



The AFI DOCS Interview: SHIVANI Director Jamie Dobie

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Jamie Dobie's SHIVANI follows the titular toddler, who is also a reigning archery champ in her native India. The film plays as part of the Youth Culture shorts program at AFI DOCS [on Thursday, June 15](#). AFI spoke with Dobie about the film.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

JD: Documentaries can lead people toward empathy for others in a way that almost no other art form can — they've certainly done that for me — and I've always been drawn to their power to change the way we see one another and ourselves.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this story?

JD: For a lot of filmmakers, the subjects almost choose you; there's a moment of crystallization where you see an image that suddenly makes you think it would be worth the effort to actually try to make a film. And in the inevitable moments during a project when you lose faith in it, it's important to remember how that first image compelled you, and to trust in that.

AFI: How did you find the subjects in your film?

For me, it was an image of Dolly setting an archery record in India when she was two years old. Her story went viral for about a day, and it was around the same time that the HUNGER GAMES films were coming out, so I think the idea of a real-life Katniss Everdeen was appealing to people. But when I saw the image of this little girl with this intense look of concentration on her face surrounded by all of these adults, I thought, "What's happening here?" It was so arresting; it rang me like a bell.

AFI: What obstacles did you face while making the film?

JD: I was very aware that my main character was a three-year-old who had no agency — and that we were making a film that might eventually have an effect on her own memories of her childhood. For her, this film will be a document of this period of her life, which she might not remember for herself — and so, without overstating it, I felt a responsibility to her. That was very weighty for me. It partly informed the style of the film, which is meant to show and not tell, and to simply let life play out in the frame. Dolly did a lot of watching and absorbing of all that was going on around her, and I wanted to create that feeling with the film. We made sure the camera was placed at her eye level, most of the time.

AFI: What do you want audiences to walk away with?

JD: Well, I hope you wonder who Dolly and her parents will become as she grows up, now that you have a better sense of the people and pressures in their lives. During Dolly's online viral moment, I was struck by how eager people in the United States, and groups like Lean In, were to use her as symbol of girls' empowerment. But I couldn't help wondering if that narrative had much bearing on her actual life; if her family, her community or even she saw her story in this way. What I found when I visited Dolly and her family wasn't so much a political story as a personal one — a story of loss, grief and identity. And Dolly's symbolic value is very different for her parents than it is to followers of Lean In.

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We all grow up with some idea of who we *want* to be; but there are also people in our lives — parents, friends, teachers — who have their own ideas about who we *should* be, and the inevitable friction between the two produces the people we actually are. In Dolly's case, this friction, or at least some ingredients of it, are beautifully externalized through the many rituals of her life. But it's not a question that's unique to her. I really want to continue to follow her story in another film or two, and I hope the audience will leave with the same curiosity I feel about her life.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC, a valuable location for screening your film?

JD: A large part of my career has been developing and implementing impact campaigns for issue-based documentaries, so in that respect I can say that DC can be a valuable place to screen, if you're aiming to influence policy with your film, since it's the seat of so much political power.

That said, I wanted to make SHIVANI an almost purely observational film, without a policy-related goal of any kind. I don't think every documentary film should have a political purpose, or a measurable outcome, and I also think, frankly, that funders are too focused on this aspect of documentary; the idea that they can know what they're getting, in terms of social effects, when they fund a film. I think it's important to remember that the act of letting an audience into the fine-scale world of another person's life can have a profound effect on its own; it gives you the chance to grow in empathy and understanding, even though those can be hard to describe in particular terms.

In a time when we're so often encouraged to see people in other countries as alien and "other," I think that close observation of other people's lives, especially those that seem superficially different from our own, tends to reveal the profound and subtle aspects of life that everyone shares. And that, with luck, makes the world feel less frightening, and more intelligible.

AFI: Why are documentary films important today?

JD: In the era of "alternative facts" and information wars, personal stories have a unique power to cut through the noise and meet people where they are. We all base our decisions around our worldview; and documentary films have the unique power to broaden that worldview.

Do you remember those "Foundation for a Better Life" ads, which paired stock photos, puppets and cartoons with vague, "inspirational" messages? Those always seemed especially tone-deaf to me, because while you might be moved or entertained by fictional characters, it's really not possible to be inspired by them. I love Kermit the Frog, but he'll never inspire me to do anything; he's not real! A good documentary film tells you where you really are — so it always follows you home.



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