

DEMOCRATS – THE STORY OF THE PRODUCTION

Watching a documentary film about the drafting of a new constitution in an African country sounds about as fascinating as watching your laundry dry on the clothing line. At least that was the general impression we got from commissioning editors, broadcasters and other investors when we initially pitched the idea of making DEMOCRATS. As a filmmaker, you know pretty well when you have lost the ear of a potential investor, and in the case of this film it often happened faster than we could pronounce the word ‘African constitution’.

When we did manage to secure a potential investor’s attention beyond this point, very soon another obstacle was brought onto the pitching table: Even if we really believed that documenting the constitution-making-process in Zimbabwe was a film worthy, how were we going to get access to make an independent documentary, filmed in observational style inside a closed military dictatorship like that of Robert Mugabe’s? Much like the bumblebee that according to the laws of aerodynamics shouldn’t be able to fly, but flies anyway since it doesn’t know about this law – DEMOCRATS was made against all common sense and all ‘laws’ that generally guides documentary filmmaking.

The funding process is a long story in itself, but suffice to say that in the end we managed to convince enough courageous investors from the Danish Film Institute, BBC, DR, and ITVS to green light the production. We then spent one year on the ground in Zimbabwe knocking on doors at the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs, until we finally cut through enough red tape and gained enough trust to obtain an official filming permit from the government. As the first international film crew in decades, we gained unprecedented access to film as Zimbabwe wrote it’s first democratic constitution. Five years, 12 filming trips, and only a single arrest of the filmmaker later, we were ready to premiere DEMOCRATS.

In the end it became a film about much more than constitution-making. In fact, the film turned out to be more like a classic buddy movie as described by one critic, or like ‘House of Cards in Africa’ as another critic wrote. DEMOCRATS follows two politicians - Paul Mangwana and Douglas Mwonozora - who are responsible for writing the new founding law of their land. The two men are political rivals, representing respectively the ruling and the opposition parties, but forced on a joint mission to save the country from decades of autocratic rule, by introducing democracy- all while the dictator is still in power.

At once a completely universal film about the game of politics, and at the same time a deeply personal story about two men on an impossible mission, DEMOCRATS has received worldwide critical acclaim. The film has screened at more than 80 international film festivals, and won more than 20 awards and nominations - including the Best Documentary at Tribeca Film Festival in 2015.

Unfortunately, there is still one important place in the world where DEMOCRATS has yet to be distributed, namely in the country where it was made. The film is such a thorn in side of President Robert Mugabe, that the matter of distributing the film has ended up in Zimbabwe’s High Court. The documentary, which reveals several

inconvenient truths about Mugabe and his regime, has lost two appeal cases with the Zimbabwean government's censorship board where it was banned as: "Not suitable for public viewing." The truth unveiled in DEMOCRATS is, according to the Zimbabwean lawyers representing the film, to be kept away from the public eye at all costs, and the documentary has thus been subject to the strictest form of censorship - usually reserved for pornographic films. Following the ban, the film has been blocked from the streaming service Netflix in Zimbabwe, and further are 15.000 DVD copies produced for free distribution, now stuck in Denmark, and can not be dispatched until the ban has been lifted.

However, getting the film out to the Zimbabwean people is of crucial importance, and on October 31st, 2016, I filed legal papers in Zimbabwe's High Court in an attempt to have the ban lifted. Over the summer we have worked hard to build a strong and solid case against the ban, and we are now awaiting for a court date to be set. If we loose the case in the High Court, we will appeal to the Constitutional Court. And no matter what the outcome in the Zimbabwean courts, the case will also be tried as a principled case of freedom of expression in the African Commission on Human Rights. It is my hope that we can lift the ban to have the film distributed freely in Zimbabwe, and also by this case raise awareness and create a legal precedense that can help other filmmakers and journalists against suppression of freedom of speech in the future.

- Camilla Nielsson