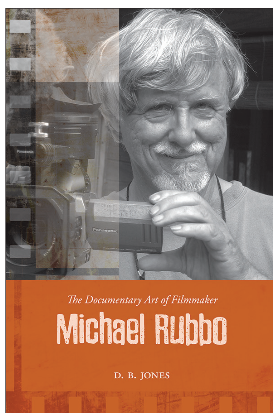
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

D. B. Jones

ISBN 978-1-55238-871-6

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

12

New Tools of the Trade

ABC; The Little Box That Sings; *Much Ado About Something*; *All About Olive*

In 1995, after nearly thirty years in Canada, Rubbo moved back to his native Australia to accept an invitation to head the Documentaries Department of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He had also been offered the headship of the Australian National Film School, but he preferred to be involved in production. And the ABC accepted as a condition of his employment that he be allowed to develop and produce a new ABC program inspired by a French-Canadian television series, *La Course Tour du Monde*, which had intrigued Rubbo when he saw it in Canada. ABC's version, called *Race Around the World*, lasted two years (1997–1998). Each year the program selected, on the basis of video submissions, eight young people to participate. After a brief course in documentary, each was given a newly released Sony digital hand-held camera with a side-opening viewer, an international itinerary, and a hundred days to produce ten four-minute documentaries. They had to plan and shoot the films, but their footage was sent back to Sydney to be edited according to their instructions. Four of the films were shown on each half-hour television broadcast. It was a competition: the films were judged, with points deducted for lateness.

For Rubbo, *Race Around the World* was a chance to offer young Australians the kind of travel-based storytelling he had loved doing as

a teenager and college student. In his day, of course, Rubbo had to rely on words, photographs, paintings, and occasional 8mm silent footage to tell his stories. Now, inexpensive, easy-to-use digital film equipment enabled the young travelers of *Race Around the World* to make films with soundtracks. But in Rubbo's view, the filmmaking—the documentation—was then and now secondary to a more fundamental experience. In an interview with Geoff Burton in 1999 about his days at the ABC, Rubbo said that he

> was just like many other Australians, a good traveller, very open and empathetic with people. Documenting my travels with whatever technology I had at hand was just a logical add-on to the rich emotional process of interacting with people. After all, documentary is all about getting access to people's lives and having those people willing to give you good stories under certain circumstances. It is an exchange of valuables, meaning they get something and you get something. *Race Around the World*, the process of travelling with tiny unobtrusive cameras, is perfect for that negotiation to happen.[1]

These remarks about *Race Around the World* reveal something essential about Rubbo's documentary aesthetic—its basis in his enjoyment of personal interaction, a sense of mutuality. The "exchange of valuables"—which he had invoked in his letter to Atwood—is not just a kind of free trade benefitting both parties; it is an ethical principle.

Rubbo created and hosted one other major ABC series, *Stranger Than Fiction*, which showed Australian documentaries, most of which he commissioned. He preferred chance-taking, observational documentaries to scripted or interview-based films. He encouraged filmmakers to experiment with the new digital technology. To help the students in *Race Around the World*, he had developed a set of six criteria for assessing proposed or completed films, and he applied these to the documentary series. A documentary film should have something at stake; have a story; have interesting characters; be emotionally touching; provide food for thought; and be strangely compelling. However, as he told Geoff Burton,

> he ran into fierce opposition from some local film-makers who were accustomed to making a lot of essay type films and had no interest in the observational genre. They saw me as a threat because … I was touted as someone who would not commission anything that was scripted or of the essay type.[2]

Rubbo nonetheless commissioned roughly thirty documentaries during his short reign and served as executive producer on several of them.

But the executive role did not suit Rubbo. As in any bureaucracy, there was infighting and intrigue, something he says he was never good at. There was ample bureaucracy at the NFB, but there his responsibility was confined to his own films. Wise executives like Tom Daly and Colin Low (who Rubbo once said "brings a certain serenity to filmmaking") negotiated the bureaucracy for him and other filmmakers. Unhappy as an executive, learning his contract would not be renewed, and itching to get back to making his own documentaries, Rubbo started working on a new documentary of his own using the new technology that he had been urging other documentary filmmakers to employ. With digital equipment, one could make a film by oneself. A director could do both his own photography and his own sound recording if he was reasonably proficient technically and not afraid to try the new tools.

Rubbo's new wife, Katherine Korolkevich, suggested the topic for his first project as a digital filmmaker, Australian violin makers, and she shares credit on the ultimate film. One of the key figures in the film would be Harry Vatiliotis, who immigrated to Australia from Cyprus in the 1950s. Vatiliotis is a skilled violin maker who rarely leaves his house, which also doubles as his workshop. Rubbo negotiated a departure deal with the ABC that allowed him, on the broadcaster's money, to start shooting the film while still working there. As Rubbo explains it,

> I would duck out at lunchtime, drive to Harry's violin workshop and shoot a sequence on my ABC camera before rushing back to take care of meetings and correspondence for the rest of the afternoon. People found it very amusing

> that the head of documentaries was shooting a documentary on his lunch break. I enjoyed it very much and I think I also enjoyed demonstrating a sort of bold competence that none of the others would try even as they marked me down for my bureaucratic performance.

Rubbo had to make some adjustments to his documentary style. Without a crew, he couldn't easily step in front of the camera and enter the action. He could participate, provoke, and contrive in real time, but only from behind the camera. But eliminating the intrusiveness of a film crew provided freedom of another kind. As both interlocutor and shooter, perhaps he could get even closer to his subjects than before.

The Little Box That Sings (2000) displays the new technology's advantages and limitations for a filmmaker as involved in his storytelling as Rubbo. As the film starts with a tilt up from a shadow of a violin player to the man playing, Rubbo extends an invitation to his audience: "I want to take you into the world of the violin makers. It's a strange backwater, where the little boxes they craft have not changed their basic shape in four hundred years. I'm guessing you don't know much about this world. And it's all strange to me, too, as this story starts."

But the world he takes us into is not quite the world. He's interested in *Australian* violin makers. In the course of the film, we meet several of them as well as a teacher, a dealer, some students, and a professional violinist succeeding in New York—all Australian. A few have a major presence in the film, their scenes interwoven and sometimes intersecting.

Charmian Gadd was a child prodigy who became a successful soloist and is now a teacher. She is buying a violin shop that will specialize in Australian-made violins. She says it is hard to get students to try one. They don't take the Australian violins seriously; they want Italian instruments. Commiserating, Rubbo says to her, "If you think 'violin,' you don't think Australia." But she is working on one of her best students, Nguen, to try a violin made by John Johnston, an Australian.

At Harry Vatiliotis's workshop, Asmira Woodward Page, the Australian doing well as a violinist in New York, is considering buying one

of his violins. But he has competition: she is also considering one made by Guadagnini more than two centuries ago.

As interludes in these developing stories, Rubbo's film takes us twice to Cremona, Italy, home of the famed luthier Antonio Stradivari and still the mecca for violin players, teachers, and makers. In the first sequence shot in Cremona, Rubbo introduces some Italian violin makers and students. He interviews Stradivari's last surviving descendant, Antonia Stradivari, who says her name is "a burden." She manages the Stradivari Museum, where we view a valuable Stradivari kept in a glass case and suspended therein on filaments of nylon. In the second Cremona sequence, we learn that most people think the secret of Stradivari's violins is in the varnish. His varnish recipe has not survived, but apparently Stradivari himself said the secret was love—that he made his violins with love.

Between the two Cremona sequences, we catch up on the main developing stories. Rubbo revisits Harry Vatiliotis, who is working on the violin for Asmira Woodward Page. Harry works fast, Rubbo observes. When the basic box is done, Rubbo says to Harry, "It looks as fragile as a model airplane." "It's like an eggshell," says Harry. When the violin is finished, he holds it up for Rubbo's visual inspection. "Even I," Rubbo says to us, "who have followed the process, am stunned by the beauty of what comes from his hands."

At her shop, Charmian Gadd is evaluating old violins people have brought to her for possible sale or just an assessment. Deception is rife in the history of violins, we learn, with ordinary ones passed off as rare and valuable. When Charmian remarks on the difficulty in evaluating them, Rubbo says in narration, "Perhaps they're treasure. Perhaps they're trash." An Australian expert, we're told, likes to joke that Stradivari made eleven hundred violins in his lifetime, and twenty-five hundred of them are in Australia. We also meet Graeme Caldersmith, a one-time aerospace scientist who now makes violins from Australian woods instead of the usual European maple or pine.

After the second Cremona interlude, we learn that Nguen, who had been lent an old, valuable Italian violin for use in a competition, had lost. Now, at Charmian's shop, he is considering an Australian one. He tries one by John Johnston and one by Graeme Caldersmith. "So," Rubbo says to him triumphantly, "we finally got you to test an

12.1 Harry Vatiliotis at work. Production photo. *The Little Box That Sings* (2000). Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

Australian violin!" Then Nguen tries an Italian one, which he likes better. "Looks like another victory for Italy," Rubbo sighs. Charmian admits defeat, for now, adding that there's "no point in bullshitting about it." But before the day is over, Nguen tries an Australian violin again and decides to take it on a trial basis. We learn that after a week or so, he returns it.

With a $50,000 violin, Suzie Park had lost a competition and was told by a judge that she needed a much better instrument. Now,

accompanied by her father, she is checking out a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Guadagnini someone is selling for $400,000. Her father is in the background, staring out a window. "The poor dad is desperate," Rubbo observes. "It's one thing to buy a $50,000 violin for your talented daughter, but another when she starts looking at one that costs $400,000." The father says he hopes to persuade a bank to buy it for his daughter.

Asmira Woodward Page, back from New York, tries out the violin Vatiliotis has made for her. "It sounds wonderful to me," Rubbo says, but Page finds things wrong with it. It looks like she will reject Harry's violin. In narration, Rubbo wonders, "Can there really be such a difference in sound? Or is it mostly snobbery?" To Harry, he says, "I think yours was right up there, Harry."

As the film nears its end, Rubbo tells us that "something rather nice happens." Harry has fixed up an old fiddle that has been brought to him. Just before returning to New York, Asmira tries it out. Ron, the owner, says it probably had not been played for seventy-five years. His eyes tear up as he watches and listens to Asmira playing it. Self-conscious, he asks Rubbo, "You don't want to see a grown man cry, do you?" "Why not?" Rubbo replies.

Considering that Rubbo did the shooting and sound recording himself, and that it was his first try at it, the technical excellence of *The Little Box That Sings* is impressive. The sound is crisp, and if there are musical shortcomings in the extensive passages of violin playing, only an expert could discern them. The image always has enough light. The handheld camera is steady and confident. There are fewer cutaways than typical of Rubbo's earlier films, and noticeable use of soft cuts and jump cuts, but the footage was adequate to allow for coherent scenes. The result is an absorbing film, with engaging characters, fascinating images of craftsmanship, interesting historical facts, beautiful instruments, and lovely music.

But while the crucial personal element in Rubbo's style is as strongly present here as in his other films—although from behind the camera only, not in front of it—it has a subtly different effect in *Little Box*. In his best work at the Film Board, when Rubbo is in front of the camera along with his main subjects, he engages with them as their dramatic equal. Often he enters in an at least mildly antagonistic relationship

with them: he baits them, provokes them, challenges them. But he also shares their vulnerability to the camera's gaze, and he makes sure, in the editing, to include scenes or moments that undermine his authority or expose his pretentions. But while he is always present on the soundtrack in *Little Box*, we glimpse him only rarely, for example as a reflection in a mirror. Yet he seems to form a more intimate relationship with his subjects than he did in the predigital films. Instead of challenging or goading his subjects, he gently cheers them on. He roots for Harry to sell Asmira Page his violin, encourages Nguen to try John Johnston's Australian violin, hopes for Charmian to succeed with her business. And with no film crew intruding on the scene, his subjects seem more relaxed than in his earlier films. They are more at ease with him. And he seems completely at ease with them.

There are some moments in the film that remind the viewer of Rubbo's earlier films but are discordant in this adjusted style. Driving from the airport to Cremona, he points out the presence of his wife and daughter in the back seat. There is no value added by this glimpse of his family. That could be said as well of moments in *Solzhenitsyn's Children*, say, or *Yes or No Jean-Guy Moreau*, where his son and then-wife also occasionally appear, but in those films, since Rubbo also appears (to a much greater extent, to be sure) in front of the camera, the inclusion of family seems a little less gratuitous. In those films, the presence of his family might have contributed to the relaxed atmosphere in the scenes in which they appear.

And because being behind the camera rather than in front of it takes the focus away from Rubbo and places it on his subjects, occasional lines of commentary that were apt in a film from his Film Board years seem incongruous here. Over the scene at the school in Cremona, for example, he tells us he is "filled with nostalgia for my own student days." Suddenly, for this brief moment, the film is about him. Self-references in his NFB films served variously to advance the story, illuminate character, reveal process, or reduce his own authority vis-à-vis his subject, but here it seems pointless.

Rubbo next took on a more ambitious digital documentary project. While visiting with Australian actress Diane Cilento and her husband Tony Schaffer in Queensland, Schaffer urged him to read *The Man Who Was "Shakespeare"*, a book by Calvin Hoffman claiming that

Christopher Marlowe was the true author of the plays attributed to Shakespeare. A few months later Rubbo got around to reading the book. For some time he had had a modicum of curiosity about the authorship question, and the book increased his interest. It appealed to his sense of mystery. He decided to make the authorship issue the subject of his next film.

As feature-length documentaries go, *Much Ado About Something* (2002)—which in its longest version runs a little over an hour and a half—didn't cost much to shoot. Funding from the Australian Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission paid for travel expenses and post-production. Additional funding came from the *Frontline* documentary series produced by WGBH-TV, which had been receptive to Rubbo's work. Rubbo had already reinvented himself as a cameraman-director and made an excellent film with digital equipment. So he decided, as he says in an interview on the *Frontline* website, to "go off to England and do the film. I prided myself on having no lights and no tripod, and I just went off to do it. My wife, Katerina Korolkevich, was my main helper, acting as assistant director. Daughter Ellen, then about 7, was in tow too."[3]

The film consists primarily of interwoven interactions—they're too informal to be called interviews—with proponents and skeptics of the theory that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays and poems. There is also some BBC footage of the now-dead Calvin Hoffman, a sojourn to Italy to visit archives, and excerpts from two movies, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and the Franco Zeffirelli version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). Although Rubbo gives what seems a fair allocation of time to those who believe Shakespeare was indeed the author, his sympathies lie with those who are convinced that Shakespeare could not have written the plays. He is, in his own word, "fascinated" by the possibility. Well into the film, Rubbo begins to develop his own theory. He believes, along with some of his subjects, including the dead Hoffman, that Christopher Marlowe, an established and already acclaimed playwright reported to have been killed in an argument at the age of twenty-nine, actually fled England in a cleverly conceived plot. He needed to fake his death and flee because he was about to be arrested and tortured, and perhaps killed, for alleged heresies he had uttered against the Catholic Church. From his refuge in northern

Italy—where several of Shakespeare's productions are set—he writes, and then sends to England, the plays that will appear under Shakespeare's name. Marlowe had the requisite education and learning for the literary quality and historical knowledge reflected in the plays. By contrast, there is no hard evidence that Shakespeare was well educated or even that he appreciated learning; there were no books in his house, and his daughters could not read or write. Rubbo's twist on the theory of Marlowe's authorship is that Marlowe was too refined and humorless to have been capable of writing the bawdy passages in the plays, so he must have sent the plays to Shakespeare, who added that element. Addressing the camera, Rubbo summarizes his theory thus: "I'm seeing Shakespeare, the country bumpkin, uneducated, and then busy theater professional, as a *junior partner* to this hidden Christopher Marlowe, who is living in Italy and writing these masterpieces. It sorta works for me—that is, *if* Christopher Marlowe is not dead in 1593."

The film is a lark. At times Rubbo piles on evidence for his theory so fast that there is no way someone not closely familiar with the issue can follow the details of his argument, but the film's energy, resourcefulness, and chutzpah carry it along. Rubbo resembles a Holmesian detective unraveling a mystery, brilliantly reasoning from seemingly minor facts to an unexpected conclusion. He advances a plausible theory that he hopes solves the case to the astonishment of everyone. Except that no one in his film seems astonished. They are merely unconvinced. Two of the pro-Shakespeare scholars become annoyed at his persistence. Even the "grande dame of the Marlovians," as Rubbo calls Dolly Walker-Wraight, gets irritated by Rubbo's argument for a collaboration between Marlowe and Shakespeare: "Oh, for goodness sake," she says to Rubbo, "how many probables are you going to add?"

Rubbo ends the film on a mildly equivocal note. After citing some instances in which historical evidence has turned up in the modern era—some papers in Italy possibly bearing on Marlowe's authorship; Marlowe's portrait found washed clean by rain in a pile of rubble in 1953—he says, "If it had not been raining that day [when the portrait was found], we would never have known the face of Marlowe. So in Italy, and everywhere else, let's keep on looking … till William Shakespeare clears his name." It just sort of works for Rubbo.

12.2 Dolly Walker-Wraight with portrait of Marlowe. Production photo. *Much Ado About Something* (2002). Image courtesy of Films Transit International.

It works for the audience, too, whether convinced or not. One reason the film is engaging is its structure, which was devised after a first attempt that failed badly. While producing *Race Around the World* for ABC, Rubbo required the young filmmakers to send in paper edits so that editing could begin while the filmmakers rushed from location to location:

> I would stress to them that their first take on the story was probably valuable, and if they did an edit on paper they would always have something clear to depart from and know why. I remembered the mess we got into in [the National Film Board] as we succumbed to the temptation to cherry-pick the bits we loved best about our rushes, and work on them rather than paper edit an entire film structure. This was often disastrous, because having worked very hard on favored sequences one can never let them go, even though they might have no real place in the film. By

> doing a paper edit, and not being in love with some vérité moment here and there, one could get a strong story and then make it work. Sometimes very banal shots, which by cherry-picking one could completely miss, would turn out to be key story shots.

Following what he had taught his students, Rubbo did a paper edit showing how unbelievable it was that Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him. He gave the paper edit to his editor, Jane St. Vincent Welch, who executed it

> brilliantly in a couple of weeks. Well, we looked at it and we both felt sick. There was something horribly mean-spirited about it. How and why would you attack this great man like this, bring up all these petty points against him? We realized that, while in a way we were winning the battle, we were losing our audience emotionally. We seemed underhanded and unfair.

They restructured the film so as to develop the Marlovians, "celebrating their eccentricities, making the whole thing out to be a bit of fun." Then they built up the case for Marlowe as at least a precursor of Shakespeare and possibly a collaborator. It seems far less insistent than the first cut of the film apparently was. One can be utterly unconvinced that anyone but Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him and yet not find the film objectionable or annoying.

One further aspect of Rubbo's editing process, which applies to all his films, is that he writes the narration largely as he is editing. Normally for a film shot without a script, the narration is written after the picture and sound have been edited. Rubbo integrates the construction of the narration with the construction of the film. He finds that writing and speaking his narration as he is editing, and laying it in as a scratch track—he would refine the narration at a later stage—helps him discover whether a sequence is working. For *Much Ado*,

> I was forever popping out to the car in the alleyway, a quiet cul-de-sac, propping my camera on the dashboard, the car's

> interior making a good sound booth somehow, and recording the narration, then dashing back inside for Jane to lay it in and try it. The funny thing is that some of the lines in the film that I speak come from those recordings in the car. I never bettered them.

As this was before the age of mobile phones, Rubbo remembers "the occasional mum with a baby stroller walking past and looking suspiciously at the man in the car talking to himself."

Despite Rubbo operating the camera himself, the film contains more self-reference and much more apparent contrivance than *The Little Box That Sings*. Perhaps Rubbo was more comfortable now with shooting the film himself. In the car, Rubbo films Dolly Walker-Wraight phoning a college for permission to film there. While exploring the authorship issue with Shakespearian actor Mark Rylance, who at the time was also the artistic director of the Shakespeare Globe Theatre, Rylance turns the question back on Rubbo, asking him why he is interested in it. In the graveyard where Marlowe supposedly was buried, Rubbo discovers the grave is unmarked: "I have no idea … where to look. And small boys throw stones at me." The give-and-take between Rubbo and his subjects is often interesting. When Rubbo challenges Walker-Wraight with the stark differences between the plays attributed to Marlowe and those attributed to Shakespeare, she points out that artists evolve, and she cites Picasso and Chekhov as artists whose early work differed drastically from their later output.

Two imaginative, overt contrivances contribute to the film's overall argument. Fairly early on, Rubbo wants to explore the similarity between numerous passages from Marlowe and Shakespeare. "So I get two actors to help me do some testing," he says. Standing side by side, one actor reads a line from Shakespeare, then the other reads a similar line from Marlowe. They repeat this with several other pairs of lines. The first few times, the name of the author each actor represents is subtitled, but then the subtitles disappear. This deft move, compounded by similar clothing and even a physical similarity between the two actors, underlines the similarity in the respective pairs of lines. Later, to demonstrate problems Rubbo sees in the standard account of how Marlowe came to be killed, Rubbo hires four actors to "visualize

12.3 Shakespeare and Marlowe, identified. Screen grab. *Much Ado About Something* (2002). Image courtesy of Films Transit International.

how it's supposed to have happened." He runs through it twice, and makes a good if somewhat tortuous case that the standard account is problematic.

Fun though the film is, it prompts an uncomfortable question: Why should we care? Perhaps the question could also be asked of *The Little Box That Sings*. That film is charming, but its main thrust is an argument, or hope, that Australian-made violins are a lot better than they're given credit for. This matters far more to Australians than anyone else, and probably far more to the Australian violin community (and perhaps the foreign trade office and promoters of Australian crafts) than to Australians in general. But *Little Box* at least has a central character, Harry Vatiliotis, whose quest for recognition of his craftsmanship we can relate to and root for. With regard to *Much Ado*, the question was put to Rubbo himself in an extensive interview published on the *Frontline* website:

12.4 Shakespeare and Marlowe—which is which? Screen grab. *Much Ado About Something (*2002). Image courtesy of Films Transit International.

Frontline: But specifically, whether it was Marlowe, whether it was [The Earl of] Oxford—whoever it might have been—how do you answer the question of why it matters?

Rubbo: I find that question very strange. I mean, I don't know why anybody would ask that. Of course it matters.

Frontline: It's self-evident that it matters?

Rubbo: Yes, because in the sense that we ourselves have any creativity at all, we must be interested in the creative process. We must want to know about creative people. We must want to know how they did things. That's why! Not to want to know would somehow deny our own attempts at creativity. So I cannot understand it when people say it doesn't

> matter. I think that's a pure cop-out. They don't want to deal with this tricky question. They don't want, perhaps, to be disloyal to a myth. Their attitude is,"A bard in the hand is worth two in the bush, and thanks very much."[4]

Rubbo gives two examples of how an awareness that Marlowe wrote the plays would affect how we interpret them. In *As You Like it*, Touchstone asks a character named William, "Art thou learned?" William answers, "No, sir." Then Touchstone compares William to a vessel that has been filled by emptying another (5. 1. 42–49). In *Measure for Measure*, the line "Death's a great disguiser" (4. 2. 186) in the context of a planned fake death could be an allusion to Marlowe's staged death. The *Frontline* website includes a forum addressing the question of why it matters, and it reports the results of a simple poll in which 43 percent of the 12,393 respondents (as of 28 January 2015) say it does matter, while 56 percent say it does not.

Rubbo's response to the question was unusually defensive. Had he forgotten two of the criteria he had posited and promoted for assessing a documentary's value—that there be something at stake and that the film be emotionally touching? Except to Shakespearean scholars and buffs—and perhaps to 43 percent of the respondents to the *Frontline* poll—what's at stake in *Much Ado* would seem pretty small compared to what's at stake in most of Rubbo's major documentaries—war, the environment, separatism, aging, Marxism, social responsibility, fairness, even success at one's craft of violin making. While knowing for sure that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays might enrich our interpretation of some passages, it is doubtful it would tell us much about the creative process, since we know next to nothing about how Shakespeare or any of the other alleged authors of the plays worked or felt when they wrote. And the film lacks the emotional element that even *Little Box* has.

But there's no need to flog Rubbo with his espoused criteria. In his interview with Geoff Burton, he admitted that he himself is "constantly forgetting to apply them."[5] *Much Ado* may prove nothing, and it may not make strong emotional connections, but an admirer of Shakespeare's plays would have to be in a dull mood to be bored by the film. It is a romp, and a highly entertaining, literate, and provocative one

at that. The authorship question made no difference to Stanley Kauffmann in his review in the *New Republic*, but it also made no difference to his high opinion of the film: "Rubbo's intelligent questions, his subjects' enthusiasm, and their occasional anger make for a crackling ninety-four minutes."[6] Even if there is little at stake, the issue is, as Rubbo says at one point in the film, indeed "fascinating." That's enough.

But his next digitally made documentary, *All About Olive* (2005), satisfies those two self-imposed criteria on which *Much Ado*, excellent as it is, falls a tad short. There is something at stake and the film is emotionally satisfying. It begins in Rubboesque fashion. After a few shots of an old woman saying goodbye to her fellow residents in an old-age home, we see a photo of Rubbo and the woman. Over it, as well as some images of the woman being examined by doctors, Rubbo states the film's premise: "I've been friends with Olive for two years … and now, we're doing something risky together. At a hundred and five, she's going home. We've had her in for checkups, and nobody's said, 'Don't go.'"

"Home" is Broken Hill, the famous mining town where Olive Riley (née Dangerfield) spent her childhood and early adult years. The risk of returning there is more than physical. Olive harbors regrets and resentments. She complains that she never got any affection from her mother or most of her siblings. She would like to have been a nurse. Instead, as a consequence of the breakup of a bad early marriage, she spent most of her working years as a barmaid. She regrets having had children: "They're lost to me, now. … I never see them. They're in another world." What memories will this trip stir up?

Some of the memories prove painful: a broken doll, which was never replaced by another; being teased for her last name, Dangerfield, and her red hair; her mother's strictness; after her marriage, catching her husband in the act with her best friend. Sometimes a memory makes her cry. But over the course of the film, sad memories and all, Olive becomes revitalized. She enjoys speaking to young students who attend the same school she did. She remembers sneaking off to go to the roller-skating rink and winning a contest there. She has affectionate memories of her father.

What contributes most to her emotional rehabilitation is Rubbo's decision not only to reenact some of the incidents seared in Olive's

12.5 The remembered fight. Production photo. *All About Olive* (2005). Courtesy of Michael Rubbo and Ronin Films.

memory but to involve her in staging them. Some of the reenactments are brief and essentially illustrative. For instance, a person is mentioned, and we see a brief version of that person. But several are well developed. The most moving ones are those Olive takes an active, assertive role in shaping. The experience is cathartic for her.

In a reenactment of a confrontation in which some girls teased Olive about her name and red hair, the young actress playing Olive gives her chief tormentor a hearty shove. Rubbo and the real Olive are watching; Olive is especially intent. She is pleased with the performance but not yet fully satisfied; it is not historically accurate as she remembers the incident. Referring to the actress playing her tormenter, Olive protests, “She didn’t sprawl.” Olive wants the actress to sprawl onto the ground, because she remembers pushing the girl to the ground, forcefully. Rubbo assures Olive, “We’ll do that later.” “You’ll have to have something for her to sprawl onto,” Olive says. “No,” Rubbo responds, amused. “We won’t really make her fall over.”

Later, Olive directs a reenactment of her washing her father's back. The remembered scene occurred after her father had lost the lower part of an arm in a mining accident. To play the father, Rubbo found a man who had lost part of an arm. (Was it out of Rubbo's own sense of realism, or at the insistence of Olive, who seems to place a great value on historical accuracy?) Olive keeps giving the young actress directions, coaching her through the scene as a director of a silent movie might do. Stand up on that stool, Olive says. Wash with your right hand. With your left hand, pat him on the arm. Nice and gentle. Rinse the rag. Do it again. You got to show that you love your dad. Rubbo, trying to be helpful, feeds the young actress a thought: "Oh yeah, it's so dirty, Dad." Olive snaps at Rubbo, "No, he's not [dirty], she's doing a good job. Will you stop interfering?"

"What?!"

"She's doing a good job. Stop interfering."

"Who's directing—"

"You're telling her he's dirty. He's *not*."

Having put Rubbo in his place, Olive resumes her directing. Now wrap the towel around his shoulder, she says. "That's a girl, that's right. … Thanks very much for that, Love, you did a good job."

In another reenactment, Olive dances a waltz with a young man in a tuxedo. Olive is in her wheelchair, set atop a circular wheeled platform that another man is steering around the dance floor. But soon Olive wants to try it without the wheelchair. Rubbo is hesitant. "If he holds me, I'll be all right. He's strong." They dance a short while. "It was lovely," Olive says. "I told you I could do it!"

Back from Broken Hill, Rubbo tells us, "Olive is having a birthday party. She's hoping the three kids will come." Whether they will or not is in doubt. We've learned that after the breakup of her marriage, she was not always able to take care of the children herself. Two were sent to a children's home, and the third to Olive's grandmother. Two of them arrive at the party. Olive and her guests wait three hours for the third one, "but Bonnie never came." The guests light the candles and sing Happy Birthday to Olive. Driving back from the party, Rubbo says, "Ollie [as he calls her] was very upset, so later I went to see Bonnie and her husband Bill, hoping to get them to reconsider … but to no

12.6 "Will you stop interfering?" Screen grab. *All About Olive* (2005). Courtesy of Michael Rubbo and Ronin Films.

avail." Hearing of this, Olive exclaims, "I don't want nothing more to do with them," and cries.

We are in a hospital. "Her daughter may not want to see her," Rubbo says, "but life goes on … even if you're a hundred and five. … Ollie always wanted to be a nurse. A carer is not exactly a nurse. But it feels good to be comforting sick kids." The film ends with several brief scenes of Olive interacting with young patients. Rubbo's last words to her are "See you later, Ollie."

All About Olive is a remarkable film. Rubbo had used reenactments imaginatively in *Much Ado*, but their purpose was to support an argument. Here they have emotional impact, primarily in their effect on Olive. They are cathartic and empowering. Olive winds up taking charge. She never seems more alive than when she directs those scenes.

It is hard to imagine another director pursuing this tactic or, if he were to try it, doing it so well. The scenes are both relaxed and daring. The actors are having fun. And Rubbo, as he does so often, shows others to his own disadvantage. He's happy to let Olive take over and shunt him aside. (In the film's opening credits, he attributes the film

12.7 Rubbo with Olive Riley. Photo courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

to both of them.) With *All About Olive*, Rubbo has told a great story, with interesting characters, provocative of thought, compelling (if not strangely so), emotionally satisfying, and serious.

But in the project's early stages, Rubbo once again faced opposition to his documentary style. He chose Olive from about a dozen centenarians he had screen-tested, and he secured partial funding from the ABC. Rubbo sought supplemental funding from Film Australia. But Film Australia favored an essay approach about centenarians. "In any case," Rubbo recalls being told by an ABC administrator, by the time approval for the project worked its way through the Film Australia administration, "Olive would surely be dead." But for Rubbo, "Olive was such a standout character that, as in the case with Daisy, I decided the film belonged to her. She was a delightful rough diamond. No one had ever paid any attention to her during her life, and suddenly because she was old, she was deemed interesting. But I found her interesting for her story and her roughness and her big heart." The Australian Film

Finance Corporation contributed supplemental funding, Rubbo made the film his way, and ABC broadcast the finished product to much audience acclaim.

Rubbo made good on his ending line of narration, “See you later, Ollie.” He helped her set up a blog, called “The Life of Riley.” Olive died in 2008, and the site is now defunct. In an essay entitled “Problems of expertise and scalability in self-made media,” which appears in the anthology *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories*, John Hartley describes as a typical blog entry a “story of Olive going to have her portrait painted, an adventure that includes the trip to the studio, a parking ticket and a pie, recorded in transcribed dialogue and still photos by Rubbo.”[7] Hartley reports that the site attracted worldwide attention; in the first month, it had 192,000 visits. Rubbo often contributed his own comments on the blog and would reply to almost all other comments. To one query about why more older people don’t blog, Rubbo, who was seventy years old at the time, disclosed his own fear of the new medium, recommended getting help from people who understand it, and confessed that he knows only how to post photos and written comments. When he tries to go beyond that, he admits, “I’m lost again.” He ends on an encouraging note: just keep trying and learning, and it gets easier. Rubbo tried to keep the site alive after Olive’s death, but he couldn’t afford the hosting fees and didn’t know how to move it to a more economical site.