

## **BANANAS!\***

Interview with director Fredrik Gertten with Orvar Säfström

***“I show the real world. But it's the world seen through my eyes, and there are different ways to depict that,” says Fredrik Gertten – filmmaker and journalist.***

Fredrik Gertten is one of Sweden's most prominent documentary film makers. He is well known in his native country for films with a strong connection to the Malmö-region including Architectural projects like the Turning Torso skyscraper (***The Socialist, the Architect and the Twisted Tower***), the Öresund bridge (***Walking on Water***) and the local soccer team (***True Blue***).

***An ordinary family*** is a story about a destitute middle class family in Argentina. It received moderate attention in Sweden, however, it became Gertten's greatest international success with standing ovations from South Korea, the US. to Istanbul and one million television viewers in Poland.

***“I am interested in the universality of a story, and since we finance our films internationally they naturally stretch outside the Swedish border. I want to make films that everyone can understand. None of our films were made for critics or cineastes. One of the best things in my line of work is when people approach me in the street to talk about one of my films.”***

Gertten's latest project BANANAS!\* tells the story of how 12 banana plantation workers from Nicaragua sue the Dole company, one of the biggest food corporations in the world. Dole is accused of knowingly using a banned pesticide in the 70's that may be linked to severe health problems and infertility among workers.

***“What amazed me most is the audacity of a company like Dole to use a pesticide that was known to cause sterility. I wanted to learn more.”***

The Nicaraguan worker's situation is by no means an isolated problem. During production of BANANAS!\*, Gertten was contacted by several other Dole workers with similar stories, in regions as far apart as the Ivory Coast and the Philippines.

***“The bananas we've been eating all these years look to have caused horrendous suffering for these people. To me it is very unsettling to find that out now. Who knows what chemicals are used on bananas today? Who knows if any consequences will be felt in 30 years? I want to highlight the moral dilemma - that the food we eat can have a high price tag for others.”***

Fredrik Gertten started WG-Film in 1994 together with documentary filmmaker Lasse Westman. During the initial years they lived of external projects, investing all company assets in technical equipment, cameras and editing tools.

***“It's easier to get started nowadays, since equipment is so much cheaper. In most cases however, people make one or two films, then they get themselves a "real" job.”***

Before venturing into filmmaking, Fredrik Gertten was a print journalist focusing on long, reflective articles from around the globe. An important aspect of his work can be traced back to those years - his fascination for “the little man.”

***“I'm interested in telling the story of a nation through one single person in the street. That is more rewarding than meeting kings and presidents. For me, one of the greatest tasks of the political documentary is to show "the others". To portray them as fellow human beings we can respect, and not just as victims.”***

Fredrik makes no attempt to hide that the casting is a vital part of his work. It is an often underestimated or even scorned process in the documentary world.

***“A great story without a great main character leaves you with a less than great film. It's as simple as that.”***

The first attorney to bring a case in front of a US jury is Juan Dominguez, a Spanish speaking Cuban exile. In the film, Dominguez bridges the wide gap between the rich world and the poor workers, even though he was just a child when he arrived in the US. Juan is an Los Angeles based personal injury lawyer, specializing in automobile accidents and with a primarily Latino client base. The process against Dole is significantly larger than any case he's previously taken on.

***“We looked up his (Dominguez) web page and it was almost too good to be true. We couldn't have written a better character ourselves. Duane Miller, Juan's partner in this venture, is his exact opposite. Miller may be a more talented trial lawyer and specializes in court cases dealing with toxins and chemical pollution of the environment, but his reluctance to appear in the film is obvious. He wanted to focus completely on the case. That is a very reasonable position, however it does not translate into a great film.”***

Gertten does not shy away from emphasizing certain character traits in the film with a facial expression, a sigh or a grin. At the same time he distances himself from what he calls "reality show dramaturgy" to project set roles onto the people involved.

***“My guideline is that the subjects should be able to recognize themselves. Dole's defense attorney Rick McKnight for instance is in many ways the bad guy in the film, but he is also portrayed as proud, sharp and alert. I don't think he would object to that image of him.”***

This illustrates one of Gertten's convictions, not to create monsters on the screen. In BANANAS!\* this is never more clear than when Dole's former CEO David Delarenzo enters the witness stand. He was directly responsible on site in Nicaragua in the 70's and gave the order to keep using pesticides already banned in the US.

***“And in comes this nice little man with a Nicaraguan wife. The caricature with a tall black hat and a dollar grin seldom fits. Maybe the film would have packed a bigger punch if I had painted everything black and white, but it is just that kind of complexity that fascinates me.”***

Gertten has become more and more secure in his film making. Where he would previously keep the cameras rolling to make sure no great shot was lost, he now works in a more deliberate and controlled fashion. Despite this, the raw material for BANANAS!\* consisted of 50 days of court hearings and 60-70 hours of other footage. First Danish editor Jesper Osmund and dramaturgy consultant Niels Pagh went through everything. Then a strategic meeting was held discussing a possible structure. How does the film open? How do we portray Juan? If the audience doesn't quite like him, will they still root for the plantation workers?

***“US documentaries often begin with a really long cut. In the editing room they initially tend to have a version running several hours, and then they gradually trim it down to an acceptable length. Our method is instead to isolate potential scenes. First, situations with Juan through the entire narrative and next the Nicaraguan family, then Duane. We create several parallel threads that we spend two to three months working on, then we weave these together. This leaves us with an initial running time quite close to the final goal.”***

A lot of the drama is created in editing, but the research and filming sets the tone for the entire film. For Gertten, it is about knowing what he is after. Asking the right question, but also being in the right place at the right time.

***“Sometimes you feel instinctively that a shot will end up in the final cut. I sat in the courtroom when Rick McKnight held his final argument. I had been in Nicaragua, I had met the affected workers and I was intensely provoked by his mocking banter. I wanted my audience to feel the same thing.”***

The final arguments are followed by another scene that puts a sharp focus on our own part in this story. To celebrate, Juan sends an employee to buy some liquor and mixers, and he returns with a bag full of Dole juice.

***“That scene is absolutely real, and it clearly shows how trained we are as consumers. If not even these people think about what juices they buy, what would it take for the rest of us to break the pattern?”***

Gertten points out that even though Dole obviously has an enormous responsibility for the lives of these people, our own attitudes are important as well.

***“I eat less bananas now, but I consciously try not to quit entirely but instead choose Fair trade products. I don't believe in being 100% orthodox. That goes for my private life as well as my films. I don't want to preach morality and BANANAS!\* shouldn't leave the audience feeling guilty and depressed. Change does not come from despair, but from seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, that our actions actually matter.”***