

WINNER BEST INTERNATIONAL FEATURE DOCUMENTARY
HOTDOCS 2008

WINNER BEST INTERNATIONAL FEATURE DOCUMENTARY
SILVERDOCS 2008

WINNER MOST POPULAR AUDIENCE FILM SHEFFIELD 2007



"This is one extraordinary documentary, approaching hugely emotive subject matter with nimble delicacy... a life-affirming, unforgettable portrait of a true humanitarian" TIME OUT

"The best documentary for a long time" THE GUARDIAN

"Funny, frightening and deeply moving". THE TIMES

"Tense, heartbreaking and humorous, this is an extraordinary documentary" HOTDOCS

"Deeply touching, resonant andvery funny" VARIETY

"A gorgeous and utterly moving portrait" INDIEWIRE

VARIOUS LENGTH SYNOPSES

25 words

What's it like to possess Godlike surgical powers, yet struggle against your own humanity? What's it like to try and save a life, but to fail?

65 words

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100 words

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Shot in a Ukrainian hospital full of desperate patients and makeshift equipment, "The English Surgeon" is an intimate portrait of brain surgeon Henry Marsh as he wrestles with the dilemmas of the doctor patient relationship. *"It's like selling your soul to the devil, but what can you do? My son had a brain tumour as a baby and I was desperate for someone to help me. I simply can't walk away from that need in others"*

150 words

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With an original soundtrack by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, "The English Surgeon" openly confronts moral and ethical issues which touch every one of us. And all in a country called the Ukraine which is struggling to do the same thing....

Longer synopsis

What is it like to have God like surgical powers, yet to struggle against your own humanity? What is it like to try and save a life, and yet to fail? This film follows brain surgeon Henry Marsh as he openly confronts the dilemmas of the doctor patient relationship on his latest mission to the Ukraine.

Henry is one of London's foremost brain surgeons, but despite being a pioneer in his field he stills rides an old pushbike to work and worries himself sick about the damage he can inflict on his patients. ***“When push comes to shove we can afford to lose an arm or a leg, but I am operating on people's thoughts and feelings...and if something goes wrong I can destroy that person's characterforever”.***

Driven by the need to help others where he can, Henry has been going out to Kiev for over 15 years to help improve upon the medieval brain surgery he witnessed there during his first visit in 1992. Today the patients see him as the great saviour from the West, desperate parents want him to save their child, and his Ukrainian colleague Igor Kurilets sees him as a guru and a benefactor. But for all the direct satisfaction he gets from going, Henry also sees grossly misdiagnosed patients, children who he can't save, and a lack of equipment and trained supporting staff. ***“It's like selling your soul to the devil, but what can you do? My son had a brain tumour as a baby and I was desperate for someone to help me. I simply can't walk away from that need in others”.***

It is this dilemma however, a dilemma of his own making that is what's so interesting about Henry, what lets his troubled and compassionate humanity through, and what is the universal theme at the centre of the film; the struggle to do good things in a selfish and flawed world.

“Henry, Henry why do you worry so much?” Igor often exclaims. Things are simpler for Igor because he has only one goal ahead of him; the creation of Ukraine's first independent neurosurgical clinic. Looking at a famous Cossack painting on his wall at home Igor exclaims that ***“Cossacks are the heroes of Ukraine...and a brain surgeon is just like a Cossack. It is an adventure – and I love it!”***

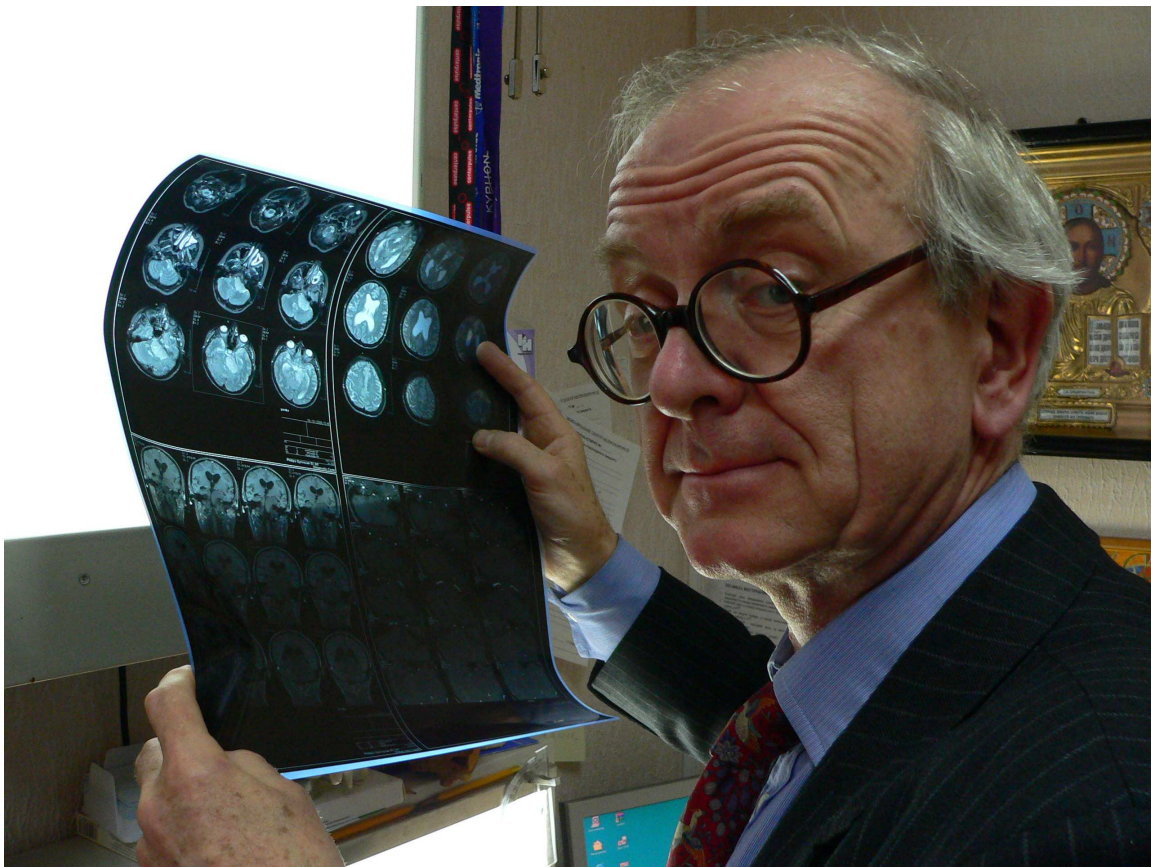
Devoted to his patients, he has to work within the logistical and political constraints such a maverick career choice presents him with. Instead of an expensive medical drill for boring into patient's skulls, Igor has bought a cordless Bosch handyman drill from the local market; and because he needed rooms to rent for his independent clinic he has found a temporary refuge in the KGB hospital, the very place which for years housed people who tried to persecute him and Henry for working outside of the State system.

Ironies such as these abound in revolutionary Kiev, and through patients such as Marian Dolishny we intimately witness life in this topsy-turvy land. Marian is very poor and is from a small town in Western Ukraine. His religious faith helps him cope with a brain tumour which is causing him severe epilepsy, but he knows that it will ultimately kill him.

Marian has been told that his tumour is inoperable in the Ukraine, but Henry believes he can save him. To do so Marian must be awake throughout the entire operation however, and this surreal set of circumstances gives rise to a dramatic, humorous and unforgettable 15 minute scene filmed with three cameras inside the operating theatre.

Shot over two chaotic weeks in the 2007 Ukrainian winter, the film establishes each of our characters at home, follows Henry and Marian to Kiev, and then sees Henry work through the endless clinics of desperately ill people Igor wants him to treat. In some harrowing scenes we feel Henry's frustration as he agonises over who he can and can't save, yet we are also with him as he sets out to save Marian's life.

The emotional climax of the film is Henry's own journey to the south west of the country to visit the mother of a young girl he tried to save some years ago. Haunted by his failure to save her life, he shares a very emotional meal with Katya, and then visits the beautiful country cemetery where Tanya is buried. With nothing but the wind and the crows around him he confronts what it means to fail, but ultimately leaves us with a feeling of redemption because of his ongoing willingness to try and help others where he can.



GEOFFREY SMITH

BIOGRAPHY OF DIRECTOR/ PRODUCER GEOFFREY SMITH.

Geoffrey Smith was born in Melbourne, Australia and was always fascinated by the moving image. Never at ease in “the lucky country” however, he went travelling to find himself and discovered en route a love of listening and story telling.

In 1987 he found himself in Haiti helping to make a documentary about the first election there in 31 years, but following the discovery of a massacre of twenty one voters in a schoolyard he was shot and wounded. Struggling to put his life back together in London, Geoffrey decided to film his journey back to Haiti to find the man who had so nearly killed him. This acclaimed film was subsequently shown on the BBC and is remarkable for the on screen catharsis it intimately portrayed.

Having discovered through this very personal film that the camera could be a powerful cathartic tool in helping people through difficult periods in their lives, many of Geoffrey’s subsequent films are built around this use of the camera.

Winner of numerous awards, including an RTS in 2004 and in 2007, he has made over twenty two films for all the major UK broadcasters and is drawn to observational real life dramas where deep ethical and moral dilemmas abound. His latest film is a BBC2 Storyville shot inside the KGB hospital in Kiev, and features an original soundtrack by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

SELECTED FILMS:

THE ENGLISH SURGEON BBC2 Storyville 94’ 2008. Best International Feature Documentary - Hotdocs 2008, Most Popular Audience film - Sheffield 2007

THE CHILDREN OF HELEN HOUSE BBC2 8 x 30’ 2007. Winner of the Royal Television Society Best Network Factual Series award 2007

YOUR LIFE IN THEIR HANDS BBC1 60’ 2004. Winner of the Royal Television Society Best Science documentary 2005.

DANGER UNEXPLODED BOMB! Channel 4, 2 x 60’ 2001. Winner of the Silver Screen Award U.S. International Film and Video Festival, 2001, and winner of the Bronze Plaque, History Section, Columbus Film Festival, 2001.

THE LIFE SAVER ITV 60’ 2000. Silver Chris at the Columbus Film festival, 2000

BREATH OF LIFE BBC2 60’ 2000

PRESS REVIEWS TO DATE

THE GUARDIAN

“...a lovely film, the best documentary for a long time”

VARIETY

“Deeply touching, resonant andvery funny”

THE INDEPENDENT

“one triumph that you should not miss”

TIME OUT MOVIE REVIEW

“This is one extraordinary documentary, approaching hugely emotive subject matter with nimble delicacy and, it has to be said, steely reserve when it comes to filming a brain operation performed under only local anaesthetic. A life-affirming, unforgettable portrait of a true humanitarian, it’s crying out for a proper cinema release”

LONDON FILM FESTIVAL

“...any of these three characters are worthy of a film of their own, but the fact they appear in the same one seems incredible. Geoffrey Smith's exceptional documentary has everything you might demand of any film in the Festival: tense drama, heartbreaking pathos, scenes not for the squeamish, some awful moral dilemmas, pertinent political points to make, even a fair amount of humour and a score composed by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis”.

HOTDOCS

“Tense, heartbreaking and humorous, this is an extraordinary documentary”

RADIO TIMES

“This masterly and poetic film...”

THE TIMES

“No scene in any film showing at The Times BFI 51st London Film Festival is tenser than the one two thirds of the way through *The English Surgeon*.It is the pivotal moment in a documentary which has its world premiere at the festival on Tuesday and is by turns funny, frightening and deeply moving”.

BELFAST FILM FESTIVAL

“*The English Surgeon* is one of those great delights - an exquisitely made film with a passionately invested subject finding universal appeal on the festival circuit. With a score by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, and photography better than your average matinee movie, this film is made of sublime stuff. It is both deeply moving and amazingly uplifting as it provides the audience with a deep understanding of the physical shape of thought and emotion”

THE DOCUMENTARY BLOG

“Visually, *The English Surgeon* is stunning. Shot in HD, the film’s florescent hues and cool colours perfectly capture the tone of the film, enhancing the dim Kiev cityscape and giving the hospital sequences a sterile feel. I remember specifically being impressed by the film’s score, only to be surprised by a Nick Cave credit. He, and Warren Ellis are responsible for a touching yet subtle accompaniment that compliments the drama without pandering to the audience or over-sentimentality. *The English Surgeon* is just one of those films were every single element successfully comes together to create a touching, inspiring and truly dramatic piece of non-fiction filmmaking” — Jay

SCORE: 

INTERNET LINKS TO REVIEWS ETC

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FUTURE FESTIVALS/BROADCASTS

- A theatrical run throughout March 2008 in the UK and Ireland
- A BBC2 screening of the film at 90' on March 30th 2008
- Belfast Film Festival in April 2008
- Hotdocs in April 2008
- San Francisco Film Festival in May 2008
- Munich DokFest in May 2008
- Silverdocs in June 2008
- Galway Film Festival in June
- Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane Film Festivals June, July 2008
- Jerusalem Film Festival in July 2008
- Dokfest Kosovo in August
- Vancouver Film Festival in October 2008
- Dok Leipzig in November
- Madman Entertainment is distributing the film in Australia and New Zealand
- American TV broadcast. Documentary slot POV will screen the film on PBS television at 82.30' after June 2009
- A US/Canadian theatrical run is planned in Autumn 2008
- We have already had numerous TV offers from Europe, Australia, and Israel despite not actively seeking TV deals as yet.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directed and Produced by
Geoffrey Smith

Director of Photography
Graham Day

Editor
Kathy O'Shea

Co-producer
Rachel Wexler

Soundtrack composed and performed by
Nick Cave and Warren Ellis

Sound recordist
Darrell Briggs

Online Editor and Colourist
Tony Wilson

Supervising Dialogue editor and dubbing mixer
Mike Wabro

2nd unit directors
Slava Feofilaktov and Shreepali Patel

2nd unit camera
Anatoly Gagramanov

2nd unit sound
James Thomson

Music editor
Gerard McCann

Music recorded and mixed by
Jake Jackson

Sound Post production
ReelSound

Production Manager London
Sheila Humphreys

Production manager and translator in Kiev
Irena Zaytseva

Edit assistant
Catherine Williams

Production assistants
Eugene Zaytsev & Vladimir Vysotsky

Subtitling
Iryna Dyachenko
Lena Karsten

Legal services
Melorie Chilton

Driver
Anatoly Mukan

Executive producer for the BBC
Greg Sanderson & Nick Fraser

Executive producer for ITVS International
Sally Jo Fifer

The Ford Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Wellcome Trust
CBA-DFID Broadcast Media Scheme
YLE TV2 Documentaries

An Eyeline Films and Bungalow Town Production
for BBC and ITVS International

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