

BAYSIDE FILM FESTIVAL

BY LOU PARDI

The seventh annual Bayside Film Festival focuses on the resilience and courage of the human spirit. Opening night film *The Songs They Sang* brings to light the songs written during the Holocaust at Vilna Ghetto, Lithuania. Director Rohan Spong took time out from adding the finishing touches to speak with Beat.

"I have been doing the surround sound mix of portions of the film today and I'm very sleep deprived - so you know Holocaust, intense music and sleep deprivation will get to a little falls," says the good-natured Spong, whose first documentary, *7th For Teacher* also appeared at Bayside Film Festival last year.

Spong had a slow run-up to filmmaking, but once he got started it was apparent he had talent. "I went to film school when I was eighteen. I moved to LA when I was 25 and started to get kinda serious about it. Then, I shot a feature-length doc about transgender school teachers in American schools," he says.

He was inspired to make the film after reading an article on a transgender school teacher. "I called the teacher and said, 'would you go on camera?' I just knew it would make a great documentary. I knew people would be interested. That film screened alongside Oscar contenders in The States - for a film that was made by one person with no budget on Frequent Flyer points, it was pretty impressive."

When the film appeared at Bayside, it planted the seeds for *The Songs They Sang*. "After the screening Amadeo [Marquez Perez] who is the Artistic Director said, 'what are you going to do next? I'd like to see what you would do next, perhaps we can be a part of it.' They got behind this and raised some of the money that was required to go overseas and film the survivors and tell their story. *The Songs They Sang* is the story of a theatre in Vilna Ghetto during the Holocaust where people, despite the fact that they were about to die, wrote these amazing songs which are basically eye-witness accounts of what was taking place around them. There's a song about a man who's questioning God, there's another song written from the perspective of a woman who is adopting children because they no longer have parents and it's a lullaby to those children about when the parents have gone. There's another one called *Shtetl Shtetl* (Dziet Gwint) about not crying in front of the Nazis because they will rejoice if you cry."

While the film involved travelling overseas to meet survivors, the inspiration for *The Songs They Sang* came from closer to home. "There's a woman in Melbourne at the moment called Pauline Sher and she's in the midst of arranging some of these songs for a recording. I was fascinated by that and took a couple of steps backwards and started to look at where the songs had come from and which of the composers were still alive in 2010," says Spong. "I tracked down one survivor who had composed *Shtetl Shtetl*, Alexander Tamir, he basically was an 8-year-old boy and he wrote this song about not crying otherwise the oppressors would rejoice in your tears. It's an amazing, startling piece of piano music and someone set some lyrics to it. After the war, he survived and he distanced himself from the Holocaust. It's only in the last years as an 80-something-year-old man that he's been willing to talk about it. I tracked him down, he was in Jerusalem and I did an interview with him."

While exhilarating, the process is challenging. "It was pretty intense because I carry my own gear everywhere. I fly everywhere, I film everything, I record the sound, I do the administration, I do the research beforehand... so it's kind of a one man band kind of deal," says Spong.

"There was another lyricist called Avrom Sutzkever and he died on the eve of me flying out to interview him. On one hand it was incredibly heartbreaking because I might have collected something with him that hadn't been collected before. He's a very, very important figure. On the other hand, in terms of the film, it was great as part of shiva, his granddaughter was going through his diaries and his biographies and reading excerpts of them to me. That's in the movie as well - his granddaughter discovering all the amazing things that her grandfather did during the war. Sutzkever was very important in terms of keeping the songs and making sure they were published afterwards. He took a lot of materials out of Vilna Ghetto. He had the foresight that they



would be important one day," Spong shares.

Regardless of your own background, speaking with survivors about their experience is challenging, and the film has offered Spong a unique insight. "I knew about the Holocaust obviously - I knew about it in terms of facts and figures," he says. "You don't think about the Holocaust in terms of personal perspectives and about the destruction of families, about married couples who lose one another, about children who are left orphaned, about parents who lose their children and those perspectives are what's in the songs because they're personal. It has been an emotional year dealing with that stuff obviously, but by the same token I am working really hard. I work fanatically, I try to tell the stories in the best possible way I can and to delve into my own personal emotions would be to do a disservice to those stories as they are. My films have a very Australian Story quality to them - you don't see me on camera, occasionally you hear me asking one question, but it's edited in a way that the participants are telling the story in their own words."

It seems fitting that the film will premiere at Bayside Film Festival. "Bayside has a really strong connection to the Jewish community - it's where a lot of the Jewish community in Melbourne live," says Spong. "It's a great festival because the area of town has such a film-going population - Bayside is like a micro-cosmos of culture. It actually reminds me of Hampton Film Festival in New York, up the top end of Long Island, in terms of atmosphere. The types of people that go are the ones that have intellectual discussion about the films."

"They tend to show a lot of works about cultures or perspectives

that haven't been represented as well. They've shown films about land rights, they've shown films about recent immigrants to Australia, they showed the film about the transgender school teachers. I have a respect for the types of films that they show and it's an honour to be their opening night film."

The audience will also include some special guests. "All of the Melbourne-based survivors will be attending the premiere," says Spong. "Melbourne-based singer Pauline Sher, she sings a song in the film and she will be there. It will be interesting to see how people respond to it. It is obviously quite gruelling subject matter but I think it is presented in a fresh way - it's not a film where you see dead bodies, it's a film where you hear emotions."

Having almost completed the finishing touches on *The Songs They Sang*, Spong is turning his eye to something a little lighter before jumping back into documentaries. "I've just done a feature film [Moonlight] with Barry Crocker, Teema Walton and Ian Roberts - and it's a gay bushranger romp, all shot on green screen like *Snitch* and it's based on a real bushranger called Captain Moonlight. In November I'm going to New York to shoot another documentary, actually one of the subjects who's in *The Songs They Sang* for the Cantos [Orchestra] who's an archivist for all of these classical musicians who were writing work and then died in the AIDS epidemic. That's what's next on the plate."

Bayside Film Festival runs from Wednesday July 14 - 17 at Palace Brighton Bay Cinema. For the full festival program including workshops, visit the festival website baysidefilmfestival.com.au.