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# The Southland Times Unwind

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## Five in Balibo

**A story to tell:** Film-maker Robert Connolly who directed the feature film *Balibo* - based on the five journalists killed in East Timor in 1975.

Photo: DOMINION POST

In 1975, five journalists, including a New Zealander, were killed in East Timor when it was invaded by Indonesia. For years authorities claimed they died in the crossfire of a battle, but many have believed they were deliberately executed. *Balibo* dramatises what happened. Its director Robert Connolly talks to **Tom Cardy**.

**L**IKE most Australians and New Zealanders, film-maker Robert Connolly had only a vague idea for many years about "the Balibo Five".

In 1975, five journalists from Australian television - Tony Stewart, Greg Shackleton, Brian Peters, Malcolm Rennie and New Zealander Gary Cunningham - were killed in Balibo, a town in East Timor, while covering its invasion by Indonesian forces.

For years, the Australian and New Zealand governments accepted the explanation that the five were killed when caught in the crossfire between Indonesian and East Timorese forces.

But for years many people believed the five were deliberately killed. Connolly learned there was more to the Balibo Five story when Australian actor Anthony LaPaglia, best-known for United States television series *Without a Trace*, came to him with the idea

of turning the story into a feature film. LaPaglia, who had starred in Connolly's *The Bank*, had read *Cover-Up* by journalist Jill Jolliffe. The book looked at how the five were killed and who should be held accountable.

"What I loved about Anthony's role is that when he brought it to me it was about the Balibo Five and he was going to be a producer, but not in it," says Connolly.

LaPaglia ended up starring in Connolly's film *Balibo* as Roger East - another Australian journalist who went to East Timor not long after the Balibo Five went missing.

East was invited to East Timor by Jose Ramos Horta, then a member of the East Timorese government and now its president. Like most people, while Connolly had heard of the five journalists, he hadn't known anything about East.

"He's not even mentioned in the history books and arguably was one of Australia's famous war

correspondents, considering the work he did. He vanished into the background of history and yet he was murdered along with more than 100 Timorese. There are plenty of witnesses to his murder. Even the Indonesian government don't dispute that they executed him."

*Balibo* begins in the present day with a Timorese woman who recounts witnessing East's murder when East Timor's capital, Dili, is invaded by Indonesia.

The film then has two strands. There is East's story, from when he is persuaded by the young Ramos Horta (played by Guatemalan actor Oscar Isaac) to go to East Timor, to his attempts to find out what happened to the five journalists.

It alternates with what happens to the Balibo Five, including nail-biting scenes where they are caught by Indonesian forces and - unlike the official line - murdered.

Connolly, who worked with playwright David Williamson on the script, says it wasn't easy juggling the film's strands.

Early drafts focused on the Balibo Five, but this changed as they learned more about East and also placed the deaths of six journalists alongside the bigger tragedy of the thousands of East Timorese who were killed, much gleaned from personal testimonies.

"I was grappling with that all the time. It was a real big issue of how to make the film and to tell the Timorese story."

So the story wasn't fine-tuned until the editing stage, which took Connolly six months - twice as long as his other films.

Connolly says while LaPaglia easily convinced him to make the film, it took seven years for it to happen. Financing was "a nightmare".

One reason was Connolly's determination to film a large part of it in East Timor.

"It tried very hard not to get made, that film," he says, while in Wellington this month for a preview screening.

"How do you film in East Timor? How do you get insured? How are you going to convince people to go? How do you get actors to want to come?"

It was made more difficult by events in East Timor. While it had been independent of Indonesia since 1999, it remains a volatile place. During the film's development there were assassination attempts on Ramos Horta.

Once on the ground in East Timor for a five-week shoot, there were other difficulties. A lot of their film gear kept breaking - partly from the humidity and they had to record the sound twice.

"The sound was a nightmare. It actually made us have an incredible respect for the journalists the film was about who went there in '75 with film and without any phones," says Connolly.

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## Bi-curious

**MATE**  
Mark Wilson



**D**ESPITE the fact I have close family ties to a same-sex relationship as I'm sure many people do these days, I'm not known widely for being the most comfortable individual around males who have chosen an alternative lifestyle to mine.

However, I'm definitely not going to join in with Christian evangelists and suggest deporting them to hell via a mass culling or alternatively sending them to Utah to be reunited with their heterosexual self through prayer.

Females choosing to interact with other females in a close and possibly intimate manner conversely is a completely different issue for me - far from uncomfortable it's quite desirable in some situations.

Unofficial research at bars, rugby clubs, mates' flats, mai mais and gyms as well as my own imagination show clearly this to hold true for most of the male species, at least the honest ones.

We seem more comfortable with the concept of female-to-female familiar relations than male-to-male ones, providing of course some minimum level of aesthetic appeal is met.

Maybe I'm shallow or insensitive but this is where I upset feminists and some true blue lesbians, as I can't think of anything worse than a powerfully built woman with no ambition to engage in female grooming because she thinks women do it to impress men and will not engage in any such puerile behaviour, cuddling up to another equally as un-groomed female partner.

Imposing certain conditions upon which certain such behaviours are acceptable is probably a triple standard at the very least and hypocritical at worst but judging by the content contained in today's R18 websites and at the Grammys, it's a commonly held belief, one may almost say is somewhat verging on a fact. It only takes one look at TV One's *Breakfast* ratings to see that Kiwi males warm to the concept of two attractive females in close quarters even if their relationship is nothing but professional.

Be careful though, remember not to fall for the hot lesbian myth, there is usually no such thing, that's why I have titled this column Bi-curious as most of the ladies we likely lads imagine to be engaged in the above mentioned activities, seem to be double agents happily switching sides as the conditions and opportunities dictate and fair play to them.

This could be an indication of personality being more important to women than gender or more likely sex appeal and how you're feeling on the day being more important.

I'm not a female. I don't know and I would welcome any feedback or practical demonstrations on this issue.

What I don't like is people who discourage this behaviour by ostracising the likes of Ali Mau because she may or may not have decided to change things up a bit and indulge a Kiwi male fantasy of ours.

She is a great news reader, a beautiful woman and I'm sure a top notch parent, what she does in her own time doesn't need to be media folly but I sure would pay top dollar for the video!

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