

LIVING ON

DIALOGUE LIST



A documentary exploring the ways in which four survivors have had to reinvent themselves after a brush with death.

Writer/Diretor
SUSAN CORNISH

Producer
PAULO ALBERTON

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Australian Film Television and Radio School
PO Box 126
North Ryde NSW 1670
Tel: +61 2 9805-6611
Fax: +61 2 9887-1030

DIALOGUE LIST

RAMONDA

It was just a slow process of me regaining confidence. The fact that perhaps I could live and I might live a little longer, and I didn't even notice it happening.

VAL

Well this is one of the things about surviving, that it can reveal some of the illusions that we have about life and death, um and it can give you a different standpoint on things that you can't see in normal life.

ALAN B

It's a bit of a weird space. You know that you've been bought this close and been saved but you can't walk away and say "Well its completely over".

ALAN L

Every film that's ever written is about some hero's journey overcoming something but then they always get to the point where you overcome it, and then they don't go on past that – and really the journey starts after that for a lot of people.

TITLE: LIVING ON

VAL

Well I looked up across the river and I saw this balanced rock, you know it was this rock balanced on another rock. There's a few of those around in the Arnhem land escarpment, um and I had this feeling of fear when I saw it. You know, it was like the rock was a warning.

I saw what appeared to be a stick in the water ahead of me. And I said to myself, "I don't remember seeing that stick on the way up".

A little bit closer I saw eyes in the stick and I knew it was a crocodile.

I thought it was going to be fairly close but I didn't think I would collide with it, and then as I swept past it I felt this great bash on the back of the canoe, and then I realised it was attacking the canoe.

And then I tried to jump into the tree. And um, and I was in mid jump. You know it was just... Like it all just happened so fast I just saw this flash of teeth and water and it grabbed me between the legs in mid jump and pulled me down into the water.

They swirl, they whirl you round and it pushes water in - it's called the death roll - it pushes water into your lungs and knocks the stuffing out of you basically and then they just hold you under.

I entertained the usual doubts. That this was a dream, that it wasn't really happening. It's very hard to hang onto this uh, this sense that you're dying I think. It comes as a very profound shock.

And I would have died I think if the water hadn't been just a little bit too shallow for the crocodile. I tried to climb the tree again and again the crocodile came back and grabbed me.

I thought "I'm not food. You know, I'm a human being". You know, I had to think about that a lot later. I thought a lot about those thoughts that went through my mind at the end there, or what seemed like the end.

But not long after that it let me go again. I tried to throw myself up the mudbank. I was getting pretty weak by this time, because I must have lost a lot of blood from the left leg. I was so focussed on the crocodile I didn't.. I wasn't sort of paying attention to what was happening to my body.

And then I found I could climb the bank by jamming my fingers into the mud and scrabbling with my feet so I actually managed to do that, climbed the bank and got to the top and stood up, and that was the most incredible moment when I stood up.

RAMONDA

I was like diagnosed one day um, and perhaps a couple of days later I was in the hospital um having my breast removed.

What I remember before I went into hospital was standing in the shower, washing myself and weeping – one does a lot of weeping.

Anything I'd ever heard about breast cancer sounded like a death sentence.

First one breast came off, then the other breast came off and it was totally devastating.

I'd go to work every day and walk around like a, like a hollow person. And I couldn't think and I couldn't... There was no future. It was sort of... It was a strange situation to be in. But I was in this situation for uh almost a year.

Sitting in my back yard were two 36-foot hulls of a catamaran. I used to look at those two hulls and think...Well I didn't. I'd look at them and then look past them. It was just too, too difficult, too painful and anyhow I was going to die.

And then one day I thought, "This can't go on". I put on my RM Williams riding boots. Took the saw and the hammer and I went out to this backyard, you know it was a huge backyard, like a ten-acre backyard, and I kicked the hull of the boat. I kicked it with the boots. Then I got the hammer and I belted it with the hammer. And then I got my saw and I sawed a huge hole in it. Which I afterwards had to fix. But that seemed to do it. I was right, and I started building a 36-foot ocean going catamaran which, you know, I thought well I can do this.

I'd never sailed out of sight of land. So I did coastal navigation and celestial navigation. And I was a real hot gun on navigation. That's what I thought, until I actually got on the deck of my boat. And it was a totally different kettle of fish.

ALAN L

They cut all my stomach muscles, pulled out my bowel, chopped a foot of it off, joined the two ends back together, sewed me back up and staples 36 staples into my skin. I used to have a colon and now I have semi-colon. And I have the scar to prove it. Thank you very much. I'm Alan Lovell.

I was doing comedy... making people laugh about cancer and inside I was feeling like this big, you know, just fraud because I wasn't feeling like that. I wasn't laughing, I wasn't a hero I was really, you know, really fragile inside.

You know ,I had just had this 3 month old baby. I had another child who was just nearly three and I had a pretty, you know, perfect sort of, you know, situation; great relationship, you know things

were going pretty well and then all of a sudden “you might have this... you might have cancer”.

Sue and I were in the doctor’s rooms and I said “What’s going to happen? Am I going to die?” and he said “Well we’re all going to die”, which was very sort of comforting, and I said “Yeah but what’s going to happen?” and he said “Well if it’s in your lymph glands you’ve probably got four years to live. If it’s in your liver you might have as little as 6 months to live.”

I just remember, it felt like my heart just hit the floor. And I felt like “This can’t be happening. This couldn’t be me. This is not my life.”

Luckily it came out that it was, you know, that it hadn’t travelled through to my lymph glands.

When you get the uh, this brush with death, this, you know, this short use-by-date you um, you just have all these regrets that you haven’t lived your life you know haven’t been...that there’s so much more to do.

So I went um, yeah, I went about doing things. I wrote and directed three short films, I put on a one man show, I was in two feature films. About two years after that the wheels sort of fell off.

And when I started to feel these feelings of, of depression and not feeling good about myself, I felt really guilty that I should have these... you know, “Why aren’t I just, you know, so glad to be alive? Why aren’t I just happy to be here?”

ALAN B

People faced death really well and did all sorts of flamboyant, um theatrical things in their last years of life and certainly in the gay community people completely reshaped what was acceptable at a funeral and how a funeral service can look like and take place.

You know, this was a group of relatively young people where there was a death going on. You know like I’ve seen people who were maybe a older, or a bit more immersed in that scene, who literally lost their entire social world over the next few years.

Because I was going to travel in Latin America it just seemed sensible to have the test. I don’t think I had any reason to believe I was particularly likely to be positive or anything, it just was the sensible thing to do.

I guess getting a diagnosis like that when you're 22,.. must have brought a sense or mortality into focus.

And certainly the stories of what could happen to you were pretty frightening and it was a pretty horrible thing to contemplate. You know, you might either become demented and become unknown to yourself and your friends, I mean to me that was more horrific than becoming physically ill, um , but I was also aware it was new and relatively unknown.

You know I didn't make a decision that this was it – that this was the end. And in fact what I chose to do was go ahead with the round the world trip. You know, like this was a real dream to go and travel in South America.

I had friends I'd talked about it with and I guess I thought well, "OK, well my choices are not to go, to stay at home and be really careful and hope that someone develops a treatment or just go and do what's important."

So that's what I did.

I'd rather speed things along by having a lot of fun rather than staying at home and wrapping myself in a sterile bubble.

I suppose I wasn't really seriously ill for a very long time and you often don't realise how ill you've been until after the event. So what happened was I just started getting sicker and sicker and then I woke up one morning and couldn't stand up and half my face was paralysed. So that was, that was pretty bad but then, then you, you know, you just focus all your energy on getting better. So I was in hospital attached to a drip. And it was only afterwards that I thought, oh you know, I've been left in a pretty bad way. And I had to learn how to ride a bicycle again. Like I literally lost my sense of balance. I'd be riding along and I'd look over my shoulder and it wasn't even like you'd wobble – I'd just fall straight over. I mean who knows what the neighbours thought. I was riding back and forth up and down the street falling over.

The things that mattered to me were, were travel, learning, friends. The idea of saving up for a mortgage to purchase a house that would take twenty years to pay off just didn't seem very rational.

RAMONDA

I wrote up this wish list of things I would do before I died.

The first thing on the list was to build this boat and sail into the Pacific. To play a musical instrument. To become a sculptor. And then I thought I'd like to do something for breast cancer. And the fifth was to write a novel.

It was a wonderful list and I've done every bloody thing on it. It's taken twenty years but I've done every bloody thing on it.

We wanted to talk to women all around Australia. So we set up this big adventure to go around Australia on motorbikes. We wanted it to be eye catching. We wanted all the attention we could get.

“Cause we were going to tell women that they were not to be fearful about this. They could know that breast cancer wasn't a death sentence and they could have a fulfilling life afterwards.

When I was really young I used to sculpt little heads and things in clay, or plasticine actually, but there was really there was no time for that. I had to finish my education, and then train as a dental therapist. And art was sort of forgotten.

You know the most extraordinary things happen when you sculpt, things that you...you don't actually know what you're doing... because I did these women, these large women, and they all had huge breasts. I have none. Both mine were removed.

I did love doing them and there's a part of me in them. And uh, I acknowledge that. And I love it.

VAL

As I struggled away down the river thinking to myself “Well I'll have an interesting story to tell a few friends”, I had absolutely no idea that it would be of interest to anybody.

And I mean actually, not doing any interviews didn't stop the press. They just ran stories anyway.

So I felt to some extent my story was stolen from me, you know, by these attempts to impose another narrative on it.

Well there were several kinds of stories they were looking for. One of them was a rape story I think. Because I was scantily clad, one of those sorts of stories.

It was heavily construed in sexual terms. In fact there was a porno, the most successful porno film of 1988 was called Crocodile Blondee.

So yes the crocodile was the monster, I was the survivor and the hero, or the heroine. That was another one. Yeah I can't get into that one either. I don't like the master/monster narrative as they call it. It wasn't St George and the dragon, you know.

ALAN L

It's a pretty stock standard sort of expectation that people have, that you're this hero survivor that's overcome this demon cancer.

And the story sort of ends, that's the climax, that's the hero's journey. And then, you know, your life will be changed forever.

But you're in this sort of void struggling to try and grapple or grab onto some sort of story, some sort of, uh, structure - that's what you're looking for - that you can pin your hopes to.

That's how I felt when the wheels fell off, that there was no narrative.

ALAN B

What you have to accept is that there could be changes, to your b... Like if you go back to early representations of people with AIDS, you know there was the wasting, the lesions and the really, the really visible signs of illness.

And it's always I the back of your head that that could be you and I suppose I've been relatively lucky, that by and large people aren't going to pick it, and that, that would be enormously stigmatising. So, so there is a bit of a sense of mistrust, you know that you might wake up tomorrow and suddenly find that your body has decided to telegraph this thing to the world in a way you didn't really want it to.

But, but I think I've been fairly accepting about, you know, a lot more accepting about aging than other people might have been, because I've always been prepared to accept a certain amount of loss of function or disability.

RAMONDA

When I went to hug people I still stayed – I was a 36 B – and I still stayed a 36B distance away from the people I hugged, and that was really strange. You know, I automatically stopped that distance. I did get used to sort of bringing them in closer and that felt really weird because they were hard up against my rib cage. And my bones. Um, and that took a wee while to get over.

ALAN L

I started to mistrust my, my body, and my... what it could do and what it's supposed to do. And I gain a lot of confidence through my physical body, and if it's not performing the way I think it should well then I'll lose confidence in other areas, the way I present myself, the way I speak, the way I talk, the way I hold myself. All those things have a flow on affect from, you know, my physical body breaking down.

VAL

My work really changed course afterwards. I didn't see it for quite some time. But it really started to emphasise the power of nature and why we weren't aware of the power of nature and being deluded about that power.

So I write a lot about that now.

Um, and I think this has got a lot to do with why we haven't, why we don't take account of the environmental crisis. We have this illusory sense of invulnerability. Um, we don't understand ourselves as ecological beings. We don't understand ourselves as embedded in an ecosystem.

'Cause we think we're so totally special and apart. Everything else is food for us but we're not food for anything else. And I think the message was that this is a delusion. We are food like everything else.

ALAN B

What happens is I go on these breaks from the treatment. Things start... after about six months I have to go back on them again. So I know I need to keep taking them. Like I'm not going to live for very long without them.

We didn't get a cure, but we got a set of treatments that improve things for many people but not for all and have a whole set of, as

we now know, long term side effects that mean for some people they can't keep taking them.

For a lot of people with HIV they've gone from being young heroes facing death to sort of middle aged people with chronic illness and chronic poverty. And that adjustment has...I mean it's very difficult for some people.

VAL

You do tend to divide your life into before and after to some extent. Hmm. I don't want my life to be reduced to that event but it was certainly an important event in terms of shaping the way I think about the world and the way I ...what I do in the world.

Yes some people call me the crocodile woman as if this is the defining event in my life, and I don't see it that way of course. You know, I've written some quite important books so I get quite annoyed by people who refer to me as "The Crocodile Woman" as if this is the most important event that I've ever ever done.

ALAN B

The thing about saying you know, "I'm a survivor." It places HIV in my life in a much too significant way. Like in a way it's just something I have lived with, and lived around and dealt with.

As an adult I don't have the experience of not living with it to compare it with. I don't really have a before and after.

RAMONDA

It gave me so much strength that I didn't know was there and I wouldn't lose it for quids and I certainly wouldn't go back to being the person I was before, although I...there wasn't anything bad about the person I was before. The person I am now is far more confident.

ALAN L

Something to do with my very core of who I am, that was eating away at me with the cancer, and I couldn't, I couldn't let it go. I couldn't really go back to who I was before, that was a different person, and that's what you want to do, you sort of want to go back to what you were before. Or a brand new improved version of you.

RAMONDA

It's a wonderful way of cutting through the bullshit. We realise with a vengeance that there's another side to life that we hadn't even explored and it's a quick way in to the other side of yourself. It's violent, this way in, it's vicious and deadly, but by God, you get there.

CREDITS