

Getting Personal

by Anne S. Lewis

Jan Krawitz has neither the time nor patience for cinematic navel-gazing. Not for her is the "personal documentary"; there are far too many compelling real-world subjects out there competing for lens time to be off frivolously mining her own stuff. In almost 25 years of filmmaking, the 46-year-old former University of Texas doc-maker, now at Stanford, has cut a wide swath through topics as diverse as the demise of the drive-in movie (*Drive-In Blues*, 1986), women's body images (*Mirror Mirror*, 1990), and the life experience of dwarves (*Little People*, 1984). But 15 years ago, while shooting in West Texas, something really bad happened to Krawitz which would require her to take a long look inward — with the camera running.

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with me," she explains, "and I felt almost a responsibility to make a film about what happened and my reflections on it." And then it took her another five years to complete the film. She adds, "I felt a bit disadvantaged that the film came out in 1996, on the tail end of this proliferation of personal films; I was worried that people would think, 'Oh, my God, not another personal film.'" The Austin doc audience will have a chance to weigh in on that when Krawitz brings *In Harm's Way*, along with her Emmy-nominated dwarf film, *Little People*, to the Alamo Drafthouse on July 21 as part of the Texas Documentary Tour.

Krawitz narrates the 27-minute *In Harm's Way* using archival footage and old family photos to set up, in the first part, the simplistic assumptions about "personal safety" that she accepted while growing up in the Fifties. Those paint-by-numbers bromides — of the "don't talk to or accept candy from strangers" and "prevent polio with good hygiene" ilk — remained with Krawitz, intact and unchallenged, through her mid-30s, only to be obliterated in a few moments, her world view shattered — just like the building we see being blown up on the screen — when she became a crime victim. (She asked that I not reveal the nature of the crime before the screening.)

The second part of the film deals with the event that shattered her world view. In a visual essay style, Krawitz pairs her narration with suggestive and metaphorical images. When, for example, she speaks in the film of how she'll never forget the perpetrator's face, on the screen we see the unrelated image of a truck driver, reflected in a car's rear-view window, stinarily

closing in on the car. There's no actual footage from the crime scene, and the narrative is vague on many of the details. "It was never my idea that this be a *Rescue 911* kind of re-enactment," says Krawitz, "so I had to be somewhat resourceful."

But Krawitz has found that when she shows the film, audiences frequently ask for more details about the crime; they want follow-up details like what became of the perpetrator. For the filmmaker, this misses the point: "I knew what I wanted to tell about the event and what I did not want to tell about it," she explains. "I wanted it to be an after-the-fact reflection on the aftermath of this event; my interests lay with what happened to the woman to whom this happened — I was not really interested in what happened to the perpetrator." Krawitz adds that the film is intended to speak not only to women crime victims but also, more universally, to anyone who has experienced the impact of a single life-changing event.

Krawitz's interest in dwarves, on the other hand, evolved in a more volitional way, sparked by a newspaper account of an organization of dwarves, which, in turn, led her to a dwarves' symposium in Florida, where her interest was galvanized. "Here was this amazing subject that very little was known about," she recalls. "Dwarves have historically been reviled in our culture; theirs is a disability that no one has any sympathy for." As she researched the film, interviewing dwarves, Krawitz began to see them as an interesting paradigm of the "other" in our culture. "What is the norm, anyway?" she asks. "If you hang out with a bunch of dwarves for a weekend, average-size people begin looking strange to you."

Little People, which Krawitz considers to be her most important film, both in terms of its message and its effect on her as a filmmaker, comes at dwarfism from every conceivable angle, from the medical to the psychological. And it zeroes in on the universal issues that dwarves contend with: getting through life, accepting who you are, finding love, deciding whether to have children. "I don't highlight their physical differences, the film sort of homogenizes these — the interviews are shot with a tight framing so the audience is not constantly reminded that these are dwarves. The point there being that these people are like us, they just happened to have been born short," explains Krawitz.

Austin Chronicle: These two films are so completely different stylistically — *Little People* being the more traditional documentary. Tell us a little about the process, in *In Harm's Way*, of not using actual footage, but instead weaving together your narrative with reconstructed images in a visual essay style.

Jan Krawitz: This film posed a lot of aesthetic challenges for me. Beyond constructing the narrative — which took 21 drafts — this was a film with no extant reality; the images had to be created and the two had to work together. There's this really interesting dialectic that goes on between the verbiage and the images in a film; I wanted the verbiage to amplify the images; to be somewhat descriptive of them but not too



Jan Krawitz



much so, so that in collusion — neither alone would hold up — the story would be told.

For example, when I'm describing what happened at this West Texas motel, I don't use images of the actual modern-day motel but instead, postcards of Fifties motels. Growing up in the Fifties, motels represented, to me, places of safety, where families went to have a good time. I found it ironic that it was at a motel, in 1985, that an event happened that brought three decades of my life crashing down — eradicating my Fifties childhood. So it would not have worked to use an image of the actual motel.

AC: In *Harm's Way* is a true story, but the images are not true images, they're completely constructed, manipulated. Does any of this alter your definition of a documentary?

JK: (laughs) That's a trick question. I think a documentary is a film that has nonfiction elements and tells one version of a true story. *In Harm's Way* is a documentary because it's a true story; however, the images are manipulated to serve my goals for the film. On the other hand, a hundred different filmmakers could have set out to make *Little People* — starting from the same point of departure — and made a hundred different films, each with a different agenda and sensibility in terms of what's interesting about the subject. So to me, a documentary is a depiction of reality as distilled through the documentary maker's sensibilities. That skirts the issue — but not really.

AC: In *Harm's Way* was your first film with narration — yours. Your other films, including *Little People*, are more "fly on the wall," observational-style, where the subjects speak for themselves and the filmmaker's presence is not obvious. Was it difficult for you to make the transition?

JK: In the beginning, my idea was not to have myself narrate the film — sort of a questionable choice given the fact that most personal films are narrated by the filmmaker because she's the one who's telling the story. But I'm not an actress, I don't have a professional voice, and I didn't really feel confident about my ability to do the delivery. During a test screening I mentioned that I planned on replacing my voice with someone else's in the final version and the across-the-board reaction was don't even think about it. I was talked into using my own voice, and frankly

that is the one thing I would change about the film. I didn't want the reading to be too emotional because I felt the content was so emotional, and I think I erred too far in the other direction of having this very flat effect. When I get up and talk at screenings, the audience is shocked — they can't believe it's the same person who narrated the film. Even people who know me ask: Was that really you?

AC: Was it difficult to find dwarves willing to be in *Little People*?

JK: Well, access is always the big challenge in doc-making. We needed to connect to a network — couldn't just put an ad in the paper looking for dwarves. Luckily, we discovered an organization of dwarves with an annual convention and regional chapters. We had to jump through a lot of hoops to get their permission, but we couldn't have done it without them.

There was one permutation of a dwarf couple that we really wanted to include in the film and were very lucky to find — a dwarf couple with an average-sized child. We just heard about them and drove to their summer home without ever having met them. It turned out they were about to go for a boat ride — a perfect physical activity for us to film that would highlight the physical differences between the parents and their daughter.

AC: What are the typical funding sources for your films?

JK: A lot of foundations. I work as an independent; my films are not heavily funded — they usually break even. I don't build in salary or equipment costs for myself because I teach full-time and use the department's resources, so I cut corners. I know how to make films cheaply. *In Harm's Way* cost \$22,000. You always hear about films taking 10 years to make and that's because people are waiting around to get full funding. I figure, if you wait for that, you're never going to make anything.

Jan Krawitz's *In Harm's Way* and *Little People* will be presented as part of the Texas Documentary Tour on Wednesday, July 21, at the Alamo Drafthouse, at 7 & 9:30pm; tickets for both shows go on sale at 6pm. Admission is \$5 for the general public; \$3.50 for Austin Film Society and FLRU members and students. Jan Krawitz will introduce the film and conduct a Q&A session after each screening. The Texas Documentary Tour is a co-presentation of the Austin Film Society, the University of Texas RTF Dept., The Austin Chronicle, and SXSW Film.