

The Canberra Times

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Panorama



Dark arts

The other side of Donald Friend

ROCKING WITH JIMMY BARNES | HARRY M. MILLER DISHES THE DIRT | TALKING WITH ELAINE PAIGE

Tarnished Images

Kerry Negara's documentary on artist Donald Friend, showing at the Canberra International Film Festival next weekend, has stirred up a fiery debate about Friend's art and sexual behaviour, Sally Pryor writes

Donald Friend has long been revered as one of Australia's most important 20th century artists. Born in 1915, he travelled to exotic places, painted and drew pictures of extraordinary beauty, and kept meticulous diaries of his travels.

He was also a self-described pedophile who kept a hoose full of boys, many of whom he had sex with, during his time in Bali in the 1960s and '70s. This part of his life did not come up for scrutiny until last year, almost 20 years since his death in 1989, when Melbourne film-maker Kerry Negara made a documentary drawing attention to the evidence, in Friend's own diaries, that he had sex with his

boys, which ran to millions of words, have been published by the National Library of Australia, and although his paedophile acts are detailed in the fourth and final volume, this part of his life has been either ignored or rationalised by many in the arts community.

It's this failure to confront the artist's darker side that is the subject of the documentary, *A Loving Friend*, which is showing at the Canberra International Film Festival next weekend.

"If Friend were alive today, one can only imagine the furor that would erupt if his crimes were uncovered. One only has to look at accused child rapist (and headed-on-for-director) Roman Polanski's current travails to get a sense of how polarising the debate is surrounding art and sex."

But Friend is long dead, and his transgressions against illiterate boys and adolescents seem by many to have been firmly relegated to the period in which they occurred—the '60s and '70s.

The documentary has already caused a stir: it was the subject of *Radio National's Law Report* in November last year, when it emerged that the library had published many of the boys' names, without asking them first. Host Damien Carrick played snippets of the film, interviewed Kerry Negara, and asked the library's director of publications and editor of the diaries, Paul Hetherington, why the library named some of the boys (most now middle-aged men) and what processes were in place for contacting people who were identified in the diaries.

Hetherington said the library had "established a process right at the beginning of the project to essentially try to make sure that we contacted everybody that we could. That was a difficult task."

"The diaries had been so large, so vast, and there were so many people mentioned in them, that it had not been possible to track down every one."

He also pointed out that the library was concerned to treat material of an intimate nature as sensitively as possible while preserving the integrity of the diaries, and to leave it for the reader to "make their own mind up about them".

While on air, Hetherington said he did not want to comment on the documentary.

The National Library has since slammed up on any talk of the documentary. Hetherington, too, refused to comment to *The Canberra Times* and a spokeswoman last week said the library had "made its comments on *Radio National's Law Report* and has no further comment to make".

Two people who appeared in the documentary, and discussed Friend's library, also refused to comment. It is the attitude, rather than the fact

of Friend's exploitation of minors, that brought Negara to where she is now, defending a documentary that ultimately asks a fundamental question: Is Donald Friend excused for his acts because he was a great artist?

Speaking to *The Canberra Times* ahead of the film's screening at the festival, she admitted that she had offended several people in making the film. But she was baffled and disappointed at the attitudes she had encountered during and after the process.

She was especially disappointed at the National Library's refusal to be part of the debate. She said the library, while admitting it may have erred in publishing some of the boys' names, had made no attempt to apologise or make amends to the victims.

Since that edition of the *Law Report* aired, Roman Polanski, who admitted to drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl in the United States more than 30 years ago but fled the US before he was sentenced, has finally been forced to face his crime. After years of exile in Europe, his arrest on route to an awards ceremony in Switzerland last month polarised opinion, with many suggesting he should not have to face justice for a crime committed so long ago.

For Negara, the Polanski saga had only served to illustrate her point. "If he was a non-famous Joe Blow sort of bloke, everybody would be crying out for his arrest and imprisonment," Negara said. "But because he's a great artist, the attitude is completely different."

Instead of being labelled a paedophile, Friend is repeatedly recalled in the documentary as something of a lovable rogue, a generous soul who had the best interests of the boys in mind, and who,



Donald Friend, far right, in Bali in the 1970s. Made Derelict, top left, looks at drawing of himself in a scene from the documentary *A Loving Friend*, the Friend drawing of Derelict as a child in the diary; and Kerry Negara, above, on the set of the documentary.

at worst, was in fact seduced by them. He did not live by "Jahow-Christus values", and thus should not be judged by them today. In this way, Negara said, Friend was depicted as a "culturally accepted" paedophile, "on the white side of paedophilia, that grey area around the moon, whereas these other paedophiles in Bali, who were more your old agency, diplomat types, are on the dark, black side of paedophilia, and who are hated and despised".

Negara was appalled enough by this attitude she encountered to dig deeper; she said that when she began making

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the film, she had yet to realize the extent of the paedophilia problem in Bali.

"I knew that there was a covert paedophilia among people who lived in different areas, but I didn't know that Indonesia had now become the third largest destination in the world for paedophiles, and that Bali was one of those connected."

She said she came across an ingrained opinion, particularly among people in the art world, that Friend had done no real harm to his victims.

"I really took offence to the hypocrisy, that if people just thought for a moment if it was their child that Donald Friend wanted to have sex with, would that be all right? Now I

would say that no, it would not be all right."

She made the effort, partly because the boys' names had been published in the diaries and partly to satisfy herself that Friend had not merely been a fantasist, to track down some of the boys described in the diaries, and says they were relatively easy to find.

"I interviewed these very people in Bali, when he talked about having sex with, and, yes, they do exist and, yes, they are real people, and, yes, it happened."

She suggested it could have been the way in which Friend evoked his victims in his diaries - romantically and erotically - that led some to describe his actions as the "lighter side of the penmanship".

"For some reason, because they're island children, people seem to think that somehow that's actually OK," Negara said. "That's why I interviewed a cultural lawyer in Bali, just to say, well, is it OK? And of course it's not OK, because we're all the same - we all love our children. And none of us wants 10- or 12-, 14-year-old boys, or girls."

She said that one of the men she interviewed, who had been a 16-year-old in Donald Friend's house, talked about how uncomfortable he had been at being got upon sexually. But many of the boys at the time were in positions of having to weigh up the benefits of living in Friend's house and thus enjoying financial security.

Negara, who is married to a Balinese man and has significant links to the community, said she had the total support of her family on the island, especially amidst the growing awareness in the region of paedophilia.

"I had a lot of support in making the film in Bali. I couldn't have made it if I didn't have the support of the local Balinese. And they were people who were very influential in Bali, as well as just people in villages, because they were surprised that people would say that paedophiles caused no harm."

Over the four years she spent making the film, Negara heard stories of Friend living his last years in Bali in fear of his life, because people, parents especially, had begun to understand what he was doing. Broadcaster Phillip Adams, who invited Negara on to his Radio National show last year, recalled meeting Friend in Bali in the 1970s.

"He told me he was living in fear of his life, he thought that any day now he was going to be killed by angry neighbours, so he was aware of the dangers in local attitudes then."

Adams also agreed with the documentary's message that artists were frequently excused for their crimes.

"Having said that, of course, one acknowledges his genius and the fact that everything he drew was critically charged, particularly his drawings of young men were intensely romanticised, but that doesn't make what he did any less objectionable to me," he said.

"I'm not surprised because I think

these double standards are always applied. I think there's more than a hint of it in the anti-berry on both sides about [Bali] Horror's photographs, because while I think that he was a genius, I always found his work disturbing and can well understand why a lot of people find it so repulsive, for all its beauty."

Negara is clear that her film does not set out to expose Friend as a paedophile, by documenting his own exploits in such detail. Friend noted himself in his diaries quite explicitly.

But she said the fact that he was and is a celebrated artist should not preclude an acknowledgement of what he did.

"In my mind, the diaries could easily have been celebrated while acknowledging his creative, positive side, but also acknowledging his dark side," she said. "Some people say that you can't appreciate the art of a paedophile. I actually don't agree. It's a very personal thing, I actually still really like Donald Friend's work."

Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the ANU, agreed.

"If we judge someone's artistic output through their political opinions or personal behaviours, we would be writing off a large part of the Western canon, both artistic, philosophical and musical," he said. "Wagner, for example - you'd never listen to his music because of his anti-Semitic views, you perhaps would not read the works of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer because he was a notorious misogynist."

But Hamilton pointed to a culture within the artistic community, a reluctance to take moral positions.

"I think the artistic community is less influenced by, particularly, the social trends of the '60s and '70s, in which transgression came to be valued above all else, even if the transgression had no real political or social purpose and was in fact damaging or degrading."

He said that the Tate Modern in London, "the epitome of postmodern artistic expression", decided a few weeks ago to remove a photograph of a naked, 10-year-old Brooke Shields.

Negara, meanwhile, has been accused of tarnishing Friend's reputation, and even of homophobia.

"It's extraordinary," she said. "He broke the law in Bali, and he broke the law in Australia. The whole idea of making the film was to say this is all about Donald Friend. It's about the attitudes that allow all the Donald Friends of the world to do what they do."

■ A Loving Friend is screening at Arc Cinema on November 2.

National Library of Australia

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