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■ **INTERVIEW / Guy and Anita Chaumette, underwater film makers**

‘Protecting wildlife is about changing its portrayal’

Award winning director: “Bermuda’s special — it’s done something to protect its environment”

BY ANDREW RAINE

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Bermuda’s waters are famous for inspiring Peter Benchley’s novel and the subsequent film *Jaws* — the far-fetched story of a vindictive shark hungry for human flesh which spawned multiple sequels and gave the Great White an unenviable reputation.

It’s a film that also tempted countless nature documentaries to cash in on the fearsome reputation of some of the ocean’s inhabitants, but has done little to help educate the public of the reality behind the myths.

But more recently, the island’s waters have been the inspiration for a much more down to earth style of film-making — one that’s aimed at educating the public, but one that’s been no less popular if the awards are anything to go by.

Yesterday evening, independent film-makers Guy and Anita Chaumette, hosted a showing of two of their multiple award winning films at City Hall in Hamilton — *The Perfect Reef* and *The Circle of Life*.

It was a welcome return for them to the island, given that Bermuda’s healthy coral reef and world class marine scientists were the inspiration behind the first film, and feature prominently in the second.

Since filming began in 2004, the series has won over 20 major international film awards and has now been snapped up by leading International Film Distrib-

utor TVF International, who recently launched the films for TV Broadcast in Cannes, positioning the series as their ‘top new title of the year’.

But the couple’s route to success has been despite a refusal to bend to the sensational aspect of marine filming that usually wins broadcaster support.

“Broadcasters take the view that anything to do with wildlife has to be dangerous,” said Mr. Chaumette.

“But portraying it like that doesn’t do anything for the wildlife as it shapes the public’s opinion. Broadcasters think that the public like it that way, but they only like it because they don’t know any better. I want to talk about how gentle underwater creatures are.

“It’s like the sting-rays which have been in the media recently — 80 per cent of the world would think they are dangerous because of what happened to Steve Irwin, but it’s not true. I want broadcasters to see they can educate the public at the same time as entertaining them.

“If you want to help wildlife then you have to change the way it’s portrayed. The dolphin is loved because they are portrayed in a nice way, so people will want to protect them. If you portray other marine life like that then the public will be more concerned about conservation.

“The approach does hurt us, because if we put sharks and so on in our



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GUY AND ANITA Chaumette on set for *The Perfect Reef* in Bermuda waters.

movies they would sell better, but to change the trend you need integrity.”

It’s a big ambition, especially so given the self-financing operation consists of just the two of them plus one musician who produces the soundtrack, but it appears to be working.

They have now sold their documentaries to television networks in Finland, Poland, Thailand and France and are currently filming in Fiji and Australia for their next project, which will focus on colour.

Though they’re remaining tight-lipped about it’s contents, they did reveal that the BIOS scientist Dr. James Wood, will feature once more due to his prominence in the field of squid research.

We grabbed them before the showing for a quick chat.

What brought you to Bermuda?

Anita Chaumette: We were trying to find out what a perfect reef was, but the series ended up being

based in Bermuda because the scientists at BIOS were so helpful.

Guy Chaumette: Is there a perfect reef? Probably not, but within the Caribbean area, Bermuda’s reef is very well populated. Bermuda’s special to us as it’s one island that’s managed to do something for its environment — we’ve not really seen that anywhere else. It’s put out laws to protect its environment both top side and underwater.

AC: For example, the ban on fish pots has also helped

the reef — before they were getting covered in algae, but now more fish have come back and they are grazing it off.

What parts of Bermuda will people recognize from *The Perfect Reef*?

GC: There are a lot of landmarks — the beaches, Tobacco Bay and us diving with the BIOS scientists on the reefs. The wrecks of the *Hermes* and the *Marie Celeste* also feature.

Were there any challenges to filming here?

AC: Having to move all our filming gear and our diving gear by scooter was a definite challenge!

GC: The water was a bit cold as well, as when you’re filming you’re not moving about much. We dived mainly in the winter.

How do you compete so successfully with the larger broadcasters?

AC: You need to have the time and the effort to keep going back. We’re self-financing and live on location, so can afford to take as much time as it takes to get a shot — even with a multi-million budget it’s hard to do that.

GC: That’s why broadcasters never put money into tiny creatures — but the tiny creatures are great! For example, we filmed a scene with a yellowhead jawfish where the male keeps the eggs in his mouth until they hatch. There’ve been no scientific papers on

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it, but I presumed the eggs would hatch from the mouth — but that took 18 months to get that together, (as we had no idea of when it would happen). The big productions can’t wait that long.

What message do you want your movies to get across?

GC: We want to show that marine creatures have emotions. I don’t just mean a certain species has a character, but that individual members of each species have their own character too.

At the end of the day we’re doing the same thing as the marine scientists — we’re trying to understand marine life, and often we’ll come to the same conclusions.

For instance, we came to the conclusion that fish like having cleaner fish attach to them — not purely because they remove the parasites, but after observing them over a long period of time we came to the conclusion that the fish enjoyed the tactile stimulation. Unconnectedly a science pa-



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SAY CHEESE: Anita and Guy Chaumette planning their dives.

per in Hawaii came to the same conclusion.

AC: The thing is to show that fish are kind and gentle and that you can interact with them.

The way to protect the environment is by making movies. We hope that people, by seeing our movies, will think about marine life differently and want to protect it.

What inspired you to make underwater documentaries?

GC: I was inspired by watching Cousteau on a

black and white TV. I wanted to be a frogman on the Calypso...and now I’m doing it.

One of the best things that’s happened is when a French newspaper called us the ‘Cousteaus of the 21st century’.

Given that there are still Cousteau family members going around it was a great honour. They (the remaining Cousteaus) had a great opportunity to do something with the Cousteau legacy, but they just used it to make money.

AC: For me it was living in the islands, and also Guy.

What’s been the best moment?

AC: The triple Gold at Euston and best underwater photography award (at the Montana film festival) was the best, as our low budget entry beat the *Imax* entry. Also the Estonia Nature Film Festival — they liked *The Perfect Reef* so much they made a massive effort for us. They gave the Jury Special Prize to *Talking with Fishes*, as they said we

were showing the underwater world in a new light.

Where’s the best place you’ve dived?

GC: Bonaire — you can shore dive anywhere which gives you freedom.

AC: We’ve just been on the Great Barrier Reef on the Heron Islands which is completely protected. It’s hard concentrating on filming fish communicating when in the background you’ve got amazing things like whales swimming around.

How did you get into the industry?

GC: I’ve been a photographer since I was eight-years old and moved into professional diving, as an instructor and then an operator and when I was in my thirties I started taking underwater stills and got into marine biology.

I soon realized that still life doesn’t do it justice — it’s all about behaviour. At the same time I met my future wife. We start five years ago in the *Turks and Caicos* — I was watching a boring documentary on TV, and said ‘since Cousteau there’s been no adventure’, and that was what we wanted to do.

AC: The arrival of the digital era really made

things possible financially. We could edit the films on a computer and could do the whole production by ourselves.

Any tips for aspiring filmmakers?

GC: Whatever you do don’t stop, keep going. The process is enjoyable and it will eventually pay off. It’s an obsessive process — all you can think about is film 16 hours a day.

AC: Don’t expect to make any money. Also, if you’re a couple then it’s much more enjoyable, as you’ve still got someone to talk to!

What’s your next project?

AC: We can’t give all the details, but it will be very visual and pleasing graphically. We’ve been spending some time on the barrier reef and we’re asking the question ‘Do fish have feelings?’ Privately, many scientists believe that they do, but they won’t say it on the record. The timing of the trip’s been lucky for us — over the last two years we’ve built up a relationship with Dr. James Wood at BIOS, and that’s how we found out about his work with squid, which we hope to be able to use.

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