

# Mastering the Trick of Walking a Tightrope

By TOM ROSTON

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WHEN the director Bart Layton was researching the documentary “[The Imposter](#),” he had an unsettling eureka moment. He was beginning to feel sympathy for his subject, a pathological liar who had apparently conned a family into believing that he was their missing boy.

“I was getting sucked into his story,” Mr. Layton recalled. “And I wanted the audience to experience that.”

The challenge would be to balance the tale told by Frédéric Bourdin, the brown-eyed French-Algerian who duped many into believing that he was a blue-eyed American teenager named Nicholas Barclay, with the wrenching but perplexing narratives of Nicholas’s family and the various investigators on the case.

Nicholas was 13 when he disappeared in 1994 in San Antonio. How the family, the F.B.I. and a succession of civil servants could believe that Nicholas had turned up three years later in a small town in Spain in the guise of the 23-

year-old Bourdin so stretches believability that it laid the groundwork for a “Rashomon”-like retelling.

“When you have these conflicting versions of the truth, the mistake would be to make a judgment,” Mr. Layton said of the saga, which was also the subject of a [2008 article](#) by David Grann in *The New Yorker*. “The key was to tell all of those subjective stories.”

“[The Imposter](#),” which is being released on Friday, does not belong to that clear-eyed tradition of nonfiction filmmaking that exposes injustice to exonerate the innocent and condemn the guilty. Mr. Layton isn’t interested in making an air-tight case or broadcasting his opinion so much as in delving into deeper meanings. As such he belongs to a line of documentarians who try to let their subjects speak for themselves, like Werner Herzog with “[Into the Abyss](#),” about three killings and the punishment that followed, or Amy Berg with “[Deliver Us From Evil](#),” about a pedophile priest. But when the documentary’s agenda isn’t explicit, there is a risk that audiences can feel complicit, subtly manipulated by filmmakers, who spend long hours, or sometimes years, developing relationships with their subjects. It’s a hazard that makers of documentaries sometimes face as they set off on their path.

Mr. Herzog’s films tend to contemplate big ideas. His most recent work has been “about the protocol of death,” he said.

“They’re not about guilt or innocence,” Mr. Herzog said of “Into the Abyss” and the “On Death Row” series, which focus on men facing life imprisonment or the death penalty. Rather than tipping the scales of justice, he wanted to meditate, for instance, on what it means when a convict can’t experience rain falling on him for many years.

Mr. Herzog said he wasn’t motivated by the desire to provide solace to his subjects: “Everything is for the audience.”

Mr. Layton took a similar approach. As his interviews progressed, Mr. Layton was bewildered, he said, by the contradictory stories told by his subjects, including the members of the Barclay family, who brought Mr. Bourdin into their home. Mr. Layton wanted audiences to feel the same way he did. “It becomes a more interesting film when you put the audience on the receiving end, rather than in an analytical position,” Mr. Layton said. “People have a visceral experience.”

To emphasize the manipulative skills of Mr. Bourdin, Mr. Layton framed him so that his head appears larger and he looks directly at the audience, more so than other subjects. Such positioning could raise questions in viewers’ minds about Mr. Bourdin, which would be just fine by a private investigator, Charlie Parker, who became entwined in the case.

“If you let a guy like that talk, he’ll show himself to be a monster,” Mr. Parker said. “He’s a scary little bastard.”

To reinforce the notion that none of the characters, not even a gumshoe, is able to tell what Mr. Layton called the “perfect truth,” he visualized their stories through re-creations with actors. Those scenes begin with over-the-shoulder shots to indicate that the film is tracing that person’s memory. “I wanted to show you that you are inside someone’s head,” Mr. Layton said.

He sought balance through the editing, deciding which material to include or exclude. At one point the filmmakers, including the executive producers John Battsek and Simon Chinn, disagreed over footage that showed the extent of Mr. Bourdin’s pathology. “There was a debate within the inner circle in the editing room about how the audience was left to feel about Frédéric,” said Mr. Battsek, who voted against the footage. “Neither Simon Chinn nor I felt that the point needed to be driven home any more.”

Mr. Layton chose to include the sequence. “It was the truth of the matter,” he said. “It happened.”

Mr. Battsek, who has produced dozens of documentaries, explained that his role is often to give directors a different perspective on subjects with whom they have developed strong relationships.

“I am several steps removed, and they can definitely lose themselves,” Mr. Battsek said. He recalled working with the director Amir Bar-Lev on “[The Tillman Story](#),” about the killing of the American soldier and former football player Pat Tillman. The filmmaker became so close with Mr. Tillman’s family that “I think Amir would say that he was glad that I was there to pull him back,” Mr. Battsek said.

Mr. Bar-Lev, who is working on another documentary with Mr. Battsek, said: “A producer’s fresh eyes are invaluable for me, but I don’t think I had Stockholm syndrome on that film.” He added: “I try and have my films represent my opinion but leave room for the audience to disagree. You can see that I am incredibly sympathetic to the family, but I deliberately include their human complexities and contradictions.”

It didn’t take an inner circle to convince the director Allen Hughes that he shouldn’t have laughed audibly during an interview for the documentary “[American Pimp](#),” which he directed with his brother, Albert.

In that film a Hollywood pimp brags about giving women who skateboard on the streets of Los Angeles some “direction” by turning them into prostitutes, and Mr. Hughes can be heard guffawing in the background. “That guy had me in stitches, even though what he was saying was tragic,” Mr. Hughes said, adding that he spent thousands of dollars in the

editing room to erase the sound because he didn't want to sway his audience by suggesting how he was feeling in that moment.

“When you are working on a film, you must be in love with that subject,” he said. “There is an umbilical connection.”

The bond between director and subject can be especially complicated when a filmmaker won't have a film unless that subject acts in a particular way, as in the case of the documentary “[The Bridge](#),” for which Eric Steel trained cameras on the Golden Gate Bridge for all of 2004, in order to tape the suicides that frequently take place there.

“It was a year of deep, dark emotions,” said Mr. Steel, who would call emergency assistance if he saw someone display signs of wanting to jump.

Mr. Steel, who had witnessed people jumping from the World Trade Center immediately after the 2001 attacks there, said he was partly moved to make “The Bridge” after experiencing the deaths of two siblings, one from cancer and the other in a car accident. “I was overcome by grief, but I never wanted to end my life,” Mr. Steel said. “I wondered why my life was bearable to me and someone else's wasn't.”

Mr. Hughes conceded that he and his brother had a particularly nuanced relationship with the subject matter of

“American Pimp.” After the release of the 1999 film they said publicly that their estranged father had once been a pimp. Mr. Hughes said he and his brother made the documentary as a “demented” way to explore issues related to their upbringing.

Mr. Hughes made no claim of objectivity. “Once you start using music, or as soon as you make a cut, you are being subjective,” he said.

Mr. Layton said he agreed: “A truly objective film is not possible unless you are using a CCTV camera that is unedited.”

As for presenting the different sides to his story, Mr. Layton said that early screenings of “The Imposter” had provoked such consistently conflicting opinions that it suggested he “got the balance about right.”

Ultimately neither Mr. Layton nor the investigators know what happened to Nicholas. “But, no disrespect to the family, this film is not about Nicholas Barclay,” Mr. Layton said. “It’s about deception. It’s also about self-deception.”