

## Projections: Fidel Castro then and now

JASON ANDERSON

January 05, 2012

**FINDING FIDEL:** In early 1958, a young cameraman named Erik Durschmied was intrigued by stories about the little-known (and little-seen) leader of a popular uprising in Cuba. An Austrian-born war correspondent who'd spend the next several decades reporting for the BBC, CBS and CBC — he shot some of the most iconic documentaries to be featured on Patrick Watson's pioneering '60s series *This Hour Has Seven Days* —

Durschmied travelled on a whim to Havana, made his way into the Sierra Maestra mountains and spent several weeks in Fidel Castro's camp.

Durschmied's interview with the revolutionary is thought to be the only one he did in English before his fighters arrived in Havana a month later. Seeming amiable and confident as he answers questions about his influences, experiences and ambitions, Castro already displays the media savvy that would help make him a key player on the world stage.

Fifty years later, the Toronto filmmaking team of Bay and James Weyman accompanied Durschmied on a return visit to Castro's Cuba. The result is *Finding Fidel*, an illuminating study of the nation he forged and the promises he did and didn't keep to his countrymen. It's also an opportunity for Durschmied to reflect on the encounter that launched his career and fostered his eagerness to head into some of the globe's most dangerous places.

An engaging history lesson that makes its Toronto premiere after appearances at festivals in Amsterdam, Montreal and Miami, *Finding Fidel* plays Saturday at 7 p.m. at the [Royal](#) (608 College St.). *Finding Fidel* has its world broadcast premiere Monday at 10 p.m. on TVO.



Close Up Films

Erik Durschmied, left, is thought to have conducted the first English interview with budding revolutionary Fidel Castro, right, in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba in 1958.

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## Stewart Nusbaumer

Blogging from Film Festivals

Posted: November 27, 2010 10:03 AM

## Film Reviews: After the Wars

It's been a zany and frenzied year. Ripping out of the starting gate in snowy January for lofty Sundance, then roaring across and around America for months to attend 30-plus film festivals -- big and small, stellar and stinker, weird and restrained -- then jumping across the autumn ocean to old Europe for more festivals, and now camped in a cavernous Amsterdam coffee shop listening to a heavy buzz in my pleasantly oscillating head. Free of my battered, vibrating road-body, with mind again grinning wide, the nearly one year of grueling road-ripping has become a florescent sparkle in my glowing memory. Yes, it has been a humdinger of a bizarre year.

It just occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, a year on this wacky film festival circuit has stomped my four decades long addiction to war journalism. Wait! I just jumped the track. It's necessary to stay focused.

In the States, film festival audiences are heavily gray haired while the filmmakers are much younger, which creates a festival gap. This can result in too many films being an utter bore to the vast majority of the viewers. In Europe the festivals tend to attract a more mixed audience with a significant number of older filmmakers, resulting in less of a gap. In Amsterdam I'm ducking films that beam youthful enthusiasm and those about youth in crises because of horniness. I'm ripe for cinema that looks back in time to something different than naivete and boners.

Screening nearly 300 non-fiction films, the [Independent Documentary Festival Amsterdam](#) is the largest and the most prestigious documentary-only film festival in the world. There are lots of films that look back, and from the program I select two that look back to -- well, let's just say old addictions are very hard to break.



*Finding Fidel: The Journey of Erik Durschmied* is an intriguing documentary that looks back a half century to when a young and unknown journalist named Erik Durschmied arrived in Cuba and after an arduous trek in the Sierra Maestra Mountains located the rebel's camp and interviewed Fidel Castro.

One of the first journalists to tape interview the charismatic Castro, who at that time was still uneasy in front of the camera, Durschmied's footage was soon seen around the world. This jump started his career as a war journalist that would last for more than 30 years, from the Cuban Revolution to the Gulf War.

With director Bay Weyman and brother James, Erik Durschmied, an Austrian who became a Canadian citizen, returned to Cuba in 2008 for the 50th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Together they retrace the journalist's historical journey as Durschmied interjects personal memories that are intercut with his half century ago interview of Castro. *Finding Fidel: The Journey of Erik Durschmied* is a travelogue with suspense -- the group was denied visas to shoot in Cuba -- although mostly a reflective memoir that examines a former war journalist's nostalgic return 50 years later to where it all began.



*Last Chapter* journeys back a quarter of a century, when Swedish journalist Pieter Torbiörnsson was covering the war in Nicaragua and a planted bomb exploded during a press conference killing four and wounding several dozen. Directed by Sista Kapitlet and Torbiörnsson, the documentary records the journalist's return to Nicaragua to investigate exactly who was responsible for the catastrophic bombing.

A detective story with pondering narration, Torbiörnsson feels partially responsible for the bombing since he facilitated the bomber's access to the press conference. Yet, others are guiltier -- those who convinced the unknowing journalist to vouch for the clandestine bomber: Sandinista officials! Ironically, like nearly all the international journalists in Nicaragua at that time, Torbiörnsson was a strong supporter of the Sandinistas.

Peter Torbiörnsson's story of his return to Nicaragua is obviously quite different from Erik Durschmied's return to Cuba. Instead of an engaging journey down memory lane to where a successful career was launched, Torbiörnsson travels to where his career in war journalism was destroyed and the lives of companions were lost. *Last Chapter* is about the dark side.

Durschmied understands that Fidel Castro used him, an inexperienced cameraman, to deliver a moderate message to the world, a world that hardly knew anything about the man who would soon rule Cuba. Castro is seen in the 1958 interview saying he wants representative democracy and free elections, he will not confiscate private land, and he is not a communist -- all of which turned out to be baloney. And Durschmied realizes that he also used Castro. His interview of the guerrilla leader launched his long and very successful career in war journalism. For Peter Torbiörnsson, understanding that the Sandinistas manipulated him to assist a bomber kill and maim fellow journalists has no upside. It's only dark.

For a quarter century, the Swedish journalist has struggled with uncertainty, depression, and guilt, while many of his former colleagues have shunned him. Acquiring a firmer understanding that members of the Sandinista movement used him -- which he does acquire during his return to Nicaragua -- does not set Torbiörnsson free. There is no happy ending in *Last Chapter*.

*Finding Fidel* and *Last Chapter* both revolve around a critical event during a war in Latin America. Both men were affected strongly yet very differently. So *Finding Fidel* is warm and reflective, and Eric Durschmied has a pleasant surprise in the old rebel camp. *Last Chapter* is heavy with remorse and pain, and when Peter Torbiörnsson finally confronts Thomas Borge -- the Sandinista probably most responsible for ordering the slaughter in the press conference -- the results are ungratifying.

The horror of 25 years ago in Nicaragua will live forever in Peter Torbiörnsson, while the fortune 50 years ago in Cuba will never be forgotten by Erik Durschmied. War can change an entire life in a second. In a second life can end. In a second one can be famous. In a second anything can happen. These two excellent documentaries chronicle the high stakes in the roll of the dice called war. It's a crap game that some just can't leave, until they're dead.

As for me, tomorrow at the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam I will watch *Armadillo*, which is about an entirely different subject. Well, sort of. It's about war, but in a different part of the world.

**idfa**

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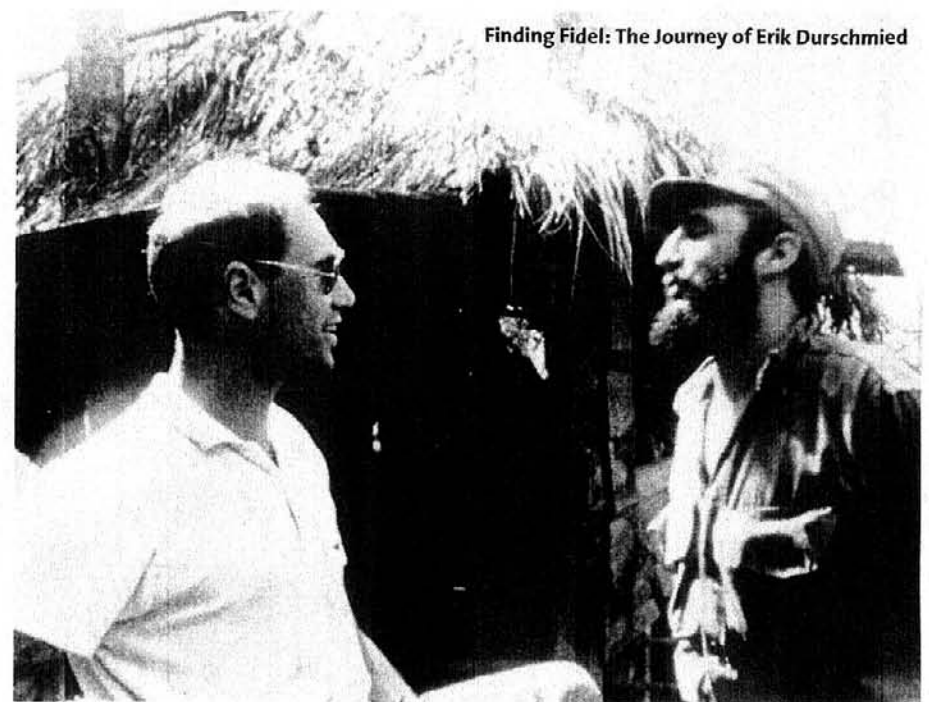
## SUMMIT MEETING

"The Sierra Maestra was the starting point and the highlight of my career. Since then, it's been a long, slow descent", says eighty-year-old Erik Durschmied with a grin, his beard neatly trimmed in the Hemingway style. Over the past fifty years, the renowned war correspondent has interviewed countless icons of power: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Ho Chi Minh, Allende, Ben-Gurion, Saddam Hussein and many others.

The report that marked his international breakthrough in 1958, however, has never loosened its grip on him. In *Finding Fidel*, Bay Weyman films Durschmied on his return to the Sierra Maestra mountains: the jungle-covered terrain in the remote southeast of Cuba, where Fidel Castro and his guerrilla fighters began their heroic campaign to liberate the Caribbean island from US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. "A pilgrimage into the past", as Weyman describes this journey. "Culminating in a tough scramble to the top of the mountain where Fidel had his camp. Although currently designated part of Cuba's national heritage, it is still a desolate spot. We filmed there without permission from the authorities, which gave an exciting frisson to the adventure. We lost half of our material, but fortunately we had copies of all the most important things."

The meeting between Durschmied and Castro on the mountain top, interspersed in fragmentary form throughout *Finding Fidel*, was a spectacular world first in 1958. Durschmied: "To the question of who had sent me, I answered honestly that I was a lone operator. 'We all have to start somewhere', was Fidel's easy-going reply. And something that of course applied equally to him. The news of the day was full of the shifting balance of power on Cuba, but no one knew anything much yet about Castro. He had a great understanding of how to play the media. And by the way, I didn't notice any Marxist ideas at all." Durschmied went on to make many more visits to Cuba. "In spite of a number of successes, the promise of the revolution was never really fulfilled", Durschmied says.

"There is a certain synchronicity in our ca-



Finding Fidel: The Journey of Erik Durschmied

reers," he says of himself and the Cuban leader. "We both appeared on the world stage at that time, and neither of us could ever get away from the images created for us then. I have tried everything, but have always been saddled with the role of John Wayne, forever playing the cowboy." PvdG/MB

REFLECTING IMAGES: PANORAMA

*Finding Fidel: The Journey of Erik Durschmied*  
Bay WeymanFri 26/11 19:00 Tuschinski 3  
Sun 28/11 16:30 Tuschinski 5

INTERVIEW DOCUMENTAIREFILMER ERIK DURSCHMIED

# 'Castro begreep goed hoe propaganda werkt'

Vijftig jaar geleden interviewde Erik Durschmied (80) als eerste journalist Fidel Castro in de jungle van Cuba. In de IDFA-documentaire *Finding Fidel* keert hij terug.

Door **Bor Beekman**

**Z**o laagdrempelig als Vietnam maken ze oorlogen niet meer. 'Als je de moed had het veld in te gaan, mocht je met de soldaten mee. Niemand hield je tegen. En niemand die schoot maakte ook onderscheid tussen die twee beroepen.' Erik Durschmied (80), geboren Canadees, was oorlogscorrespondent en cameraman voor de Amerikaanse kranten en televisiestations. *The New York Times* doopte hem 'de man die meer oorlogen zag dan welke levende generaal ook'. In Vietnam, waar Durschmied tien jaar doorbracht, filmde hij het klassieke CBS-verslag *Hill 943*, waarin Amerikaanse soldaten op de huid worden gevolgd tijdens de bloedige strijd om een heuvel.

Decennia lang trok Durschmied van brandhaard naar brandhaard, tot de legervoortocht hem bij de eerste Golfoorlog opsloot in een hotel, samen met de rest van het journaal. Toen was het klaar. 'De oorlog werd een videogame, en de verslaggeving een soort sportjournalistiek, waarbij je zittend raketinslagen op een scherm becommentarieert'.

De IDFA-documentaire *Finding Fidel: The Journey of Erik Durschmied* volgt de oud-correspondent naar de plek waar zijn carrière vijftig jaar geleden begon: een bergtop in de jungle van Cuba. Daar vandaan bestookte rebellenleider Fidel Castro - geholpen door Che Guevara en broer Raul - dictator Batista. Niemand in het Westen wist wie die Castro was, of wat hij van plan was, tot de twintiger Durschmied - destijds journalistje van niets - de revolutionairen wist te bereiken, na een uitputtende tocht door de jungle. De interviewbeelden van Castro - in charmant gebrekkig Engels - gingen de hele wereld over.

Rijk werd Durschmied er niet van. 'Ik heb de beeldrechten slechts voor één uitzending verkocht, maar kopieën verschenen al snel, en overal.'



Erik Durschmied ontmoet rebellenleider Fidel Castro in de Cubaanse Sierra Maestra in 1958. Beeld uit de film die hij er nu over maakte.



Zo trof hij de beelden enkele jaren geleden nog aan in de documentaire *Commandante* van Oliver Stone. 'Ik heb Oliver nog gebeld, maar werd afgewimpeld door zijn advocaten. Die zelden: klaag ons maar aan.'

In de documentaire is te zien hoe Durschmied nogmaals de tocht afdelt naar het rebellenkwartier, thans een museum voor de revolutie. Zijn oude, twintig kilo zware filmcamera wordt er tentoongesteld in een sjofele hut. Een wederzien met Castro zat er niet in. 'We kregen officieel niet eens toestemming om te filmen.'

Twintig jaar geleden nodigde Castro hem uit om privé bij te praten. 'Toen vond ik al dat hij er uitgedoofd en teleurgesteld bij zat. In de heuvels als revolutionair voor een ideaal vechten is één ding, vanachter een bureau zorgen dat de suiker- of aardappel oogst niet mislukt, is heel iets anders.' Dat Castro in de historische beelden van Durschmied het Cubaanse volk allerlei beloftes doet die hij nimmer inlostte, kwam niet te sprake. 'Wie ben ik om hem te zeggen dat hij er een rotzool van heeft gemaakt?'

Als rebellenleider zag Castro direct de waarde van zo'n internationaal interview. 'Hij begreep uitstekend hoe oorlogspropaganda werkte. Als ik 's avonds met Castro voor zijn hut zat, kwam er opvallend vaak een ondergeschikte in mijn bijzijn melden dat het tweede of derde front vandaag zulke mooie vorderingen had gemaakt. Later bleek er dan helemaal geen tweede of derde front te zijn.'