

FILMMAKER JASON BURLAGE ON *MI CHACRA* (MY LAND)

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ALICE APLEY: *When I go to HotDocs and the other film markets I'm usually focused on meeting new filmmakers and finding new films for DER, but one of the really great things that happens is that I always run into current DER filmmakers. This year I ran into Jason Burlage who's the director and filmmaker behind Mi Chacra which is just a beautiful portrait of Peruvian life and the story of Feliciano, Quechuan farmer. One of the things that I find really interesting about the film is that, unlike a lot of the films that are about tourists and tourism that are around these days, this is a film that sort of sneaks the tourism angle in at the end because it's really about this farmer and you get a whole sense of his life, and it's only quite a ways through this film that you see an involvement in the larger part of the world in that he works as a porter on the Inca Trail. I just think that's a unique perspective on tourism that we usually don't get to see: that we really get to know some of the people who are involved in the tourist industry.*

So, when I had an opportunity to sit down and chat with Jason, the first thing I wanted to ask him about was Feliciano and how did he find this great character and to hear a little bit more about that.

AA: I'm here at HotDocs 2014 and ran into Jason Burlage who is the producer and director of *Mi Chacra*, so we thought we would sit down for a minute and talk a little bit about his film. So Jason, I'd love to hear - how did you get started with this story?

JASON BURLAGE: I worked in Peru for three summers with a company that does summer community service programs for teenagers. And, at the time, I was looking for a subject for a documentary and really someone I worked with down there told me a story about the porters that work on the Inca Trail. He painted this very vivid picture of how that was affecting their lives in their villages. He talks about how, even though they were going out and making money, there was something about the whole experience that was difficult for them and a lot of them would actually end up staying away from their village. He talked about having a very negative effect on the village. At the time, I was working in the villages. We were working on building - we'd build schools or work on irrigation systems. As he told me that story, it was very vivid and I thought "That would be a great film." So I stayed in Peru and started to research the film and I went from there.



Jason Burlage

AA: Was it the tourism angle or am I imposing that and you were just looking for a story based on the work you were doing in the rural areas?

JB: No, I definitely - I definitely thought we would be working in these villages and there is, in that area of Peru from Cuzco to Machu Picchu, there is a very specific route that most tourists take and they pass through the country-side on their way to Machu Picchu. I remember standing in a field at one point watching a guy plowing his field, had a bull pulling a plow that he had made out of a tree very near by, and a bus full of tourists drove by. It just seemed very strange. It was these two worlds that didn't really connect at all. Where, this guy is working - I don't think exaggerating, he's working exactly the way his people were working 500 years ago. The people in the bus live a completely different life. And so that was definitely part of it. I was interested in how he was seen by the tourists - Feliciano, the main character, as a porter - how he was seen by the tourists on the Inca trail, and how he saw himself in comparison to them. The tourism or the intersection of the cultures is definitely something I was thinking about.

AA: Can you tell me how you found the main subject, Feliciano?

JB: I spent a couple months scouting. I had an assistant who luckily spoke Quechua and Spanish and so we visited maybe a dozen different villages in the mountains around Urubamba and interviewed. Each village would generally have a team of porters



a still from *Mi Chacra (My Land)*

that would go to the Inca Trail together. They would work for a certain company and when the company called they would say, for example, 'we need nine porters on this day.' So the boss would gather up nine guys and they would go. And so we would basically enter these villages and ask who the boss was and he would gather the porters for us and we would talk to them – or we would talk to him and he would recommend certain people. And I was looking for someone kind of specific. I was looking for a younger man with a young son. So we interviewed maybe sixty - sixty five different guys. We whittled it down to two and I was on the verge of picking the other guy when this Peruvian friend of mine who was helping me a little bit in this process - not my assistant but another guy that was helping me - told me I was going to pick the other guy because he was more outgoing. It just seemed like he would be an easier guy to get a story out of. Thankfully my friend, he just said, "don't underestimate that quiet guy." The more I thought about it, the more I thought that he's exactly right for what I was thinking.

AA: Yeah (laughs).

JB: So we went with Feliciano, and I am glad – very glad we did. I thought he was extremely intelligent and somewhat poetic. I thought he had great insight into his own experience. That is how we found him. If I had been left to my own devices I would have chosen the other guy - who may very well have been a character but thanks to my friend, I didn't.

AA: Do you have any idea what's happened to him and his son? He's clearly very concerned about creating a better life for his son so I'm sure audiences are always interested in 'well? what happened?'

JB: Right, that's true. The fact is that I haven't been in contact with him in a year and a half because it's very difficult to contact him. He doesn't have a phone. There was nobody near him who had a phone that we could call to communicate. My updates since finishing the film has come through the man who was my assistant on the film. But he has had to - he lives a 30-minute taxi ride away from Feliciano's village. And so he has gone a couple of times and found Feliciano and the status

really as far as I know hasn't changed. I know they had another son, and I know they were still planning to go the the city when Royer was old enough to start school which would have been maybe about a year and a half ago. Not sure. I would love to know and hopefully will be going back to Peru sometime fairly soon, so...

AA: You know, I know you are here working on a new film. Just thinking about the tie over - is this something that you learned from *Mi Chacra* that informs how you worked or what you are doing on this film?

JB: Yes, yes. *Mi Chacra* being my first independent, feature length film, I don't know if there is another experience in my life during which I learned as much. Both, simply, in how to make a film - I learned all kinds of things, but, yeah, the experience. When I started it seems like I should have thought about this but I didn't really think about the universality of that story, of Feliciano's desire to leave the village and move to the city. But, during the making of it, I became more aware of how that story is happening everywhere. I was aware of that happening everywhere, but I didn't think about it while making this film. And even at some point in the making of the film, I realized it was kind of my story, too, because I grew up in a town of a thousand people and never considered staying there. I can't remember a time in my life when I thought, "Well, this is where I will live." There was always something better. So the film I am working on now is actually an extension of those ideas and its an attempt to look at the other side of these people who have left their villages and gone to the city and how they are making their way in the city now. So...

AA: And we're looking forward to seeing that.

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MI CHACRA IS AVAILABE FOR PURCHASE AT:

www.der.org/films/mi-chacra.html

THIS INTERVIEW IS AVAILABLE FROM DER AT:

soundcloud.com/docued/filmmaker-jason-burlage-on-mi-chacra-my-land