

SNAKE DANCE

The knowledge needed to build the atomic bomb was not given to us, it was consciously pursued. And the world has been living with the consequences ever since. Neither wholly documentary nor work of fiction, *Snake Dance* is a stirring personal reading of humankind's catastrophic decision to play God.

The 75-minute film, jointly written by two veteran storytellers, the British writer **Patrick Marnham** and the Belgian filmmaker **Manu Riche**, uses a powerful choreography of words and images to construct a suspenseful, interwoven account of the invention of the first weapon of mass destruction. Visually poetic and historically insightful, *Snake Dance* explores the atomic legacy and the indelible stamp it has left on the world.

The chief protagonists are Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant idealist and father of the bomb, and Aby Warburg, a German art historian who in 1895, travelled to New Mexico to study how Pueblo Indians had survived the barren desert conditions of Los Alamos for more than 1000 years. While there, Warburg discovered the Indian rattlesnake dance, their way of confronting their primal fears and ensuring survival by mastering the power of lightening, the bringer of rain. Fifty years later, Oppenheimer chose the mountains around Los Alamos as a place to raise his children and find spiritual peace, and to conceal the construction of hell.

Such juxtapositions are woven into the story of *Snake Dance*, which takes us on a journey through the open spaces of New Mexico, where the atomic bomb was built and tested, and where Oppenheimer's son declines to be interviewed for the film. In Congo, Africa's horn of plenty, the land that nourished the bomb with uranium, we witness desperate miners struggling for survival as they continue to feed a voracious arms industry. And finally, we visit the bomb's living test site in Japan, where most recently the devastating 2011 tsunami in Fukushima has contaminated the land for generations to come. The film's soundtrack is by the Japanese pianist, Jun Kanno, whose father describes the experience of witnessing Hiroshima and the tsunami as leaving him bereft of feelings or words.

In the aftermath of WWI and after several years in a psychiatric clinic, Aby Warburg confronted his personal fears in 1923 by giving a public lecture about the Pueblo Indians and their snake dance. He believed that humanity's tragedy lay in our failure to overcome our own phobic reflex. We, unlike the Indians, have allowed fear to govern our lives and our civilisation.

Snake Dance throws this eloquent analysis into the debate of a post-nuclear age.

The Belgian première of *Snake Dance* takes place on April 16, 2012 at the Kaaithheater (Brussels). The screening is preceded by a performance by the actor Jerry Killick (*Monkey Sandwich*), who will play Aby Warburg giving his historic 1923 lecture about the Pueblo Indians. This combination of lecture and film will then tour Europe, showing at member theatres of the Kaaithheater's network. The world première of *Snake Dance* will take place on April 24, 2012 at the International Doc Film Festival of Nyon (Switzerland). Patrick Marnham's book of the same name, will be available from Random House/Chatto in early 2012.

Manu Riche (1964) is a Belgian documentary filmmaker. He was an early contributor to the legendary documentary magazine *Strip-Tease* produced by Belgian TV channel RTBF. During the nineties he worked on several independent films in co-production with European public broadcasters. In 2002/2003 he explored the relationship between fiction and documentary in two major films on Belgian personalities, King Baudouin I and Georges Simenon (co-written by Patrick Marnham). He is the initiator, producer and director of *Hoge Bomen*, a series of portraits on formal and informal power in Belgium at the beginning of the 21st century.

Patrick Marnham (1943) is an English journalist, biographer and writer of travel books. He is primarily known for his biographies, where he has covered subjects as diverse as Diego Rivera, Georges Simenon, Jean Moulin and Mary Wesley. As a journalist, he has written for The Times, Daily Telegraph, Guardian and The Observer among others. From 1968 till 1971 Marnham was a scriptwriter for BBC Television. His film work includes *L'Homme qui n'était pas Maigret* with Manu Riche. His books have won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and the Marsh Biography Award.

Snake Dance is a production of Riche, Riche & Riche (B), RYVA films (B), SohoMoon pictures (IRL) and idtv docs (NL). Supported by the Belgian, Irish and Dutch film funds. In co-production with the Kaaithheater Brussels and VRT Canvas, Flemish public TV channel.

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