â??Unlike anything Iâ??ve ever seenâ??: Filmmakers create documentary of a documentary

Description

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By Jon Hernandez, CBB News

A new film explores the trials, hardships and endless problem solving required in documentary filmmaking â?? by putting the entire process itself under the lens.

Academy Award-winning Vancouver-based documentary filmmaker John Zaritsky is in front of the camera for the first time in *John Zaritsky on TV*, a film that follows him as he takes on his latest project, chronicling survivors of the controversial pharmaceutical thalidomide.

The film, co-directed and co-produced by Michael Savoie and Jennifer diCresce, candidly follows Vancouverâ??s Zaritsky as he embarks on what he believes is his tour de force. It is an official selection for the 2016 Whistler Film Festival.

â??I was uncertain about it,â?• Savoie told host Sheryl MacKay on CBCâ??s *North by Northwest*. â??But the film is unlike anything Iâ??ve ever seen about the filmmaking process. Itâ??s not the kind of film that gets tacked onto the end of a DVD â?¦ this is really getting into the head of a fellow on the top of his game.â?•

The Thalidomide Saga

The film follows Zaritsky as he shoots *No Limits: The Thalidomide Saga* â?? a documentary that explores the after-effects of the controversial drug.

Thalidomide was first synthesized in the former West Germany and marketed worldwide as a â??wonder drugâ?• that provided â??safe and sound sleep,â?• according to the Association of Canadian Victims of Thalidomide.

However, when the drug was taken during pregnancy, it led to serious birth defects and many infant deaths. The drug was available in Canada for three years before being pulled off the shelves in 1962.



John Zaritsky talks to a subject and thalidomide survivor, explaining that he is also the subject of a documentary. (Michael Savoie and Jennifer diCresce/John Zaritsky on TV)

Zaritsky decided to catch up with some of the survivors to showcase how the after-effects of the drug linger, and that it is allegedly being re-branded in Germany. The timing of the project aligned with Savoieâ??s desire to create a documentary that turned the genre on its head by shining a light on the filmmaking process.

â??It seemed to me to be the perfect time to do this,â?• he said. â??But what we didnâ??t expect was that eight weeks before [production], John wanted me to shoot his film.â?•

A character in his own film

Savoie, who had worked with Zaritsky in the past as well, accepted the role of cameraman, and in so doing, ended up becoming the subject of his own film. He says at first, being one of the characters was strange â?? until the harsh reality of documentary filmmaking set it in.

â??We just got so tired. Over the course of 25 days we traveled 25,000 kilometers. And eventually, youâ??re just surviving out there. Youâ??re eating when you can, sleeping when you can, so the crew that was [filming us] really disappeared.â?•



Michael Savoie is both filmmaker and subject as he tiredly looks at his watch after little sleep and many days of shooting for John Zaritskyâ??s No Limits: The Thalidomide Saga. (Michael Savoie and Jennifer diCresce/John Zaritsky on TV)

â??Itâ??s such a difficult way to live your life. Making a documentary is hard. And the whole process of raising funds and bank accounts and tax credits is a really hard thing to do with your life. And when you finally do get to do the fun part and start filming it, you donâ??t want to make any mistakes.â?•

And he says once a filmmaker is out on the field, things always fall apart.

For example, at one point, one of Zaritskyâ??s essential characters drops out of the film. The camera catches the moment as it happens, lingering on the filmmaker as he takes it in and begins to work around it.



Savoie (left) tells Zaritsky (right) a key character has dropped out of the film while theyâ??re in the middle of a shoot.

â??A major building block of his film just disappeared, and he had to think fast and get back on his feet â?¦ thatâ??s one of my favorite sequences of the film. Thatâ??s real cinÃ©ma vÃ©ritÃ©.â?•

The film premiers at the Whistler Film Festival on Dec. 1.

(Source: http://www.cbc.ca)

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