

Documentary 'Air India 182' Delves into 1985 Bombing that Killed 329 People

TORONTO — "Air India 182" is one of the marquee entries at the Hot Docs film festival, yet it's a movie so gripping and suspenseful in its retelling of a large-scale tragedy that it frequently seems like a tautly written drama instead of grim reality.

The film, from Toronto-based Sturla Gunnarsson, delves into the events leading up to the deadliest airborne terrorist attack until 9-11, and the biggest mass murder in Canadian history - the bombing of Air India Flight 182 off the coast of Ireland that left 329 people dead, many of them children.

The film - which premieres Thursday at the festival - intersperses newsreel footage and inconspicuous re-enactments of the men who plotted the bombing with searing segments involving the victims' relatives, sitting against a snow-white backdrop as they recount the last time they saw their family members alive.

A tearful daughter recalls how she decided against travelling as a teenager with her mother to spend the summer in India that day in June 1985.

A grief-stricken father remembers how he reluctantly let his children travel overseas by themselves for the first time.

A weeping mother tells how she was only able to find the remains of one of her young sons in Ireland, causing her to hope against hope that somehow her other boy had managed to survive the bombing and would eventually show up back in Canada.

"If I lose my husband, am I still a wife? If I lose my children, am I still a mother?" asks Lata Pada, whose husband and two daughters perished on Flight 182.

These were stories the Icelandic-born Gunnarsson, raised in B.C., had wanted to tell for more than two decades after witnessing Sikh fundamentalists in Vancouver urging vengeance against India because of the government's oppression of Sikhs. Gunnarsson's wife, Judy Koonar - an associate producer of "Air India 182" - is a Sikh.

"On a personal level, this is something I've been around for 22 years," he said Wednesday.

"I had seen the struggle for control of the temples and the rising climate of terror and intimidation going on, and this entire importation of a distant foreign cause onto Vancouver soil. So when the plane went down I was horrified, but I wasn't that surprised ... Vancouver had become part of the battleground."

Gunnarsson had to wait patiently to make the film, however, since so much was unknown and unreported as the case against the bombers slowly worked its way through the court system over 20 years. Just one man of several charged was convicted - Interjit Singh Reyat, who has spent almost 20 years in prison on manslaughter charges.

"The moment it all really gelled for me was when the trial ended because all that information was finally available, it was in the public domain, so that was when I realized we could actually get to the bottom of this," he said.

"I could carve out a clear narrative and at the same time restore to the victims some sense of identity, because over the years they became kind of dehumanized, they were just this mass of faceless victims."

Gunnarsson says he was approached at least twice in the past 20 years to make a dramatic film about the Air India bombing, but felt he couldn't do it.

"I didn't feel comfortable with the dramatic approach because nobody knew what the real story was, and the fiction paled in comparison to my sense of what the reality was," he said.

"I wanted to find a way into the story that was truthful and that I could live with. There are certain things I think you can fictionalize and it's OK because it's entertainment, but when you have a tragedy of this dimension, you carry a huge responsibility when you deal with it."

Gunnarsson says the Air India bombing, in fact, has forever affected almost everyone associated with it - from the RMCP and CSIS officials who were maligned for their failure to stop the bombers to search-and-recovery workers in Ireland.

"There was an inadequate response to the threat, there's no question," he says.

"On the higher levels, it took a long time for the lights to go on. But the guys on the ground, everyone I spoke to, this was a defining moment in their lives and it's a burden and a grief that they carry to this day. And not just the investigators - it's the woman who checked the bags, it's the guy who took the unaccompanied minors onto the airplane - everybody who has been in any way involved in this is carrying a great sorrow."

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