



A Film by Hugh Piper & Helen Barrow

# DANCING with **DICTATORS**

The Story of The Last Foreign Publisher in Burma.

Director: Hugh Piper  
Producer: Helen Barrow  
Editor: John Pleffer  
Composer: Guy Gross  
Director of Photography: Helen Barrow  
Sound: Hugh Piper and Graham Wyse  
Line Producer: Maggie Lake



**FEATURE DOCUMENTARY | 80 min | 57 min | HD108050i**

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The Myanmar Times copy censored by Press Scrutiny Board 2010

## Log Line

What sort of journalist owns a newspaper in one of the most repressive countries on earth – Burma? Australian publisher Ross Dunkley's battle to survive in one of the most repressive countries on earth.

## The Story

DANCING WITH DICTATORS is a film about Burma from the inside and the battle for control of a newspaper, The Myanmar Times. Burma was renamed Myanmar by the military junta back in 1989. Central to the story is Australian publisher Ross Dunkley, an unusual man, dedicated, energetic, a strange mix of pragmatism and idealism who started and 49 % owns The Myanmar Times which comes out weekly in both English and Burmese. Like all media in Myanmar the paper is heavily edited by the military censor - The Press Scrutiny Board.

The film-makers were initially intrigued as to what sort of journalist starts a newspaper in one of the most repressive countries on earth? Dunkley came to Burma at a time when a more liberal attitude was in the air with some influential generals wanting the country to open up. He started the paper with a young American educated Burmese, Sonny Swe, who had connections to the highest levels of government. Four years after the paper was first published there was a hardline crackdown during which Sonny Swe was jailed for 14 years. Ross Dunkley hung on by his finger nails but the junta forced

him to accept a new local partner publisher Dr Tin Tun Oo who took over Sonny Swe's 51% share holding. Dunkley accepted *fait accompli* but refused to allow Dr Tin Tun Oo into the office except for monthly board meetings. A time bomb started ticking that has taken eight years to explode.



Ross Dunkley and staff at The Myanmar Times office Yangon.

Burma has been isolated from the outside world ever since the military stole government from democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi in 1990. The documentary is set against the background of the country's first election in 20 years in 2010. After nearly 50 years of military rule the government will change from a monolithic military based administration to a supposedly civilian administration. Those outside the country see the election as a sham and that the military is simply changing uniforms. For many inside the country this is an opportunity they cannot afford to turn their back on – a chance for a new start no matter how limited. Through the eyes of journalists both expat and Burmese the filmmakers are able to travel inside the election process and film on the streets with Ross and his staff. After massively manipulating the poll, the military backed USDP eventually claim a landslide victory with 80% of the vote. The disappointment inside the newsroom is palpable.

The film-makers presence during the election did not go unnoticed and four days after the vote they are deported which focuses attention on Ross. Dunkley's business partner Dr Tin Tun Oo uses the deportation against him in an attempt to take full control of the newspaper. Eventually Dunkley is arrested and charged with immigration offences. These charges are then linked to accusations that he drugged and assaulted a sex worker.

Dunkley appears in court on almost a weekly basis for nearly four months. Originally the police and the sex worker were trying to shake him down but the charge was taken up by government with a view to taking over full control of the paper. The foreign investors regroup while Dr Tin Tun Oo takes over Ross' position as CEO. After nearly seven weeks in Burma's notorious Insein prison Dunkley is released with bail posted by TTO. The weekly court appearances continue. At one point Dunkley thought he would be acquitted and granted a visa.

*“ After about a dozen appearances in front of the judge, 47 days in prison and a tension fuelled lead up to my arrest it will thus be over, ending what I can only describe as one of the most excruciating experiences in my life and finishing yet another chapter in my eventful career on the frontline as an editor and publisher”. Ross Dunkley.*

But no it isn't over. The process rolls on for another eight appearances where he is acquitted on three charges but found guilty of causing simple hurt and an immigration offence. He is appealing the simple hurt conviction. He believes he will be granted a visa to return to Myanmar and he has plans to regain control of the company and achieve his dream of breaking the state run monopoly that delivers the nations one daily newspaper and publish The Myanmar Times as a daily.



Filming with Ross Dunkley and newspaper staff on Election Day 2010.

## One Paragraph

**DANCING WITH DICTATORS** is a film about the struggle for control of MCM, the only media company in Burma with any foreign investment. Australian publisher Ross Dunkley started and owns 49% of Burma's leading newspaper The Myanmar Times. The paper comes out weekly in both Burmese and English and like all media in the country it is heavily censored. What sort of journalist owns a newspaper in one of the most repressive countries on earth? Against the background of the country's first election in 20 years we travel inside this closed and frightened society. The government has forced a 51% partner on Dunkley and after the election their enmity comes to a head. Dunkley is arrested and charged with immigration offences linked to assaulting a woman. We follow his weekly court appearances. He spends seven weeks in Burma's notorious Insein prison before being bailed. After 20 court appearances Ross Dunkley is now free and he is plotting to not be the last foreign publisher in Burma!



Ross Dunkley escorted to court 2011

## Director's Statement

Twelve years ago, Helen Barrow and I made THE POST about the Phnom Penh Post newspaper in Cambodia. We wanted to re-visit the film in light of the recent Khmer Rouge trials. However, we found that the paper had changed ownership and is now owned by an Australian, Ross Dunkley who also owns the Myanmar Times. We learnt that Burma was about to hold it's first election in 20 years and we realised that the bigger and more challenging story lies there. Here is one of the most repressive countries on earth and we were intrigued as to what sort of man would do business with the notorious generals?

We asked Ross Dunkley if we could come and film inside The Myanmar Times and to our surprise he agreed. Ross' agreement was not without risk for him and his business. I think he agreed for three reasons: 1. He was aware that change would not take place overnight but he honestly believed a new more liberal Burma was on its way and he wanted the world to know. 2. He wanted us there to record him achieving one of his dreams, his paper moving from being published weekly to daily. 3. He wanted us there as he solved an ongoing problem and found a new local partner.

Unfortunately for Ross, to date, none of these things have happened. When we started filming I had no idea that the battle for control of the company would be the film's major theme or that Ross would end up in such dire circumstances.

At first we found it hard to film outside the office. Our presence did not make everyone happy. Although most Burmese staff supported the aspiration to make a film about the election through the eyes of Ross and the paper, when it came to us going out on the streets with reporters some made it difficult – basically they were scared. Those who welcomed us along ensured they were covered in terms of permissions from management and Ross. Small acts of every day bravery mean so much.

After the election, we were deported and managed to leave the country with 40 hours of material. We thought we might have had a movie at that stage but then Ross Dunkley was arrested. It was deeply disturbing in that we knew our deportation had played some part in his troubles. At the same time we sensed that the story was just beginning.



Ross Dunkley surrounded by media after final court appearance June 30 June 2011



Producer/ Camera: Helen Barrow. Director: Hugh Piper.

## Creative Team

### Writer, Director, Sound: Hugh Piper

Hugh Piper's recent documentaries include: MR SIN - THE ABE SAFFRON STORY- a tale of black mail and corruption at the highest levels. CRACKING THE COLOUR CODE - he wrote and directed this multi disciplinary journey through the science, anthropology, history and culture of colour for European and Australian television. CRIME SCENE BANGKOK is about flamboyant personality Dr Porntip Rojanasunan and her quest to reform the Thai forensic system, made for National Geographic. SUBMARINERS is a six parts TV series about a four month journey on HMAS Rankin, one of Australia's controversial Collins Class submarines. A CASE FOR THE CORONER is a six part TV series about the work of the NSW Sate Coroner, John Abernethy involving inquests, forensic investigations and autopsies as families and friends look for answers to unexplained deaths. HAPPINESS centres on "the Happiest Man on Earth" - Tibetan monk Matthieu Ricard and his journey from Nepal to the science labs of Madison Wisconsin to measure how mental health and happiness is improved through deep meditation. Earlier works include THE POST a film about the reporters on Cambodia's leading English language newspaper The Phnom Penh Post.



Hugh Piper- Director and Helen Barrow Producer/Camera



## **Producer, Director of Photography: Helen Barrow**

Helen Barrow has worked as an independent documentary maker for the last 20 years. As a producer and director her stories have been screened on ABC, SBS, National Geographic, Discovery Asia and USA, BBC, Channel 4. Her interest lies in stories about people who are challenged by life and their response to that challenge. Titles include: MR SIN - THE ABE SAFFRON STORY- Producer/Camera (ABC). OPERATION BABYLIFT - Producer/Camera (SBS). HIRED ASSASSINS-Political Cartooning in Australia, Producer/Director (ABC). THE POST- Producer/Camera (ABC). NEVER SAY DIE MATILDAS -Director (SBS). KICK FIGHTERS Director/Camera/Co-Producer (National Geographic). SIX DEGREES-CITIES -Director (Discovery/SBS). Prior to establishing her self as an independent documentary maker Helen worked full time for ABC TV as a cinematographer for 10 years.

## **Editor : John Pleffer ASE**

John's extensive editing credits range from the Gold Walkley winning "COP IT SWEET" to the AFI winning "FRONTIER" and the Logie awarded "DYNASTIES" ; including films as diverse as Jim Sharman's "BURNING PIANO", David Goldie's "NOBODY'S CHILDREN" , Barry Humphries "FLASHBACKS", Mark Gould's "MOULIN ROUGE GIRLS" and the ratings busting series "FAMILY FORTUNES", "PEKING TO PARIS" and "OPERATUNITY OZ". In 2009 he edited the acclaimed series "THE HOWARD YEARS". In 2010 he cut the 7 part series "FAMILY CONFIDENTIAL" .

## **Composer : Guy Gross**

Guy is a multi award winning Australian film and television composer and recipient of the 2009 APRA/AGSC International Achievement Award, considered the most prestigious accolades for an Australian screen composer.

From his British Academy Award (BAFTA) nominated score to the international hit "THE ADVENTURES OF PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT" to the US hit SCI-FI series "FARSCAPE", his film scores cover a huge variety of styles. Guy's film music has been performed in concert by the Sydney, Melbourne and Queensland Symphony Orchestras.

His works for television include scores for the tele-movies: A MODEL DAUGHTER - THE KILLING OF CAROLINE BYRNE, JOANNE LEES: MURDER IN THE OUTBACK, SCORCHED, documentaries: THE HOWARD YEARS, THE PRIME MINISTER IS MISSING and WHO KILLED DR BOGLE AND MRS CHANDLER? and multi award winning series EAST WEST 101.



The Myanmar Times office -Yangon

## **Burma Background**

In colonial times there had been a flourishing newspaper tradition in Burma in both English and Burmese. The military first took full control of the country in a coup in 1962. They instigated “ The Burmese Way to Socialism” and introduced a single party state nationalising the economy and banning all independent newspapers. After years of repressive control, in 1987 a currency devaluation wiped out people’s savings and anti government protests and riots erupted and in the following year thousands of people were killed on the streets of Rangoon.

Around this time Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma to look after her ailing mother. She drew national attention, as her father Aung San was a nationalist leader considered the father of modern Burma. Aung San was assassinated in 1947. His only daughter soon came to occupy a place in the people’s hearts and she became a political leader with her National League for Democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi has spent brief periods free but has been under house arrest for most of the last 20 years. In 1989, the Generals changed the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar and the capital city from Rangoon to Yangon.

To assuage international concern about the junta’s violence in 1988 an election was held in 1990. In spite of Aung San Suu Kyi being under house



Printing The Myanmar Times in Yangon

arrest, the NLD won in a landslide with 90% of the vote. The army simply ignored the result and took back power.

Ross Dunkley started the Myanmar Times during a period of relative liberalism in the year 2000. That period ended with a hardliner crackdown in 2004. In September 2007, due to escalating fuel prices and the junta removing tariffs on kerosene protests broke out on the streets of Yangon. Monks and protestors were shot by soldiers – no one knows how many died. Currently there are well over 2000 political prisoners in jails around the country.

The first election in 20 years was held in November 2010. The military ensured victory for themselves and the military backed USDP and laid claim to 80% of the vote. All the same many inside the country see the change from a single party military dictatorship to a civilian administration as the first step towards some small measure of democratic reform. But to date, there is very little to suggest that anything other than more of the same is the order of the day, while some say they situation is even worse.



Ross Dunkley, holding Myanmar Times newspaper outside of Phnom Penh office Cambodia July 2011

## CHARACTER PROFILES

**Ross Dunkley.** Australian 54 - raised on a cattle station in outback Western Australia Ross won Australia's chief journalism award The Walkely before starting up his own rural newspaper. He became editor of the Vietnam Investment Review in Hanoi the first foreign owned newspaper paper in the country. Money was made there and he moved onto start The Myanmar Times in Burma in the year 2000. Feeling the need to diversify he bought the Phnom Penh Post three years ago. Ross has no doubts about the worthiness of his businesses and his aspirations. Like all adventurous capitalists he wants his businesses to prosper and believes that hard work leads to success and with that comes wealth not just for him but his workers and the countries he wants to contribute to. Ross believes that economic engagement is a better way to bring change to a troubled country than isolation and sanctions.

**Geoffrey Goddard.** Australian 58 – Myanmar Times world editor. Geoffrey has been a journalist in Asia for half of his 40 years in journalism including Thailand, Burma Cambodia Singapore and during his six months in China the Tiananmen Square crackdown took place. After the imprisoning of Aung San Suu Kyi. he had promised he would not return to Burma. All the same he was back in Melbourne when he saw an ad for Senior Editor at Myanmar Times and couldn't resist applying. "It was one of the best decisions I have made, though it has not been without a high emotional cost."

**U Zaw Myint.** Burmese 50 - Editor Myanmar Times Myanmar language edition. Zaw Myint graduated from Yangon University majoring in law. He started in journalism at the New Light of Myanmar, a creaky government run Stalinist relic that publishes the country's only daily paper. He left the New Light in 2001 and worked for several sports publications before leaving journalism to work in trademark and patent law. He started with the Myanmar Times in 2005 writing sport then gained gradual promotion to news editor. Myanmar language edition.

**Myo Myo.** Burmese 30 - journalist. For the last 5 years Myo Myo has worked at the Myanmar contributing to both the English and Myanmar language editions of the newspaper. Before training as a journalist Myo Myo worked as a teacher and tutor in Yangon and lives with her family. After surviving Cyclone Nargis, the family moved to a village 2 hours from the central Yangon.

**Tom Kean.** Australian 24 - Myanmar Times news editor. Tom joined the paper aged 21, straight out of journalism school in Melbourne two months after the Saffron Revolution in 2007. "They were looking for somebody experienced but at the time there were not a lot of contenders". Since then he has become Features Editor, Deputy News Editor and now News Editor. Over his time in Burma Tom has developed a love for the country and is learning the language. His knowledge of the workings of government and Burmese culture is deeply impressive.



Facing camera: Zaw Myint( L) Editor Myanmar Language edition and Tom Keen(r) Editor English language edition interviewing a candidate on election day.



Tom Kean: Editor English language edition, The Myanmar Times.



Ross Dunkley with senior management from The Myanmar Times



Myo Myo - journalist



Chris Davey Senior Photographer and Tom Keen Editor English language edition The Myanmar Times



The Myanmar Times - Front page





Ross Dunkley with Dr Tin Tun Oo (center right) and senior management of The Myanmar Times



Front page of The Myanmar Times - censored copy



## DANCING with **DICTATORS**

The Story of The Last Foreign Publisher in Burma.

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