

Tula Goenka

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I am reminded of Thea St.Omer each and every day. The bedside table on which my alarm clock rests, the cotton *dhurrie* throw rugs in both my children's bedrooms, the "Life is a journey/ not a destination" decorative plaque in my office that I frequently point out to my students, are all things I bought from her for a nominal price when she was closing down her store in Marshall Square Mall near Syracuse University.



That summer afternoon was the first time I had met her, and as we got talking it turned out that T was a filmmaker and had attended grad school at NYU. I returned to the store a couple of times—more to talk to T than to purchase things—and we discovered that we knew several people in common, including our mutual mentor, Professor Sam Pollard. Because of last minute staffing changes, we were looking for someone to teach a course in Global Cinema in the Television-Radio-Film department at the S.I. Newhouse School of Communications, where I teach, and I recommended T for the position. She was indeed the perfect fit, and taught the course in Fall 2008, and followed it up with an African-American Cinema class the next semester. As “professors,” we educate our students with the subject matter we teach inside the classroom but we also influence them with our presence and being, and our creative work. One testimony to T’s impact is that one of her former students came to participate in her memorial celebration at the Palace Theater so many years later.

Before her sudden passing, I knew that T was the quintessential guerilla filmmaker, deeply rooted in the local. Her films are raw and unapologetic essays,

both in content and form, and usually deal with people living their lives on the edges of mainstream society: the dispossessed, the disabled, and the marginalized. To tell their stories, T broke all the rules in her documentaries by only showing A-roll (talking heads of her subjects looking into the camera) with no B-roll (cutaways). She does not identify her interviewees with a lower-third graphic, thus letting the words of all the varied people meld into one greater voice. She used amateur actors in her fiction films, and dealt with subjects that are not often discussed, including adultery, alcoholism, and homosexuality. She also worked with some Syracuse University departments to create promotional films for them on topics such as mental disability and inclusion.

I also knew that T was an enthusiastic entrepreneur. Every time I ran into her, she had some other plan she was passionately working on: getting a permit to have a food truck or a small restaurant, raising money for another artistic endeavor, starting some quirky small business. Although she seemed to be perpetually struggling to make ends meet, she had boundless energy and enthusiasm, and it was infectious. I always felt rejuvenated after our meetings, and planned to spend more time with her. Sadly, for one reason or another, that rarely happened.

It was only after it was too late and I was helping Nancy Keefe Rhodes plan T's memorial service and archive her films, that I discovered T's attention to detail. Her digital workflow was meticulous and she understood the necessity to organize, label, and save different versions. She also revisited past projects and reworked them until they were "perfect." Going through the end credits of all her films, I noticed that T maintained her community through her filmmaking. Although she did most of the writing, producing, directing, shooting, and editing on her projects, she collaborated with the same people even if they lived in different places. I also found out that she wrote, painted, filmed and cooked to give physical form to her musings and thoughts, and readily shared them with people around her.

As my "Life is a journey/ not a destination" plaque constantly reminds me, it is the people we meet on our life journey who determine what our story will be. I am better for having known T, however briefly, and I hope and pray that she has finally found the peace she always seemed to be looking for. And perhaps she and I will meet again, in a different time and space, and will be able to spend more time together.



Tula Goenka is a filmmaker, educator, author and human rights activist who started her career working with directors such as Mira Nair, Spike Lee, and James Ivory. She now produces and edits her own documentaries, and teaches film production and Indian cinema at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, where she organized the first anywhere US-to-India professional internship program for film students. She co-directs Syracuse University's annual Human Rights Film Festival and is the author of *Not Just Bollywood: Indian Directors Speak* (2014).