

## Beholders Documentary Dialogues - English translation of interview with filmmaker Rick Minnich

Always seeking connection Rick Minnich on his work, his vision and Beholders In the 1930s, Rick Minnich's great-grandfather was already a filmmaker. As a Christian missionary, he and his wife traveled the world, portraying people from all corners of the globe. More than half a century later, his great-grandson is following in his footsteps. Rick also became a filmmaker ("film missionary" as he says himself) and now has an impressive oeuvre of documentaries to his name. His goal: to connect people and stories that at first glance seem very different. Because, "We are much more connected than we realize."

"Our Man in Berlin. That's how American-born filmmaker Rick Minnich calls himself. More than 30 years ago, he settled in Berlin from the United States, where in addition to making documentaries, he also occupies himself with lecturing at the MET Film School Berlin, giving workshops and all kinds of other activities. His list of successful films is long and his career impressive. His most famous film is probably Forgetting Dad (2008), a gripping search for the story behind his father's abrupt amnesia. In 2022, he made the documentary The Strait Guys, which can be seen at Beholders.

"The Strait Guys is perhaps the best example of my vision for documentary filmmaking," he says. "I believe that as humans we are more connected than we realize ourselves. I grew up in a pretty 'white' world myself, but spent a lot of time with my great-grandparents. They were regularly visited by people of color from places like Africa and India. What they did as missionaries, we would describe today as "building bridges. Trying to find connections between people and cultures that seem very different. Unlike my great-grandparents, I travel with my camera instead of the Bible. But I do the same thing: I am always looking for people and stories that show that we are much more connected than we realize."

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Why is The Strait Guys such a good example of that vision?

"The Strait Guys is about a group of Americans and Russians trying to connect the United States and Russia using the world's longest train tunnel, which is supposed to go under the Bering Strait. So it's about two countries that have had a kind of love-hate relationship for centuries and have been going through another bad period since the war in Ukraine. The film shows that despite this, there are people who feel a certain connection between the two countries and who strive for a permanent connection. For economic reasons, but also out of a spirit of peace. One of my favorite scenes from The Strait Guys is the moment we go to a train station in Siberia. The Russian railroad people show us the station and the locomotive they are using turns out to be from General Electric. That's an American company! It turns out that the locomotives are built in Kazakhstan under license from General Electric. It was a wonderful moment: the railroad workers of America and those of Russia got together and talked about all kinds of technical matters. In this they spoke each other's language; they came closer to each other. And they wanted to see each other's tools and machines ... 'boys with their toys,' haha!"

Why exactly did you like that moment?

"I strongly believe that people from all over the world can achieve very beautiful things together. I had the privilege of studying in Vienna from the United States. I am a big proponent of these exchange programs, especially for young people, because that way they realize that no matter what country you come from ... you can always celebrate together and have a good time! The more people grow up with that kind of understanding of the world, the better off we will be as a human race."

"That's also one of the reasons I love going to events like Beholders: talking to people from other parts of the world, listening to what they're about. Besides, I like intimate settings. I mean: I also go to big festivals. I had two films at IDFA. But at smaller festivals you can have conversations that go into more depth. That's what I'm looking forward to at Beholders! I believe films can have a deep impact on people's lives. Especially when they are screened at a live event and the filmmakers and audience can exchange thoughts directly with each other. By engaging with the audience, I learn more about how they experience my film. I find out if my films create the effect I want to create.

When my film is shown on TV, maybe 200,000 people watch it. But I rarely get feedback, haha! I've also had screenings with maybe only 10 or 20 people in the audience, where we talked for an hour afterwards. That's valuable! With *Forgetting Dad*, I traveled around a lot and saw that my personal story about my family touched people in Europe, the United States, Brazil, China... Everywhere I went, people were touched. That was wonderful, because it was one of my goals: to tell a personal story that universally speaks to people. That's what I mean by looking for connections, something shared between all people."

"When I catch myself judging people while filming them, I force myself to focus on their situation. What is happening in their lives that I don't see?"

Your film *Heaven on Earth* is being screened during the student program. Can you tell us something about that?

*Heaven on Earth* was my graduation film. It is about the village of Branson in the United States, where "the perfect America" is presented and where the fundamentalist, patriotic views of the inhabitants are prevalent. The film is not that long, 50 minutes. That way there is plenty of time to talk afterward. Besides, this is a film from the beginning of my career; I was 30 when I made this film. For students, that does appeal, I think. Also, I think there can be an interesting discussion based on this film, given the political situation presented in *Heaven on Earth* and the situation as it is in the United States right now. During the program, of course, I will talk about how I developed the idea, how I did research for it and how I filmed. An interesting detail with this film is that I had first cast the main characters and done research and came back four months later to film. Then one of the main characters no longer wanted to cooperate. That meant a little crisis for me: what to do next? While we were there, another opportunity came our way. A former soldier, who was involved in the bombing of Hiroshima. He wanted to cooperate and is now in the film. So instead of that earlier protagonist, I got a "mass murderer. And the great thing was: he was 29 when that bomb fell on Hiroshima, I was 29 when I interviewed him. He was an older man by then, he didn't hear well, so I had to sit very close to him to interview him. I had goose bumps all over my body! And I thought: if I had been 29 in 1945, what would I have done? For me, that's the essence of that scene in the film: when we look back on things, we can easily condemn them. But it's very difficult for people today to empathize with the situation back then. That is perhaps the biggest lesson I learned from making that film and that I still carry with me: if I catch myself judging people while filming them, or looking down on them, I force myself to stop doing that and focus on their situation. What is happening in their lives that I don't see? That's how I try to understand them better."

You also provide a program component within the industry program, *Unfinished Sympathy*. What exactly will you be doing there?

"*Unfinished Sympathy* is about a film that never got finished. The general theme of my contribution there will be making personal documentaries about your own family. In that, I'll talk about *Forgetting Dad*, for example, and a project that came out of that film. That's a project around my brother Justin, who was addicted to heroin for many years. I started making a film about him and then stopped doing that for a variety of reasons. So I'm going to talk about that during *Unfinished Sympathy*. And I found a big collection of photographs, films and travel diaries of my great-grandparents, Spenser and Eva. That's all in a big box on a shelf and when I heard about *Unfinished*

Sympathy, that started bubbling up again! I want to do something with that too! I'm still working on the details of the plan, but so I want to talk about what challenges you face when you film your own family. But also about the choices we make as filmmakers, what works and what doesn't, how you start a film... All things that the audience usually doesn't get to see. So that's really fun for visitors to go to as well. And I'm very open to questions. So I love it when people from the audience ask me difficult questions, haha!"

We are already starting with the first question! What's important when making a documentary? "For me, it always starts with a big question I have about life. I look for at least one answer to that question. Next, it's nice when I don't know exactly what is going to happen. In fact, often the search is much more interesting than the actual answer I find. In *The Strait Guys*, the central question is "what is really keeping the United States and Russia apart? There is only 80 kilometers of water between the two countries. And there has been talk of a tunnel for decades. Why hasn't it been realized yet? Somehow I already knew the answer to that question: it is a geopolitical problem. With the film I try to capture situations in which the 'strait guys' encounter, see and experience these geopolitical challenges. I would urge everyone to go see this film: come and discover the biggest mega-project you've never heard of. And see how the whole world can be connected by a train track."

In frame:

Three films by Rick Minnich will be shown during Beholders:

*The Strait Guys* - regular program  
*Spenser and Eva* - industry program  
*Heaven on Earth* - student program  
For dates, times and locations, visit [www.beholders.nl](http://www.beholders.nl) or the separate insert with this magazine.