

IDA MEET THE FILMMAKERS

Over the next few weeks, we at IDA will be introducing our community to the filmmakers whose work will be represented in the DocuWeek™ Theatrical Documentary Showcase, August 8-14 in New York City and August 22-28 in Los Angeles. We asked the filmmakers to share the stories behind their films-the inspirations, the challenges and obstacles, the goals and objectives, the reactions to their films so far.

So, to continue this series of conversations, here is Makoto Sasa, director/producer of *Fire Under the Snow*

Synopsis: The Venerable Palden Gyatso, a Buddhist monk since childhood, was arrested by the Chinese Communist Army in 1959. He spent 33 years in prison for the "crime" of demonstrating peacefully. He was starved and tortured. His nation and culture were destroyed, his teachers, friends and family displaced, jailed or killed under Chinese occupation. Despite this, he remained unbroken, and kept the flame of his spirit ablaze.

IDA: *How did you get started in documentary filmmaking?*

Makoto Sasa: I always wanted to make my first film before I became 30. Turned out, that was not possible. I started helping on my friend's documentary film during graduate school, and I thought that documentary filmmaking would be cheaper and more realistic to make than a narrative film. So, I picked up a camera and made a short "documentary" for my Avid class assignment. It was an extremely personal documentary, and I really don't want to show it to anyone now. But, I found that I really liked being behind the camera and shooting whatever is happening in front of my eyes. Through the lens, the world looks so different and that fact gave me hope for life. So, I stuck to it.

IDA: *What inspired you to make Fire Under the Snow ?*

MS: My subject, the imprisoned Tibetan monk. Palden Gyatso's story helped me to survive a

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dark time in my life when I started living in New York City 11 years ago. And I wanted to tell his story for more people.

IDA: *What were some of the challenges and obstacles in making this film, and how did you overcome them?*

MS: Wow. As you can imagine, there were several. Here's somewhat of a breakdown:

A. Working on a foreign subject in a foreign language. There's no magic! We just had to be patient about it. And we had great translators.

B. Finance-a continuous obstacle for filmmakers. I just kept trying and trying again and again...until I was able to get the funding I needed. Perseverance and determination helped.

C. Developing story structure; trying not to make another Tibet story, but creating a Tibet story through life of Palden Gyatso... Listening and not listening to feedback; being discretionary...Millions of discussions with my editor (with occasional "healthy" fights)...Trying, failing and trying again...Writing...Sleepless nights...

And how did I overcome those challenges and obstacles? Yoga...Reflecting on Palden's amazing life: 33 years in prison.

IDA: *How did your vision for the film change over the course of the pre-production, production and post-production processes?*

MS: The method and approach kept changing, but the overall vision was unchanged. But I can only say that after having completed the film.

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IDA: As you've screened *Fire Under the Snow*-whether on the festival circuit, or in screening rooms, or in living rooms-how have audiences reacted to the film? What has been most surprising or unexpected about their reactions?

MS: It has been an overwhelming experience. I feel that most audiences got the same inspiration that I had when I discovered Palden's story. At one of the screenings at the Tribeca Film Festival, at the end of the Q&A, a young Tibetan girl ran up to Palden Gyatso, crying, and hugged him. She couldn't speak and just kept crying on Palden's shoulder. He patted her shoulder gently. It turned out that she had a brother who was imprisoned right after the recent uprising in Tibet. It continues to be an amazing experience seeing the film with an audience.

IDA: What docs or docmakers have served as inspirations for you?

MS: Doc film: *I Am Cuba*

Doc filmmaker: Aleksandr Sokurov

I love Krzysztof Kieslowski films, even though he is not a doc filmmaker. He has inspired me to make a film.

Fire Under the Snow will be screening at the Village East Cinema in New York and the Arclight Theater in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

To view the DocuWeek schedule in New York City, visit

<http://www.documentary.org/content/docuweek-new-york> .

To purchase tickets to DocuWeek NY, visit www.villageeastcinema.com and www.ifccenter.com

To view the DocuWeek schedule in Los Angeles, visit

<http://www.documentary.org/content/docuweek-los-angeles> .

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To purchase tickets to DocuWeek at the ArcLight in Sherman Oaks, visit www.arclightcinemas.com