

SHOOTING ROBERT KING

A FILM BY RICHARD PARRY



15 Years
3 Wars
1 Photographer

Running Time: 78 minutes

Certificate: tbc

Year: 2008

Website and Images:

www.shootingrobertking.com

Information:

Director/Producer Richard Parry

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Producer

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SHOOTING ROBERT KING - QUOTES/ REVIEWS

‘Completely blown away by it. It's beautifully put together, and by far the best war doc I have seen ... It's beautifully constructed with the reveal of his wife and son at the end, and his development as a character works so well. I dread to think of the work and time that went into it but it is a brilliant film...’

Nick Broomfield, Filmmaker.

‘Stylishly filmed, laced through with humor, some horror, and the ever-present whiff of despair, Shooting Robert King makes for compulsive viewing. The life of Robert King is, in the end, an Everyman's life, lived out against some of the largest and most incomprehensible sadnesses of our time, and that, somehow, is also deeply entertaining.’

Jon Lee Anderson, New Yorker Magazine writer, Author.

‘Darkly comic, as if "Scoop" was reimagined for the 21st century as a gonzo acid trip through some of the most hellish wars in memory, Shooting Robert King is also a moving story of love and redemption... I've never seen a better film about journalism and war.’

Peter Bergen, Chief CNN Terrorist Analyst, Author.

‘Shooting Robert King takes us into places most people don't know exist and puts a face on those who risk it all to tell the world. The story of Robert King is the story of all journalists struggling throughout their lives to survive and make a difference.’

Ron Haviv, War Photographer.

‘Following the American photographer Robert King over a full fifteen years produces an extraordinary portrait of an appealingly flawed man, and it is this intensely personal journey which yields the film's true riches: its powerful, rolling themes of self-hate, the search for meaning, and love... Shooting Robert King is Mesmerizing in its intensity.’

Richard Watson, BBC Newsnight Correspondent.

‘Richard Parry's documentary provides an intriguing glimpse into the driving forces that have King and his ilk coming back for more despite the inherent dangers... Effectively bridging the intervening years with present-day footage of King, Parry's film exposes some of the darker impulses that keep King and company clicking.’

The Hollywood Reporter.

‘Though war photographers have often been captured onscreen, no film has followed a career trajectory as closely as Shooting Robert King. Director Richard Parry has been intermittently checking in with photographer Robert King, from his start in Bosnia to his breakthrough work in Chechnya to his struggles embedding in Iraq. His portrayal of King's personal and professional growth is reminiscent of Michael Apted's Up series – only under fire.’

Toronto International Film Festival.

‘Fifteen years in the making with eight colleagues lost in the process, Richard Parry's incredible journey with King starts with him as a twenty-four year old graduate and chronicles harrowing daily battles with the outside world and within himself... Intertwined with personal existential questions, ‘Shooting Robert King’ forms an explosive insight into war journalism and one of the most gripping narratives of the programme.’

Sheffield Doc Fest.

The innocent, the naive, the kind, the clumsy - none of these people live long in war. Which makes Robert King's survival all the more surprising, and this film all the more remarkable. Listen carefully to the story of this dirty faced angel from Tennessee. Then have him shot at dawn. The world is too ugly to allow such honesty to live.

Anthony Loyd, War Reporter and Writer

Following the progress of photographer Robert King from hapless wannabe to hardened hack, this gripping chronicle of the wars of the last two decades manages to be funny, shocking and an uncomfortable insight into the lives of war correspondents. I loved it!

Christina Lamb, War Reporter and Writer

I was blown away ... Beautiful. Important, Profound... Robert is a kind of Everyman for our tribe. The nervous, hopeful greenhorn beginnings, the heart breaking moments of set back early on, the determined optimism that makes him, in the end, a success, the price he pays, the hedonism, the addiction, the lessons en route. And the enduring optimism... Wonderful, powerful, filmmaking.

Allan Little, BBC Correspondent, writer

Richard Parry's extraordinary film about the perils, both physical and mental, of being a war photographer... King's pictures (are) brilliant, perfect encapsulations of trauma, turmoil, chaos and waste ... that's what makes the photographs, and this film, so compelling.

Tim Dowling, The Guardian

Journalists will love this striking exploration of warzones over the past 15 years, The footage in this film is expertly shot by professional cameramen in some of the most harrowing places on earth ... These kinds of subtle observations make the amazing footage and stills even more meaningful. This is a thoughtful and provocative film unlike anything we've seen. It's also vitally important.

Rich Cline, BBC Radio 5 live, UK ** (4 stars out of 4)**

Intriguing documentary about American photojournalist Robert King... Parry's footage, accumulated over a decade and a half, ends up introducing us to a wisecracking and, later, avowedly philosophical King: "I was fucked up before I even went; that's why I was so good at it."

Andrew Pulver, Guardian, UK * (3 stars out of 5)**

This fascinating account of the unheralded heroes of international conflict - the journo, photographers and cameramen - succeeds for exactly the same reasons as the best reportage: by focusing on just one story, it somehow tells many more... Parry's film surveys the wreckage and finds in King a fearless, fascinating, flawed figure, and tells his story with the sort of gallows wit that only comes through living cheek by jowl with death.

John Fortgang, Channel 4, UK ** (4 stars out of 5)**

King is a slippery subject – part self-absorbed fratboy, part tortured artist – but Parry's unerring focus and documentary discipline make him as fascinating as he is infuriating.

Tom Huddleston, Time Out London

Parry's film surveys the wreckage and finds in King a fearless, fascinating, flawed figure, and tells his story with the sort of gallows wit that only comes through living cheek by jowl with death... A fascinating, entertaining and skillfully assembled documentary about the messed up business of war reporting, and the messed up men who do it.

Film Four Film Reviews, ** (4 stars out of 5)**

This film has been a labour of love for the last fifteen years. It was filmed during our own journey through war; a journey that saw eight of our colleagues die. The film is dedicated to their memory.

Richard Parry and Vaughan Smith

Brief

At times war photographer Robert King resembles a heroic misfit straight out of the pages of *Scoop*, thrown into the heart of battle, struggling to adapt to the brutal environment he finds himself in. Occasionally comic, often touching, more often dark, *Shooting Robert King*, the tale of Robert King, is a unique and personal journey, a film which follows him over 15 years and through three wars.

His journey starts in Sarajevo in 1993, a 23-year-old fresh out of Art College and prepared to dodge bullets on the front line dreaming of a Pulitzer Prize. His dream proves elusive. Fired by his photo agency and struggling to make ends meet, any swashbuckling allusions Robert holds for the career he has chosen quickly evaporate: as he realises this is one of the toughest professions in the world.

Despite himself, Robert stays in the game, over time establishing himself as a respected professional, his work making the front covers of global media titles. Over 15 years *Shooting Robert King* records Robert's life from boy to man, to husband and father. It is a biography, which leads from reckless naivety to maturity hardened by war and softened by family. It is a story, which forces Robert to inevitably question why he chose a profession, which involves an endless trail of death and destruction.



Bosnian front line 1993

Story

Robert King, 38 years old from Memphis is stalking the Tennessee woods. As he raises his Kalashnikov he reflects on what first took him to a war “fifteen years ago I was very naive, I was going on my only option in life to stay alive...”

Sarajevo, 1993. Robert, a 24-year old art graduate is aiming to be the youngest ever Pulitzer Prize winner. He’s got 800 bucks in his pocket, has never been to a war and his ambition is proving tough. He gets shot at on the front line, fired by his agent and sets light to his apartment – all within his first month. Despite everything he is funny, charming, engaging and continues to be optimistic about his life’s possibilities.

Grozny, 1997. We find Robert in Chechnya’s bombed out streets and he’s a far cry from when we last saw him. He’s tougher, meaner, and wiser and his pictures have adorned the covers of the world’s top publications – from Time to Figaro. He’s becoming a force to be reckoned with in the industry. He is also much more savvy, “you can get into a lot of trouble here, you can just focus on booze and women and night clubs.”



Bosnian front line 1993



Chechnya 1997

Robert moves to Russia and continues to flirt with conflict. In between bouts in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Albania and Kosova he parties in the vein of what he calls ‘the Robert Capa’ approach to journalism. “I didn’t want to mourn silently in my fucking room”.

Iraq, 2007. Robert now married with a family is in many ways more settled than we’ve ever seen him. Although the Pulitzer remains elusive he is now considered a leading combat photographer and Iraq has become his main pay cheque. But journalism has become much more deadly than it was in Bosnia. It’s almost impossibly dangerous ‘outside the wire’ so Robert is forced to embed with the US military. With all the restrictions this brings, Robert is frustrated, unable to work and nostalgic for the relative freedom of the Bosnia days. And fifteen years of covering wars have had an effect, “yeah I’m cynical, how many dead bodies have I stepped over - I’m kind of damaged goods”.

Shooting Robert King explores the complex web of motivations that drive someone to extremes: the insecurities and aspirations, the striving for excellence and acknowledgement and the seemingly conflicting need to be at peace and yet near danger. Over 15 years and three wars - from naivety to cynicism and finally achieving the recognition he sought, this film addresses the two questions that are always asked of those who report wars: Why do you do it? How does it affect you? It leaves the viewer feeling strangely culpable for not having ever heard of or noticed Robert and the others like him that must be out there.

About the production

From Richard and Vaughan

When we first met Robert in 1993 we had no idea the journey the film was going to take. We were ourselves video freelancers, trying to make a buck, stay alive, and see the world – not so different from Robert actually.

Our intention was to make a documentary that authentically reflects the struggles, charisma and complexity of these freelancers – those unsung heroes at the bottom of the food chain, in this extraordinary world. Both of us had shot other documentaries for networks following war journalists and we felt aggrieved by these programs tendency to simplify and ‘paint heroes’.

Over the years we found it almost impossible to get the broadcast world to pay attention to what we thought was a great story with an engaging and honest character. We were determined to pursue it.



Tennessee 2007

It has been a journey that taken us in different directions too. ‘Frontline News’, our agency, saw 8 cameramen die covering wars. The industry has changed and it’s now much tougher to make a living as a freelancer. ‘Frontline’ is now a journalists’ club. With a restaurant, meeting place and forum dedicated to the memory of fallen colleagues. Vaughan, who still does some conflict news, runs it. Richard now works on a broader range of features and documentaries.

Against our expectations, Robert has persisted in a remarkably difficult walk of life where the likelihood of ‘burn out’, ‘drop out’ or just failure – is pretty high. And this film is a testament to his endurance.

About the filmmakers



Vaughan (left) and Richard (right) whilst filming Shooting Robert King in Chechnya, 1997. Photo by Robert King

Richard Parry

Director/Producer

Richard started making films at 13 years, shooting Super 8mm horror and sci-fi shorts and roping in his family as cast members for the various dramas. After leaving school he sidestepped college and begged, borrowed and blagged stock, cameras and people to make a 60-minute drama: A shoestring affair that made it to the ICA Good Video Guide and Edinburgh Fringe Film Festival.

In 1992 as war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, Richard borrowed money for a small, domestic video camera, packed his bags and caught a plane to the nearest working airport. He spent the next few years working as a freelancer for Frontline News, which sold his video footage from the various conflict zones of Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo to the world's global news networks. Frontline defied the major news stations and uncovered corruption in the United Nations, an unattractive story to journalists who were significant consumers of these black market goods.

It was whilst filming for Frontline News that Richard met Vaughan Smith and the two have worked closely together ever since. On one occasion they were forced to dress as Croat soldiers and were smuggled to the front-line, lead tiptoe through the minefields and into a Muslim enclave. This was just one of the many harrowing moments of working in a war zone – after the Balkans Richard went on to cover conflicts in Nagorno Karabach, Chechnya, Zaire, Albania and the former Soviet Union.

In 1997 Richard turned his attention back to the UK and directed and shot 'Generation E' for Channel 5, looking at how ecstasy has affected British culture. The program flag-shipped the launch of the new Channel 5. Following on from that he made 'Full Moon Party' for Channel 5, about backpackers in Thailand then Channel 4's 'City Stories', a 5-part series on the world of finance.

South West Nine (released in UK cinemas in 2001) was his first full-length feature film, as Director and Writer and was nominated for a BAFTA and 5 BIFA's, amongst others – the film also picked up 'best soundtrack' and 'best new director' on the festival circuit.

Since 2003 Richard has shot documentaries in Iraq and Afghanistan for CNN, Discovery and American A&E – and Directed/Produced a three-hour BBC series on Irish Gypsies in the UK and their conflict over land.

Vaughan Smith

Producer

Vaughan Smith is a news pioneer who founded the Frontline Club in London in 2003 as an institution to champion independent journalism and promote better understanding of international news and its coverage.

During the 1990s Vaughan worked as an award-winning independent cameraman and video news journalist covering wars and conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo and elsewhere.

During that time he also ran Frontline Television News, an agency that he founded set up to represent the interests of young journalists who wanted to push the envelope of their profession.

During those turbulent years, which began with the fall of Communism and lasted until 9/11, Frontline freelancers captured some of the best conflict footage around the world.

Vaughan himself filmed the only uncontrolled footage of the Gulf War in 1991, after he bluffed his way into an active-duty unit while disguised as a British Army officer.

The risks that Frontline journalists took were great and eight members or former members were killed while working in the field. The Frontline Club is dedicated to their memory. Vaughan, himself, was shot twice but escaped both times with light injuries.

The workings of Frontline Television News captured the imagination of a generation of young freelancers. Its history has recently been detailed in a book “Frontline: The True Story of the British Mavericks who Changed the Face of War Reporting,” by David Loyn of the BBC.

During Vaughan’s time as a freelance he worked for many of the world’s leading television stations and became an advocator of greater support for freelancers operating in war zones.

As a freelance cameraman Vaughan won, either individually or as part of a team, 28 news awards. Many of them for “The Valley”, a film which Vaughan produced about the Kosovo War, which remains the most acclaimed documentary ever shown on the UK’s Channel 4 Television.

Prior to setting up Frontline, Vaughan was briefly a microlight test pilot and cameraman. Before that he was an officer in the British Army’s Grenadier Guards, serving in Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Germany. He captained the British Army shooting team and won the inter-army rifle shooting championship.

Vaughan also owns and runs a farm in eastern England, which provides organic ingredients for the Frontline Restaurant. As the manager of Frontline, he is in charge of the management of a two million pound enterprise, and employs more than 40 people.

In 2007, Vaughan was the joint winner of a Guardian Media Innovation Award for his independent blog from Southern Afghanistan.