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LET THE TRUTH BE TOLD

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Once consigned to oblivion, documentaries are making ripples in the local film industry thanks to a wealth of young talent taking up film-making as an outlet for their artistic energy and a vehicle for their gritty depictions of real events.

Due to the technically demanding nature of documentary film-making, the field tends to attract the best and brightest, and Hnin Ei Hlaing is one of them. Her first documentary titled "Burmese Butterfly" won her international acclaim for its realistic take on the touchy subject of transsexuality in Myanmar and was shown in several international film festivals.

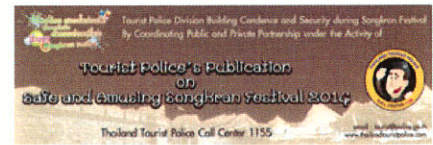
Now two of her documentaries – "Potter's Song" and "Puppet Beyond Border" – are among the highlights at the upcoming Myanmar Film Festival in Los Angeles. In this exclusive interview with the *Myanmar Eleven*, Hnin Ei Hlaing tells us why Myanmar simply needs more documentaries.

When did you first become interested in documentary film-making?

I have always been interested in fine arts since I was young. After passing my matriculation exam, I attended a diploma programme in Computer Arts. Then, I worked as a video editor for the MM Box programme at MRTV-4 TV channel for two years. When I was 21, I applied for Yangon Film School. That's how I entered this industry.

Tell us about your first film project at Yangon Film School.

At Yangon Film School, there were many older students with more experience. I had a lot to learn and



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ended up working as a sound recordist. Then I could do the editing. I learned film-making from my work. My first film was a documentary called "Burmese Butterfly". I was editor and sound recordist for this film too.

"Burmese Butterfly" is a difficult subject to approach. Did you experience any difficulties while making this film?

I became interested in transsexuals after reading Nu Nu Yin (Innwa)'s "Smile As They Bow". The novel sheds new light on the world of Myanmar transsexuals. As I wasn't familiar with the subject, I had to befriend a gay hairdresser. It took time to gain her trust because trust is important in making documentaries. It took six months before we became friends. They like hanging out at a teashop near the Theingyi Bazaar flyover around 10 pm. I sat at the teashop and talked to them. Some of the topics during the conversation were of remote interest to me. I tried hard to understand these topics.

What was the main difficulty?

It was difficult to film with a video camera in 2009, especially in downtown. I was worried that someone might come up to me and ask what I was doing and how I would go about doing it. I got asked ranging questions.

How about the feedback on your first film?

The film has been screened in over 30 international film festivals with more festivals showing interest to screen my film. Such a huge interest in my work has something to do with the plot. I never expected any admiration all that much. I still believe that the film is weak in some areas. I guess the target audience enjoyed watching the film.

How crucial is casting to the making of this documentary?

I always need three or four months for the preparation stage after selecting a story and the main character who will be my storyteller. I often meet with the person to observe and study his way of living. I need to decide whether I'm satisfied with them [the rest of characters] after some time. Sometimes I approach them, but it turns out they don't make any impact on my mind. Sometimes the story may be powerful, but I have to see if it's suitable for a character to tell his story on camera.

What's the role of a documentary film-maker?

In the past, documentaries didn't play a role all that much. In recent years they have played a more important role thanks in part to film festivals. A documentary is the art of conveying actual events. We need to keep a record of the country as well as show the values of our country to the world.

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