



Q&A with Anna Broinowski (Aim High in Creation!)

What motivated you to make this revolutionary comedy delving inside the DPRK?

I was very interested in types of Propaganda cinema – both in the East and the West. A friend gave me Kim Jong Il's manifesto on how to make the 'perfect socialist film', *The Cinema and Directing* (1987). I was immediately fascinated by his often counter-intuitive (for a Westerner at least) filmmaking rules. And I began to wonder: what would a film by Westerners, strictly adhering to Kim Jong Il's rules, be like? Could it have the same power over western audiences that North Korean films have over Kim Jong Il's 23 million citizens? The film-within-a-film became the narrative device through which I could explore propaganda cinema in North Korea, and the filmmakers who make it.

One of Kim Jong Il's central rules is that every great propaganda film must be not only of "high artistic standards". it must also "advance the socialist cause" and help "destroy decadent capitalism". I therefore needed a 'capitalist enemy' for my heroic characters to fight in the film-within-a-film. My Sydney suburb of Erskineville had a wealth on offer – from the developers building 24-storey tower blocks in my backyard, to Dart Energy, who wanted to drill for Coal Seam Gas in the nearby park. I chose the CSG issue because it affects the whole country. The multinational corporations driving this industry are riding roughshod over farmers and citizens everywhere. It's a timely example of free-market capitalism at its profiteering best.

How on earth did you get access to interviews with North Korean masters of propaganda filmmaking?

Through British filmmaker and Koryo Tours manager Nick Bonner, who has produced many excellent films about North Korea. Initially, Nick was understandably not that interested – I was just one in a queue of filmmakers who approach him constantly for help getting into North Korea. After spending a year trying other very dubious avenues, I contacted Nick again and told him the whole idea: I wanted North Korean filmmakers to teach me how to make a film in their style. I think this appealed to Nick because it was a cross-cultural proposition in which I was intent on learning from the North Koreans, rather than just taking from them. He facilitated a one-week recce for producer Lizzette Atkins and I to meet North Korea's top filmmakers (no formal shooting), and at the end of it, they could see we genuinely wanted to explore their film industry rather than use it as an excuse to create the usual sensationalist expose of 'evil' North Korea. A month later, I went back with DOP Nicola Daley to shoot *Aim High!* I was astonished by the level of access they gave us.

What was it like for you to make cinema from a completely foreign perspective?

Quite odd and challenging! It was tempting to take the more alien characteristics of North Korean cinema (70s style crash zooms, sentimental focus-pulls, singing at odd moments, two-dimensional villains, propaganda speeches of love for the Dear Leader) and send them up for laughs. But the North Korean filmmakers had collaborated so generously and trustingly, this would not have been fair to them – nor would it have been fair to the Australian victims of Coal Seam Gas, whose lives have been affected in a real and devastating way. So I decided instead to take the harder route and try to find a way to harness North Korean filmmaking techniques to make a film that would somehow have a genuine emotional impact. However strange North Korean propaganda cinema is to Western tastes, it also has a strangely endearing and innocent, with a magical-real quality. These were the elements I tried to emphasise in our film-within-a-film. I know my

North Korean collaborators liked it; I have no idea yet how western audiences will respond to the final version, which has been significantly cut down since we screened it in Pyongyang.

What was the most surprising moment that you found during the filmmaking process?

Too many to count – from filming Ri Kwan-am directing on the captured spy ship the USS Pueblo to unsuccessfully acting in his film myself; the day Kim Jong Il's favourite composer Pae Yong-sam modestly told us he'd arranged for us to hear the song he'd composed for our film-within-a-film, then ushered us into a grand concert hall where a full chamber orchestra played the score; the alcohol-fuelled barbecues we shared with our collaborators, where they told anti-Soviet jokes, spoke frankly about their demoted status under North Korea's current Songum ('military first') policy, and spontaneously burst into song for fun.

I was struck by their innocence and lack of cynicism, and the fact they have no idea of the behemoth capitalism has become since they sealed themselves off from it in 1953. And the comparative serenity of their lives, in a land without internet, outside phone contact or advertising, and only one TV channel: they still gather to sing, dance and share stories for entertainment, in a pre-digital kind of time warp. The sinister side of living in a place where one in five people is reportedly a spy and one wrong comment can send you away forever was palpable – there was always a black-suited 'minder' in the corner, monitoring everything my North Korean friends said. But despite all this, perhaps the most enduring realisation for me was that filmmakers, no matter where they live, share so many common passions, characteristics and experiences that they really are a family.

What were you hoping to achieve by making this film?

To share with the world a different story about North Korea: a story that gives us a glimpse, through the prism of cinema, into the mindset of the 22,800,000 North Koreans NOT incarcerated in gulags – people who, like people everywhere, simply want to get through each day relatively unscathed and look after their kids. I wanted to humanise the North Koreans in the minds of viewers constantly bombarded by the mainstream Western media's depiction of North Koreans as victimised, brainwashed automatons. Sure, North Korea can be a very nasty place: but *Aim High!* uncovers other aspects of its people we don't normally see.

Secondly, I wanted to illustrate how we in the West are also victims of propaganda – and in doing so, stress the humanity we share with the North Koreans, rather than encourage a judgmental, us and them stance.

Do you have plans to screen the film in North Korea after it has its world premiere at MIFF?

A longer cut of the film-within-a-film has already screened in North Korea successfully, thank god! However, it is extremely unlikely that *Aim High!* the documentary will ever be seen there officially. Despite the fact that we removed several things from the film that could potentially get our collaborators "into trouble", and respected the way we were told to film images of the Dear Leader, I am certain that the commentary about him, and certain moments in the film, remain too (inadvertently) offensive for it to ever be shown to North Koreans. That's not to say it won't be scrutinised in private by North Korean authorities: they keep close tabs on everything made about their country. It is for this reason that we have had to be very careful about what to include from the many interviews we shot with the North Korean subjects of *Aim High!*

Which is your favourite film in the MIFF Juche Showtime: Films of the DPRK spotlight and why?

I have two: *Hong Kil Dong* because it is a genuinely engaging period action pic, and surprisingly light on in the propaganda stakes. And *A Broad Bellflower* because it is eerily beautiful and absorbing, despite being a full-blown melodrama; the passionate sincerity of its two main actresses makes it strangely compelling.

The [MIFF Premiere Fund](#)-supported *Aim High in Creation!* is screening on the following dates:

- **Wednesday 7 August, 6.30pm at the Forum Theatre**
- **Sunday 11 August, 7pm at Greater Union**