

Prof. Mark Freeman

Documentary film is too often thought of as dry and boring. History, biography and factual records and reports, which provide educational information, are familiar forms of documentary.

Yet, Mark Freeman doesn't totally subscribe to this commonly held view. For him the binary "documentary and non-documentary" does not exist. All kinds of films are documentary by nature. "When we speak of documentary, it is a continuum. There is a film which is more documentary by nature, but others are less documentary-like," Freeman said in a recent interview.

Freeman's career as a documentary filmmaker and as teacher has spanned more than 30 years. As opposed to other filmmakers who are interested in journalistic reports, Freeman creates programs that bring grassroots concerns to larger audiences, employing a bottom-up approach in documentary filmmaking.

"In teaching the art of filmmaking, I want my students to be aware that documentary filmmaking is about telling stories. The stories I choose to tell are based on the experiences of ordinary people," said Freeman, who is a professor in the school of theatre, television, and film, San Diego State University, US.

His focus on the stories of ordinary people in most of his films is not without reason. He says he deliberately picks stories in which most mainstream media are less interested. In that case, he has plenty of opportunities to uplift, explore and share the lives of ordinary people with larger audiences.

To stimulate public interest in documentary, Freeman offers the following advice to filmmakers: "Create films that are grounded in your personal experience and passion."

In making a documentary, Freeman has his own adage that he consistently applies: "Documentary is a process of discovering the world, rather than inventing the world."

With the support of a Fulbright Fellowship administered by AMINEF (American Indonesian Exchange Foundation), Freeman came to Indonesia to teach the art of documentary filmmaking at the Jakarta Art Institute (IKJ). "I'm glad to teach in Indonesia because of the country's rich cultural diversity. It's very much worth exploring," he said.

He also felt honored when Indonesians such as director Garin Nugroho (Selendang Merah) and choreographer Jefri Andi Usman (Akan Jadi Malam) shared their recent work with him.

Calling himself a generalist, Freeman humbly said he would not only teach his students at IKJ, but more importantly learn from them about Indonesian culture and the lives of the ordinary people in the country.

Freeman has spent most of his filmmaking career working as an independent filmmaker, and in most of his productions he has played many roles: producer, director, writer, videographer and editor. His work has brought him to many parts of the world including China, Ecuador, Guatemala, Argentina and Israel.

His well-known documentaries (markfreemanfilms.org) include Talking Peace (a portrait of Jews and Palestinians who are personally engaged in dialogue and peacemaking efforts in San Diego), Trolley Dances, (six original site-specific dance performances) and Edmund's Island (a portrait of a homeless newspaper vendor).

Freeman believes that focusing on the lives of ordinary people makes documentary a powerful tool, which can profoundly shape our attitudes, values and behavior.

“I belong to the community of filmmakers who have a strong conviction that the work we do can change the world and make a difference.”

His documentaries have won numerous awards including a Gold Apple at the National Educational Film and Video Festival, a Certificate of Merit at the Chicago International Film Festival and a Red Ribbon at the American Film and Video Festival.

Upon completing his teaching at IKJ, Freeman expresses his desire to have made Indonesian friends and to be better informed about Indonesia.

“After finishing my work here, I’ll return to the US and bring home new perspectives,” adding that some Americans may be familiar with Bali, but many may not even realize that Bali is part of Indonesia.

“They think Bali is somewhere in another part of the world, not part of Indonesia,” he said laughing.

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