

HOW TRUE ARE FILMIC “TRUE STORIES”? © Ian D Richardson

I've learned through bitter experience that scepticism is required when coming across a movie or a television drama that is "based on a true story". Sadly, many are more fiction than fact, often unnecessarily so.

Some time ago, I wrote a non-fiction book, [God's Triangle](#), which was the result of several years investigating what happened to an Australian great aunt, Florence "Florrie" Cox, after she married, Frank E. Paice, a New Zealand-born Baptist missionary in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). She was someone her family didn't wish to talk about because she was embroiled in a scandal. My investigation revealed that this was not of her making, and that she was a victim not just of her being unknowingly intersex, but because of the social restrictions around the time of the First World War when any discussion of sex-related matters was taboo, particularly in Christian circles.

The book has not made me rich and/or famous, but it sold reasonably well and attracted attention from a number of people in the cinema world who thought it would make a compelling film. I accepted a three-year option for a very modest \$1500 from two producers. One I knew well and liked; the other I didn't know but who had the ability to raise development funds from one of the government-sponsored film agencies in Australia.

My clear understanding was that the screenplay I had been working on over the years would be brought up to production standard, and that once filming was under way and the film was released, I would progressively receive a total of around \$250,000. An attractive sum, you will agree.

The second producer was successful in raising development funds to be spent on her and a script editor. Things began to go wrong when I discovered that this producer had no intention of using my script and was writing one herself, although she had never before written a screenplay. This would have given her two bites at the financial cherry: producer and writer. Worse was to come when I discovered that she had changed the name of the main character for no other reason than she thought the name Florrie was "old fashioned".

As the film was being presented as a true story, it made no sense to me for Florrie Cox to be called something entirely different, but eventually I won this battle for her real name to be used.

Despite being told I would get a "co-writer" credit, it was immensely difficult to gain access to the script the producer was creating. On those few occasions when I did see it, I was horrified. It was poorly written, but worse, the emphasis was no longer on the struggle by Florrie and her husband to cope with Florrie's devastating intersex condition. Instead, the emphasis was on the Indian battle for Home Rule, which did not seriously get under way until well after my great aunt's story. Further, the producer displayed an embarrassing ignorance about Baptist missionary behaviour, such as their total objection to alcohol and ballroom dancing. As time progressed, the script became more a work of fiction than of fact. Some scenes bordered on the truly bizarre.

I am not a "precious" writer. At least I like to think so. I have worked as a journalist for decades and believe in the importance of editors and how they can improve the telling of a story. When I signed the option agreement I was looking forward to seeing a script that sharpened what I had done. Instead, the producer chose to take in her words "a fresh look" by totally ignoring the script that had been worked on for several years by myself and the original producer.

Of necessity, my script contains dialogue and scenes that have to be imagined, but my intention always was to reflect as accurately as possible the high hopes and deep upsets that must have taken place during Florrie Cox's marriage. I have since written a novel based on what I discovered in *God's Triangle*. It is called *Florrie - A Life Unexpected*, globally available on Amazon as a paperback and Kindle ebook.

I still have hopes that a film will be made. If not, then I would sooner that than have a production that would have been shamefully inaccurate. I will take comfort of sorts from the view of a friend and mentor, an award-winning TV and film director, that the producer's script was so bad it would not have been funded and filmed.

Finally, here is a related article from @Guardian...

"There's a boom in real-life dramas. How do the makers avoid playing fast and loose with the truth?" asks Stephen Moss: <https://bit.ly/cinema-TV-accuracy>