certainly when shooting. I'm always anticipating on a shoot, "Where does this scene fit into the over-arching story, how does it play out and what happens next?"



In addition to humour, both films use food as a central device to explore stories of conflict; why is this so?

Food is even more fundamental to life than humour. We all like to eat. So if you can find an intriguing story involving food I think you are on a winner. The mayo connection in *Monsieur Mayo* is really revealed in the last ^{third} of the film. I think it's quite a revelation and I'm not going to give it away. It's also that foods like mayo are something we take for granted. But in the context of *Monsieur Mayonnaise* and *Make Hummus Not War* they become laden with so much more meaning. In the context of this film, the French love of mayonnaise, becomes a symbol of freedom. In *Make Hummus Not War*, hummus is a symbol of what unites us, a common love to eat and enjoy life no matter what your religion or social/cultural background.

What's your most memorable meal featuring mayonnaise?

Claude Colliot, the French chef in *Monsieur Mayo*, made the most exquisite light fluffy mayo served with crudités, raw vegetables. Delicious! But I think the best mayo I've ever tasted is Mirka Mora's homemade, handmade, mayo, whisked with a wooden spoon and served on a baguette with ham and lettuce. Incroyable! From memory there were three small cloves of garlic – more a Provençal style aioli and lots of pepper. It was amazing to watch Mirka patiently whisk and dribble oil into her mayo and even better to taste it. Homemade is always best. Making films is like that too. Cinema needs a signature, a personal touch.