

# Air India 182 and the beauty of Hot Docs

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Last night, I dragged myself to Toronto's Elgin Winter Garden theatre to watch Sturla Gunnarson's *Air India 182*, the second of two opening night films at Hot Docs. I say "dragged" only because I'd already seen the film once on a rough DVD version. I didn't *need* to see it again. But I felt compelled to. Although Gunnarson's feature documentary on the 1985 Air India terrorist bombing was made for television—the CBC will air it commercial-free on June 22, the anniversary of the flight's departure—it has a theatrical power. I wanted to see it on the screen, with an audience. And I knew this premiere would be an emotionally charged event. Gunnarson interviewed 14 close relatives of the victims, and a number of them would be at Winter Garden theatre.

The theatre was packed. And the tension in the crowd was palpable. I took a seat beside three men wearing turbans, and wondered how casual or intimate their connection might be. Many in the audience were of South Asian descent. When I talked to Gunnarson a few days earlier, he said, "I wouldn't be surprised if there are 200 or 300 people in the room that are connected to the tragedy, because the circumference of the bomb is so vast."

Speaking directly to camera, Gunnarson's interview subjects told heart-breaking stories, from memories still etched clearly in their minds 23 years later. Stories of seeing their relatives off at the airport and sensing there something wrong. Stories of identifying bodies that were pulled out of the sea off the Irish coast. "I was able to identify my sister," says one woman. "It didn't look like my sister—her face was flattened, her nose was gone—but she had a particular way of wearing her eyeliner." (Of the 329 victims, only 131 bodies were recovered, which made her one of the "lucky" ones.) Deepened with the passage of the time, relatives' testimony loses none of its immediacy but gains a profound depth of reflection. "If I lose my husband, am I still a wife? If I lose my children, am I still a mother?" asks Lata Pada, whose lost her husband and two daughters.

Equally eloquent are the memories of those less intimately involved, such as a helicopter pilot who set out on adventure to rescue survivors and realized he was on a recovery mission. Or a merchant seaman who helped recover the bodies, and recall being

shattered by the incongruous presence of a cold, lifeless but otherwise perfect infant on the deck of a ship. Or the former check-in employee with the airline unable to forget the business class passenger who convinced her to route a suitcase all the way to India, the suitcase that contained the bomb. Or the baggage handler who remembers the X-ray machine breaking down the day the bag was loaded onto the flight. And the beep of a security wand that was ignored as a bag was sent through.

With a trail of coincidence to match the trail of conspiracy, *Air India 182* becomes a story of both politics and fate.

Last night's premiere had the weight of a dignified and long-overdue memorial. Before it was over, the tense hush of the audience gradually gave way to the soft sound of choked-back tears. But despite the horrific facts of the event it explores, Gunnarson's film is never lurid or maudlin. The film's memorial tone is balanced by a fierce investigative mandate. And Gunnarson's interviews with retired CSIS and RCMP investigators, speaking out against the orders of the Justice Department, create a compelling procedural dimension.

Underlying the whole piece is a finely distilled sense of outrage. It has, after all, taken a filmmaker to honour the victims of a tragedy that he feels has never been given its proper place "in the Canadian narrative." As the director pointed out in a Q & A after the screening, the majority of the victims on that plane were Canadians, but you would never have known it by the national response. If they had been blond-haired, blue-eyed Canadians, he said, Parliament would have talked about nothing else for weeks—this coming from a blond, blue-eyed Canadian who's married to a woman from a Sikh family, the film's associate producer, Judy Koonar.

Gunnarson, who has jockeyed between drama and documentary in his career, is one of Canada's most accomplished, most consistent, and most underrated filmmakers. With *Air India 182*, he combines pure documentary with eloquent scenes of dramatic re-enactment. And this film, which took just one year from conception to premiere, may be the finest and most important of his career. It pushes the frontiers of non-fiction with a veracity and power on a par with movies like *United 93*, *A Mighty Heart*—and *Standard Operating Procedure*, the Errol Morris film about Abu Ghraib, which is also being shown in Hot Docs.

Like Morris, Gunnarson uses stark, confessional direct-to-camera interviews. And he makes creative use of re-enactments, but in a radically different style. Morris fetishises the unknowable with impressionist, slo-mo images that verge on abstraction. Gunnarson's are chaotic snatches of vérité realism. But he too finds a poetic beauty and glimmers of transcendence in imagining what might have unfolded, and portraying a life that is about to be lost.

I'm glad I saw *Air India 182* in a theatre. What's wonderful about Hot Docs is that, even if virtually all of its entires are shot on digital video and designed for TV, it is a *film* festival. And it's good to be reminded of the power a cinematic documentary can have as it plays on a large screen in front of an audience that is dying to see it.