

Hope for the best but prepare for the worst

by Jerzy Sladkowski



When making a documentary, you have to be prepared for all kinds of problems. I have found myself in deep shit before, but seldom as deep as I was with VODKA FACTORY. This is a story of a failure that – thanks to the experience, luck, and talent of my crew – became something good.

For several years, I had been planning a film about a women's collective in Russia. Working for years in Siberia, I have produced several films portraying male and female characters, and I realized that Russia is full of nameless heroes – all females – bearing full responsibility for the daily lives of their families. While men, especially in the provinces of this huge country, tended to spend their time drinking rather than making an effort to provide a better life for their families, women had no choice than to secure at least a minimum standard of living. What distinguished Russian women from men, apart from their consumption of vodka, was their ability to form a collective to support one another. Women seemed to enjoy being and working in groups, and even under inhuman conditions they still had energy left for humor and practical jokes. I started researching this subject and was advised by a friend of mine, the Polish filmmaker Andrei Fidyk, to concentrate my efforts on a provincial vodka factory.

In the following months, I visited a number of provincial vodka factories and made my choice after meeting Tatiana and Andrei, two young directors of a small vodka factory in Zhigulyovsk, 1,000 km south-east of Moscow. The two were so exotic and so entertaining that I felt I had found a place where Chekhov, Gogol, and Mayakovsky were still alive. A dynamic feminist and an unsuccessful poet and hard-line Stalinist sitting face to face in the same room, constantly arguing about politics, moral issues, social matters, love, death, loneliness, health, gossip, and so on, while all the time fearing an unexpected visit by state controllers and generally feeling sorry for themselves. The disputes were frequently interrupted by people from the laboratory coming in with samples of vodka for them to try. Little wonder that by the end of the day both were drunk and unable to communicate clearly. I filmed these events, made a nice trailer, and went back home happy and brimming with plans. As the Russians say – one should hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

Six months later, after completing the financing of the film, I arrived in Zhigulyovsk to find that the vodka factory was still there, but there wasn't a trace of the two charismatic directors, and at least half of the workers were gone too. I had two options – to give up or to stay and come up with a new project in the same location.

I had a week left before the arrival of the crew. I arranged a party for all the female workers in the factory (about 30 women) and, after a few drinks, started to collect their stories. But there was nothing I could sink my teeth into – just a number of sad family histories linked to alcoholism and poverty. Still, we became



friends and some of them seemed to be potential background characters for my film. We continued our discussion the following day. Someone mentioned that new workers were expected to join the collective soon. New hiring at the factory had been announced in the local press. This was a chance I couldn't afford to miss. I met the new workers and sat in on the job interviews. That is how I found Valentina and heard about her future plans.



A few days later, I met her mother Tatiana, and she was the one whom I really fell for. In combination with Valentina and the women's collective around her, Tatiana's seemed to be a promising little world to portray. The day before my crew arrived, I made my decision. I would portray two women – a mother and daughter – in the hopeless environment of a provincial vodka factory. The documentary comedy

in Chekhov's style would have to wait. My financial backers and my producer didn't object. They considered the new turn to be promising. I got a green light.

My advice is: never work with narrow-minded producers. Documentary film-making is a profession for open-minded people who accept the natural development of a project in relation to the flow of time, changes in circumstances, and research. Nothing is a catastrophe during the process of making a film – the catastrophe takes place when our film doesn't work, when it's not good enough. All measures taken to push the film in the right direction are right.

Despite all the meetings before we began shooting, a funny thing happened at the start. I usually take it easy at the beginning of a shoot. After introducing the crew, I go around and talk to people while the photographer and the sound technician catch the atmosphere of the location, looking for well-playing faces, testing the lighting, observing body language, and learning the lay of the land. Unexpectedly, the photographer approached me, complaining that the women, who seemed so positive and sympathetic, became sad and overly serious in the takes. I asked the crew to take a break and observed the collective from a hiding place. As soon as the crew had left, all those sad, depressed women started joking, telling stories, mimicking and mocking us, but when the crew came back

all that disappeared and we saw sad and melancholic faces again. They didn't talk at all anymore; we only heard the sound of the machinery in the room. I approached them and asked what they were doing and why.

You know what their answer was? "We thought you wanted it that way – we thought you expected us to be sad and look unhappy. TV people and journalists usually ask for that." I was speechless. I hugged them. Then I told them, "Listen, once and for all, forget what you think I expect you to do! Just be yourselves!" And that was the real beginning of our cooperation. The truth was that this shabby factory was the only place in their world where they could relax, feel safe, and have some fun! I was immediately tempted to go for this humor and still try to make a documentary comedy, but it was a special kind of humor, very alcohol-oriented, rude, and painting a very unfair picture of the collective. I stuck with my previous decision and went for the mother-daughter story, which in my opinion was the most relevant under the circumstances. I do not feel I could give my film, my story, that universal dimension if I went for this local humor, even if it was a very tempting idea.

A new problem cropped up. While the workers in the factory supported us and agreed to cooperate, the management woke up and started hassling us, questioning our project, even accusing me of making some kind of porno. I was taken to the hotel in a secret police car and advised not to leave it before our fate was decided. Thanks to the professional skills of my Russian production manager, we ended up in an exclusive restaurant surrounded by our antagonists. A few hours later, we left the place semi-conscious, but according to eyewitnesses in better shape than our new friends. After that, the rest was just filmmaking.



Let me say a few words about Valentina, my protagonist. For me, Valya is not a main character but instead half of one. She wouldn't bear the story without her mother Tatiana, who to me is a stronger and more compelling hero than Valya. For sure, Valya had a traumatic childhood, a very poor education, a poor upbringing, very bad company, and plenty of bad luck too. She was considered a local beauty, with all the usual consequences: boys fought over her, girls hated her, she had to prove herself, and very soon her only dream was to marry the toughest guy in the village. She got him, and that was the beginning of a nightmare. He didn't want her to study and didn't allow her to keep the few friends she had. She was expected to stay home, satisfy her heavy-drinking husband sexually and give birth to his children.

Her story was sad and yet powerful. Besides, she was practically illiterate. I chose her instinctively. There was something special about her vulnerable eyes and face, whose emotions were so easy to read despite the thickest makeup in the south of Russia, and which harboured her desperation to rise above the misery and to try her luck as an actress in Moscow. There was something irrational in her desire and some deep, hidden potential that shone through at

rare and unexpected moments. But when it did, it was strong and convincing. At the beginning of the shoot, I was the only one who believed in Valya. Over time, the photographer and the rest of the crew came to agree with me, although our relationship was tenuous and we really loved to hate Valya more than we actually liked her. But the camera liked her. Valya grew in front of the camera and delivered real emotions one by one.



Tatiana, her mother, was a much easier choice. First of all, she was a contrast to her daughter, and at the same time she complemented her perfectly. Tatiana grew up in the same village, wandered down the same long road through the misery of a tough childhood and violent adolescence, married an abusive drunkard and loser, divorced him, and at the age of 50 became a disillusioned, hard-working bus conductor drowning in debts and local conflicts. She didn't care about the presence of the camera at all and had a rare ability to be natural and credible in front of it. Her behavior was easier than Valya's; she used to read books and watch theater on television. Despite her past, she was still romantic and positive.

A few words about the supporting characters. Choosing them is one of the crucial parts of my work, and in my opinion it is a highly underestimated element in documentary filmmaking. In a good film, every frame should be a new emotional experience. The human face is the strongest conveyor of emotions, so deciding who to include in the shoot may be decisive for the power of a take or a sequence. I think twice before I choose a face before a take. My crew and I observe the location carefully before shooting and collecting faces, body languages, behaviors, and gestures. In *VODKA FACTORY*, we had about 40-45 women working in a shift. In wide shots, we included all of them, but in closer shots we always had the characters who featured in other sequences, who had some dialogues and who could also be recognized. We tried to create a kind of family – these are people you already know – so viewers could feel comfortable with them. I usually introduce a new character in several takes before we meet him in a dialogue sequence or more advanced action. In some cases, I try to create a need to get to know a new character better. We see somebody and feel, "Oh, it would be nice to spend more time with him," or, "No, I wouldn't like to see him across the dinner table, but he is fascinating and I am curious about him." These are small details, but they add tension to our takes and make visual perception stronger.

When I had learned as much as I could about Valentina's and Tatiana's story, I made a list of potential sequences for our film. The ideas came from Valya, Tatiana, and their friends, but it was my job to develop, select, and adapt them to my filmmaking. I never ask a character, "Go for a walk with your husband and quarrel about your marriage" (even if that sometimes works). Instead, I prefer to ask them first, "Where do you usually discuss your marriage problems, how does the subject come up, what are your positions in this conflict?" I do not push them in the first place but filming a walk for a natural purpose, for example, I

provoke one of the characters to take up the subject of the crisis in their relationship. By this time, we know each other well; we all know what we are doing and we already agreed earlier to deal with difficult subjects in the film. They can always say, "No, we don't want to talk about it right now." I never push. Either we take it on another occasion or we skip it. We choose another way to get this motif into the film if necessary.

There is some confusion about the difference between staging and provocation. Staging is when we plan the sequence from beginning to end. When we provoke, we start the process and let it take its own course. I very rarely use staging while I very often use provocation in my films.

I actually prefer to have fewer people informed of what we do on location than too many. Trying to get natural reactions in a provoked scene is a fragile situation. In my experience, fair play is not always the best choice. Provocation is by definition not fair play, so we have to be consistent if we choose to use it. Sometimes I even avoid explaining to the photographer what I'm after. I tell him, "Be observant, I don't know how this will develop and I don't want you to have any expectations. We're fishing in deep waters."

I never discuss the content of a dialogue sequence with everyone involved. I chose one character and make him an instigator, a provocateur; sometimes I choose another person to confront the actual provocateur without his knowledge. All of this takes place under the condition that we have agreed to cooperate and that those involved trust me. I do not trick anyone; I am just doing my job, that is, getting the best out of my characters for the purpose of the film, for the sake of credibility.

The crucial element is not to push the characters to start playing somebody other than who they are. Not to leave their story and start telling yours. Their story is my story, not the other way round, even if they sometimes do not see their life as a story. In my experience, the very first moment we push our hero to leave his or her story and to start playing somebody else, his or her credibility is gone. A natural character can be great, even greater than a professional's, as long as we do not ask him or her to play-act.

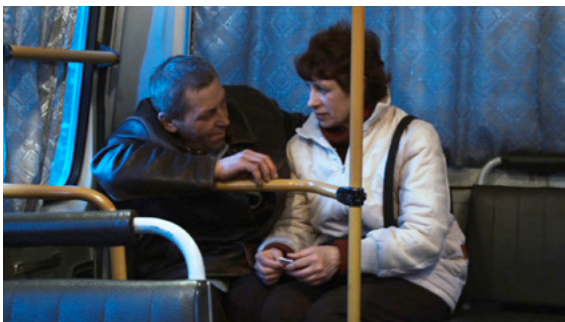
Despite the fact that Valentina, her mother, her little son, and the workers in the factory were ready to cooperate with us, the story didn't seem strong enough for a feature-length format. We started shooting, not fully happy with the circumstances, and – as so often happens in documentary filmmaking – an unexpected turn of events shifted the odds in our favor. During a take, Tatiana mentioned something about a letter she'd gotten the day before. It didn't seem to be a big deal; she looked more embarrassed than happy about it, but I asked her what it was about and a few minutes later we had the missing element in our film. The letter came from Tatiana's childhood sweetheart. They hadn't seen each other for 30 years and now Oleg hoped to meet Tatiana again and basically turn back the clock. Having such a motif in our film, we made good use of some bottles of vodka we got from the factory that evening and the next day we started

planning the complicated arrangements to get Oleg to Zhigulyovsk during our shoot, not a month later.

She worked two shifts a day. He worked day in day out on a farm 200 km south of Zhigulyovsk. After some hard negotiations, however, we managed to convince his boss to let him go, promising to send him back the same afternoon. I didn't want Tatiana to know about it. The funny thing was that they could only meet on a bus during Tatiana's shift. All this matchmaking ended up in a kind of disaster. First, we couldn't find Oleg, then Tatiana got a shift on a different bus than ex-



pected, then we lost him again, and finally, when all the pieces seemed to be in place, we practically missed him boarding the bus. The sequence is strong because it's based on real emotions but... Thank God our sound man was sober during the take and rushed to get the mikes as close to the two as possible and Thank God our photographer stayed cool and tried to do his best under the circumstances.



I still go back to the Oleg-Tatiana bus sequence when I memorize VODKA FACTORY and I still think my spontaneous decision was right. I didn't warn Tatiana that Oleg would appear and we chose to use telephoto lens and tripod instead of coming close to the characters in the bus. I use to say, "Do not throw the stone, just push it a little bit to the edge and let it fall down by itself." This is my general strategy, that is, doing as little as possible and letting things happen.

Sometimes I kind of play an idiot not knowing what to do. This puts pressure on the characters and they start to act by themselves. I learned this when shooting SWEDISH TANGO. The main hero, Hans, was a strong character with a gigantic ego. Confronting him would be devastating for the film. I loved provoking him a little bit by playing lost and he delivered takes one by one. Again, we had become friends by this stage of making the film and he knew what this was all about. It was my film but it was HIS story, and his intuition was my best guide. His wife, Kerstin, followed him as she usually did during their 60 years together.

All this is possible if you succeed in choosing ideal characters during your research (which I always fight for), but we do not always have this comfort. If not, different measures have to be taken. We have to think about choosing another approach or a new angle for the story because nothing is as dangerous for our film as a hero who is not compelling or not tempting to the audience.

I always look for strong characters in the surroundings of my story's natural hero. The father may not be a very exciting fellow compared to his son, wife, or mother. There is always somebody who attracts attention and who has this undefined medieval power that makes him or her appealing to the audience. We need this power in our films because our main characters convey our messages through their stories and deliver those messages to the audience.

As I mentioned, I use provocation as a method for setting my heroes “in motion.” But there is not just one definition for what I mean by provocation. “Pushing stones towards the edge” is one thing but “kicking heroes’ asses” (not literally!) works better sometimes. Pretending to be pissed off works better than playing lost. One of my fellow filmmakers says, “I squeeze them like lemons until I get what I want.” This is an exaggeration as far as I am concerned, but the fact is you either get it on tape or you don’t. Every filmmaker has to deal with this challenge in terms of his manners, Ten Commandments, and the elementary rules of common decency. I often ask my heroes not to judge me after the takes but after the presentation of the final outcome. Directing films is not really a profession for nice girls and boys. You need guts to handle things. I choose friendship and prefer to have a good time when I work with my crew and my heroes, but I stay in control and they all feel it.

To actually provoke is one thing; to get it right on tape is another. Waving around a hand-held camera is probably the most stupid thing done by some filmmakers in their desire to reflect reality – whereas in truth all it suggests is a lack of talent or skills or both. The essence of documentary filmmaking is the comfortable observation (from the viewer’s perspective) of people involved in dramas taking place in front of our camera. TV reporters are entitled to use every measure to come close to the events. As filmmakers, however, the aesthetic dimension of visual expression is crucial for a successful final outcome. This is my opinion.

Documentary film and TV are not always the best friends. While the leading European public service TV stations see documentary art as a valuable input for their programs, the majority of commercial channels choose tasteless docu-soaps and adding reality shows. I look forward to seeing more and more feature-length documentaries screened in movie theaters and created by talented film artists representing the unlimited variety of visual expressions, styles, and approaches instead of talking heads and cheap narration.



For me, choosing a photographer is like choosing a wife. It’s not just a love affair. It’s not enough to have fun. Essentially, you also have to trust each other. For several years, I have worked with Wojciech Staron, a Polish cameraman and a film director in his own right. We both dislike digital images, but we are realistic and in some cases this is the best choice even for us. This is all about money. Provoking the characters and events, we often wait a long time with the camera running until something interesting happens. We don’t use digital video because of the number of takes, but because it’s cheaper when you spend all that time waiting with the camera on! You cannot afford film in documentary filmmaking. Filmmakers working with features say that the film stock is the cheapest part of production. In documentaries, nothing is cheap. We decided to shoot VODKA FACTORY with a digital video camera, knowing we were abandoning quality for the purpose of unlimited access to the characters. We talked a lot about the backgrounds which, if chosen carelessly, are real killers

for the emotional photography in people watching. We decided to go for close-ups, natural lighting, and poor backgrounds. We didn't succeed in all cases, but generally our choices were right.

The choices we made in VODKA FACTORY will not necessarily be useful in my next project. Finding the right form and the right shape for the next story is one of the most difficult but most fascinating parts of our job as I see it. In my film-making, there is no single style or no single concept I believe in. The longer I work with the film, the more I believe that launching a new film is starting a new adventure from scratch. Experience makes you stronger, but it doesn't solve the problems you will have to deal with.

I am often asked about the amount of staged sequences in VODKA FACTORY. There are maybe two or three. The majority of the sequences, however, are the result of provocation and observation. I provoked my protagonists, but they also provoked each other. Indeed, some of that was my doing and I enjoyed observing all this happening and filming it. I am a filmmaker not a reporter, a storyteller not a social worker. I deal with emotions, feelings, and atmospheres, with creative and subjective observation not with information. I am not portraying

reality as it is, but using real stories and real characters I find out in the world. I interpret reality visually, in a personal and subjective way, in my search for messages that help us to better understand the world around us – and ourselves.

