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Matters India |Saturday, February 14, 2015



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Forgiveness is ultimate freedom: Film director

Published on: [4:19 pm, December 3, 2013](#) Story By: [mattersindia.com](#)



Catherine McGilvray

Rome: Forgiveness is the ultimate freedom of every human being, the spiritual step that can lead humanity to a new spiritual evolution, says Catherine McGilvray whose documentary film *The Heart of a Murderer* on an Indian nun's murderer.

"We are organizing a premiere of the film in Rome," McGilvray said. She also plans to invite the three protagonists in the film to be present for launch of its DVD distribution March 2014.

McGilvray was born in Rome from an Australian father and an Italian mother. She graduated at La Sapienza University of Rome (BA in Theatre and Cinema dies) and studied film direction at the CSC Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.

She has since made several short films, among which *WAITING FOR THE TRAIN* "Aspettando il Treno" (12', 16mm, B/W) which received awards at many festivals, TV broadcast on SBS and CANAL+ theater distribution by Istituto Luce, and *MIRANDA'S JOURNEY*, "Il cuore all'improvviso" (13', 35mm, B/W) also awarded at festivals and TV broadcast by CANAL+ and LA7.

Her first feature film: *L'IGUANA*, 104' 35mm, adapted from the novel by Anna Maria Ortese, prod. MediaLand, was in the official selection at the TFF 2004, Mostra del Cinema di Pesaro, LAIFA, Shanghai, Alexandria, Bellaria, Festival di Procida, Napoli Film Festival, Festival di Foggia, Festival di Salerno. Awards: Best Direction at BAFF, Best Art Direction at Ischia Film Festival.

Given below is her interview that appeared in [.heartofamurderer.com](#).

How did you get to know about this extraordinary story?

I first heard about the story from a young missionary from Kerala. I was deeply moved by the images of the mother kissing her daughter's murderer and of the assassin becoming like a real brother to the sister of his victim. I went to India in 2009 to meet the protagonists with the idea of committing myself completely to making a documentary on this story. I had a feeling that it was something urgent and necessary to do. I could say that it wasn't me that found the story, the story found me, and I did my best to fulfill what I felt was my duty.

What made you decide to take a personal risk in producing the film?

I didn't look for an external production, because there were too many uncertainties and also because I wanted to be totally free to film what I felt was the right way for this story. I wanted to respect the culture and sensibility of the people involved, the delicacy of the subject. I didn't want to compromise for commercial reasons. Renato Spaventa and Arnaldo Colasanti joined me in the project of launching the group *MysticRivers*, and we decided to produce the documentary ourselves, with the idea that it will be the first of a series. Then the Rielo Institute for Integral Development, an institution based in the U.S., founded by the *Identes* missionaries, luckily decided to distribute the film.

How long have you been working on the film?

In 2009 I went for the first time to meet the protagonists. The situation was still tense in Madhya Pradesh, and it wasn't easy to gain the trust of the FCC sisters on one side and of Samundar on the other. The Hindu nationalist party was strong in those areas at the time, and the sisters were concerned about the anti-Christian propaganda. In 2010 Renato and I went to India for a month to do the main shooting. We were in Madhya Pradesh, in the rural area, first in an ashram, where we spent two weeks with Swami Sadanand and Samundar, then in Indore, where thanks to Swami's intervention we were able to film inside the Central jail where Samundar was imprisoned for nearly 12 years, and finally we reached Udainagar village, where we filmed Rani Maria's convent, and the jungle where the crime took place. Then we went to Kerala by train, on a 44 hour journey, with Samundar and Swami. At the end of the journey Samundar met Amma, Rani Maria's mother. We had to come back a third time in 2012 to complete the shooting and to show a rough cut to the FCC sisters and the protagonists. We still did not have a signed written agreement from them, we were running a great risk! Fortunately they loved it. We have just ended the post-production, so the documentary has been 4 years in the making.

Did you meet many difficulties in the making of the film?

The main difficulty was the language. All the dialogue was in Hindi and Malayalam, and of all our characters, only Swami Sadanand could speak English. I was shooting with my Panasonic P2 camera and Renato was recording the sound, and neither of us understood a single word! We had an interpreter with us, but there was no way he could translate

while we were filming. Every day I had to wait for the evening, after the shooting had been done, to discover what had been said. Another big difficulty was the fact that with our very basic equipment and skills – I am no d.o.p and Renato is not a sound engineer – we weren't up to shooting in the very strong daylight, so we had to film early in the morning or in the late afternoon, in a very short time span. There was a real problem of lack of electricity: we were living with the locals, and in the village area the power supply was practically nonexistent; we often couldn't check the rushes or charge the batteries, so we had to make the best of it.

The structure of the documentary I had had in mind before going to India was always challenged by the circumstances, nearly everything went differently from what I expected. There was also a cultural difference to face in filming Samundar, because some of the things I asked him to do, which are normal for us – some daily gestures as for instance shaving, or going to bed – or even talking more intimately about his family – were felt by him as unchaste, while he surprised me often in going further than I expected in re-enacting his past actions in front of the camera. So I had to completely abandon my western point of view, my habit of controlling events, and follow day by day the inspiration coming from the real situation and characters we were filming. We encountered many obstacles on our way, and were left with no choice but to follow Swami's example, laugh and say "praise the Lord" every time we had to change our plans. In fact, making this film was for us like going through a mystical experience, literally. It's been an exciting challenge!

Did the making of the film have a spiritual impact on you?

Swami Sadanand imposed as a condition for the making of the film that Renato and myself had to stay a week with him in spiritual retreat at his ashram. We agreed to this willingly and it was a great adventure to be introduced to the teachings of this Christian Sannyasi, who links the deep spiritual achievements of the Indian contemplative tradition with the living Gospel. I saw in Swami the joy that comes from living a life completely dedicated to Jesus. I learned a new way of living as a Christian.

You said that in the making of the film the structure you had in mind was always challenged by circumstances...

The only thing that didn't change in the structure of the documentary, and to which I clung firmly from the beginning, is the idea of Samundar on the train, as the fil rouge of the film. Samundar, the murderer, is at the centre of the story, as a sort of 'epic narrator.' We are introduced to the events from his point of view. While he is looking out of the window, we hear his interior monologue. Only at the end of the film, when he's been pardoned and freed from jail, when he has been transformed into a new person by love, does he speak directly to the camera, with a new voice and a different look in his eyes. Before that, while he recalls the facts of his crime, the punishment and the forgiveness, he is stuck on the train, as if he was imprisoned by his previous ignorance and hate. The physical journey of Samundar, the murderer, from Central India to the South, to visit his victim's mother in Kerala, parallels his spiritual awakening from the constraints of hatred and ignorance to a condition of mental freedom. He recalls the events which led him to commit the crime – a very painful process for him – in the way his culture usually does: not only through words, but re-enacting past gestures and actions. This is the Indian way of narrating facts of the past, and I happily accepted the 'contamination' with the Indian style of storytelling, a 'contamination' that I hope may best convey the real spirit of this fascinating and incredible story.

Why did you choose to have the murderer as the main character in telling a story of forgiveness?

I chose to tell the story from the murderer's point of view because I thought that it was a great opportunity to feel authentically the transforming power of the act of forgiveness. If I had told the story from the victim's point of view only, it could have ended up as a hagiography of sister Rani Maria, the story of a saint, the astonishing mystery of God's grace, something we, as normal people, have difficulty relating to and identifying with. With Samundar as the "hero" of the story, we can identify with him, because he is a sinner, and his struggle from darkness to light is something we all experience in our daily lives, even if we are not killers. Identifying with Samundar means understanding deeply that no matter what we have done in the past, we can always be transformed by love.

What did you feel living at the same time so close to a murderer, a holy man like Swami, and such an incredible person as 'Amma', the mother of Rani Maria?

It was strange at first to be so close to Samundar, knowing what he had done. My constant thought was: "How can he be the same person who stabbed 54 times with such cruelty a poor harmless young woman?". He seemed very gentle with children and animals. He was full of respect and love towards Selmy, who he really considers his elder sister. He was obedient to Swami, who he considers his father and guru. He was under stress recalling his past, and initially diffident towards us, western people with a camera, but slowly he accepted to reveal himself, maybe as a kind of atonement. As he said: "people must know that it is wrong and nobody should do it ever again". He often said: "Selmy is Christian and I am Hindu, and we now are brother and sister". He is fully aware of the great chance he has been given. He hasn't changed his faith, but his heart has changed. Seeing him over a span of three years I observed the transformation in him. He is now willing to help others as he can, having the example of Rani Maria in mind. Meeting Amma, the mother, was incredible. We couldn't communicate because she speaks Malayalam only, but she is so full of dignity and love that her slightest gesture is more powerful than any word. Once, when I was at a loss because of technical problems during the shooting at her house, she simply came to me, wrapped me in her arms, and looked into my eyes with an extraordinary smile. She was thanking me for my struggle. I felt rewarded at once, and I got back to work with renewed energy.

What are your expectations of the film?

For this film, my only wish – and my commitment together with my collaborators and co-producers – is that it can reach the largest possible audience in the world. I chose to make it in a very raw and simple style, trying to talk directly to the heart of people of different education, culture and beliefs. I hope that its "scandalous" mystical content will make as many people as possible be aware that it is humanly possible to change our way of thinking and reacting to life's challenges.

If Samundar has changed in his heart, as we witness in the film, anyone can change. If the mother and the sister of his victim were able to forgive him and love him as a son and a brother, it means that we too can forgive everything: forgiveness is the ultimate freedom of every human being, the spiritual step that can lead humanity to a new spiritual evolution.

(This interview appeared in heartofamurderer.com)

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