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# H O M E M O V I E S

WORDS LOUISE PASCALE PHOTOS CHRISTOPHER HOUGHTON



We met sharing war stories. It doesn't sound romantic, but that's the truth. I met Christopher on his last night in Canberra, after a month of recording the stories of Australian Defence Force personnel. The project was the Australians at War Film Archive, where teams of filmmakers spent a day recording the stories of war veterans and those currently serving.

We would rock up at their house or base at 8:30 in the morning, set up a green screen, a camera and a comfy chair, and document their story from birth to when they returned from service. From World War Two to the Peacekeepers of East Timor and later the Iraq War, we captured it all.

The day I met Christopher I had just interviewed a major who negotiated our peace-keeping role with the East Timorese Falantil after the bloody elections of 1999. I was in awe of what the major achieved and how he brought peace to the East Timorese. I remember that night, Christopher staring at me with a smile on his face, knowing I was just as passionate about storytelling as he was.

For six months we had a long distance romance between here and Sydney. Eventually, Christopher chose to come here to be with me and we set ourselves up in a little maisonette. Christopher began his time here writing a feature script. I had never really gone out with a writer/director before so it was strange adjusting to the long days and late nights of him tapping away in our study. It was my first experience as 'a writer's widow' and it took some getting used to. There would be social outings he'd miss to meet a deadline or days I'd not see him because he was writing. It felt like I was single again, despite him being in the next room. But once I read what he wrote, it was all worth it – that script tapped into his childhood and helped me get to know him more.

The first project we did together was a short film called *Swing*. The film was a real test for us. As producer, it was my job to keep the film on track and to budget. Christopher's job as director was to keep the vision and team together. When we premiered at the 2007 Adelaide Film Festival, we won the

Audience Award for Best Short Film, were nominated for an AFI (now called AACTA's) and went on to win Australia's prestigious St Kilda Film Festival.

Our next project was even bigger – having our son, Rain. I had decided to go back to university to do graduate studies in journalism. Studying while pregnant and on maternity leave was hard, but things were about to get harder.

Exactly one month after Rain was born, the global financial crisis hit. Christopher, who was supporting us by directing television commercials, suddenly saw all the work dry up as companies feeling the pinch cut marketing and advertising budgets. I took on jobs supervising short films to pay the bills. With my newborn attached in a hug-a-bub, I'd go on set and help emerging producers troubleshoot their first short film.

Taking Rain on set was fine for a while but as soon as he started teething and making baby talk it was no longer viable. I found this out the hard way when I was filming a climate change rally. Christopher had brought him along in the pram and, on reviewing my rushes, I kept hearing his baby sounds in the background. It was another three years before he came to work with us again.

Meanwhile, Christopher was doing some soul searching. Work was so sporadic it was either walk away from the industry or really commit to investing in his dream. Watching your love grapple with life-changing choices is hard. Like me, filmmaking is in his blood and walking away from it would have a profound impact on him – and us. We both believe in following our hearts and dreams so after decades of trying to make your

dreams come true, waking up one day and deciding to no longer do that can leave a huge hole in your life. Thankfully, he chose to follow his dream and within 18 months, two of his feature projects were green-lit. The first was the documentary *Sons & Mothers*, which I also produced. It's a film that follows the men's ensemble of No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability.

By then, Rain was three years old and I really wanted him to understand what we did for a living. Bananas in Pyjamas came to my rescue, sort of. While watching an episode where B1 and B2 decide to make a movie, I took the opportunity to say to Rain: "That's what Mummy and Daddy do." To which he responded, "No you don't, you work in an office."

Of course, his last time on set was napping in a hug-a-bub. So I decided to take Rain on set of the documentary during lunch breaks, when I was taking meals to the crew. He got to see the equipment and meet the crew, but most of all he met the actors we were filming who live with disability. I no longer cared if Rain understood what we did for a living; understanding disability and how to see past it was more important.

It was at our premiere at the 2013 Adelaide Film Festival when I realised that he got it. When he arrived, the cinema foyer was full of people and abuzz with excitement. If a four year old was capable of being proud of his parents, that was it. His face was beaming as he sat in the cinema and watched it all unfold, and every moment of guilt I had as a working mother dissolved in that one moment. I also realised he was ready to come back on set – this time for Christopher's feature film *Touch*. On Rain's fifth birthday, we

had lunch at the back of a shop where Christopher was filming, eating Chinese out of takeaway containers and playing Uno in camp chairs. We hung out for a few hours and Rain was fine with being quiet when Daddy called 'action'. However, he couldn't resist yelling out, "Daddy, what's next?" as soon as he said 'cut'.

The production of *Touch* was the first project Christopher and I did not work on together. It was also the first time I got to see how important supportive partners are to filmmakers. We're the ones who need to keep the home base running while they pull 12 to 14 hour days and have short weekends.

Because I understand what is going on for Christopher, I can juggle around it, but I do worry sometimes for Rain. He's a pretty balanced kid and he gets it when one of us misses the school concert or a learning expo. The words 'deadlines', 'call times' and 'wrap' are part of our everyday vocabulary and he knows what they mean. We often joke, "Get a trade son, don't be a filmmaker". But that

would be hard when he sees scripts lying around the house and wants to read them. We've tempered that by giving him a copy of the script for *How to Train Your Dragon*, which he is now devouring.

But honestly, we will love whatever he does. And if he ends up working in film, then we know he's in for a ride. There's no denying that when we're on set or documenting real life, it is exciting – there's adrenalin, creativity, camaraderie and a real sense of purpose. It is hard work to get there but that's what makes it worthwhile.

Just last year, *Sons & Mothers* toured around the country and won awards, and Christopher has been nominated for Best Director of a Documentary at the AACTA's. This year *Touch* will be released in the cinemas. Not only has all this proven that following your dream can pay off, it has set a great example for our son.

And Rain has managed to get a mention in the credit list of all our projects. So if he does decide to become a filmmaker, we've already given him a head start. ♦



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