

Tragic narrative

Sturla Gunnarsson's documentary uses both victims' family and re-enactments to tell the story of Air India bombing and investigation

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The faces on the screen, and the words they speak, are wrenching. Twenty-three years ago this June, these people said goodbye to family members boarding an Air India flight that never reached its destination in London. A bomb planted by Sikh extremists exploded while the aircraft was approaching the coast of Ireland.

"I was able to identify my sister," says a woman who went to Ireland where some of the bodies had been hauled from the sea. "It didn't look like my sister – her face was flattened and her nose was gone, but I was able to identify her because she had a particular way of wearing her eyeliner and that eyeliner was still on her."

Comments like these are the heart of Sturla Gunnarsson's *Air India 182*, premiering tomorrow night at 9:30 at the Winter Garden Theatre, as part of the launch of Hot Docs, the



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Filmmaker Sturla Gunnarsson, shown here in Toronto April 9, 2008, says he spent 22 years wanting to make a movie about the Air India bombing. "Somebody had to do it," he says.

Canadian International Documentary Festival.

"Somebody had to do it," says Gunnarsson, 56, a Toronto-based filmmaker raised in Vancouver, whose feature films include *Beowulf & Grendel* (2006) and the Newfoundland comedy *Rare Birds* (2001). "I've been thinking about this for 22 years."

For one thing, he has intimate connections with the British Columbia Sikh community through his wife, Judith Koonar, an associate producer of the film.

"We always grew up Canadian," says Koonar, a Vancouver native. "We were not hyphenated in any way. We were just Canadians."

Her family witnessed with dismay the takeover of certain temples by Sikh fundamentalists, preaching vengeance against India because of that government's oppression of Sikhs. When Gunnarsson started work on the film, Koonar helped find interview subjects, partly through contact with a private website for relatives of the 329 individuals aboard the plane.

Gunnarsson films them looking straight at the camera – and at the audience – against an unusual background of pure white, a colour usually avoided by filmmakers. "I felt the story was going to be quite kaleidoscopic in its range of faces and I didn't want the audience to try to interpret the frame around those faces," says Gunnarsson. "White is also the colour of death in the Indian culture."

It was not hard to elicit their testimony. "It was painful, but what we discovered was that most people involved needed to tell their story," Gunnarsson says.

"Judy would make a very tentative approach to somebody and then half an hour later, with very little prompting, would get the whole story."

The tragic narrative is driven by these interview subjects, telling us how they took their families to the airport that day, how they waved farewell to their sons, daughters, wives and husbands.

But much of the film is also told in a series of re-enactments, with actors portraying conspirators such as Inderjit Singh Reyat, who constructed the bomb that was carried on board the plane in a suitcase.

"I wanted to do something that unfolded as a linear narrative," Gunnarsson says. "There's no way that I could have done that without the re-enactments. The material didn't exist to support it. But I'm not a purist anyway. I've spent my whole career dancing in that zone between documentary and fiction."

"I don't believe that when (American documentary filmmaker) D.A. Pennebaker is filming somebody as if he were just a fly on the wall, that there's any greater authenticity. Filmmaking is always personal."

The police side is represented by interviews with three retired members of CSIS and the RCMP Air India Task Force.

Retired deputy director of CSIS Jack Hooper, in particular, is frequently seen. Not shown is CSIS agent Ray Kobzey, who was chiefly responsible for trying to nail the conspirators before they acted.

"The only interference we had in making this film was the justice department," Gunnarsson says. "Hooper was not supposed to talk about it."

Nonetheless the film is highly sympathetic to investigators such as Kobzey, who knew something was happening but could not come up with the evidence that would stand up in court, and who pleaded for more resources in the weeks and days leading up to the bombing.

"What do you think Ray Kobzey is thinking?" Hooper asks. "Ray, probably more than anybody, is saying that it did not have to happen, and that pushes anybody to the brink of insanity."

Air India 182 screens tomorrow at 9:30 p.m.; Friday at 1:30 p.m. For information on Hot Docs, go to hotdocs.ca