

Manchester-born Joanna clearly has an eye for a story. Her second documentary, *The White Helmets*, is in the running for an Oscar nomination, this time for best documentary short. The 40-minute film is a devastating insight into the work of Syria Civil Defence, a volunteer force colloquially named after their protective headgear. These civilians made the decision not to flee – or fight – but to spend their time rescuing people from bombed-out buildings, often at great personal risk. Indeed, the group burst into the public consciousness when it saved a 10-day-old “miracle baby” from the rubble in Aleppo in 2014. (The rescuer, Khaled Omar, a painter and decorator before the war, was later killed in an airstrike.) Being long-listed is an “honour”, Joanna says, but one tempered by sadness. “Eastern Aleppo has all but been destroyed,” she says. “The situation couldn’t be worse and we’re terrified for those left behind.”

Born to an English mother and an Indonesian father, Joanna has the sort of good looks that another woman might have capitalised on for a career in front of the camera. But her long, dark hair is tied studiously back, she wears minimal make-up, and when she talks, concern speaks as much from a furrowed brow as it does from the sort of lips some would pay for.

She pitched *The White Helmets* in summer 2015 at a rooftop party in Los Angeles thrown by Netflix, *Virunga*’s global distributor, for the film’s Emmy win. “Orlando [von Einsiedel, who had directed *Virunga*] and I had both been following the White Helmets through friends, and when he called me to suggest we do a documentary on them, I agreed straightaway. The commissioner knew I had an idea and asked if I wanted to ring the next day or tell her then,” she explains. “Perhaps buoyed up by a couple of glasses of champagne, I walked her to her car and she listened to my pitch.” They were prepping the new project by November.

But seeing what’s on the ground in northern Syria was not without challenges. “Entering that part of the country was not an option,” Joanna says. “Few journalists go to rebel-held areas and return alive. You see some in Assad-controlled parts with his permission, but those who go to eastern Aleppo too often end up paraded in orange jumpsuits by Isis. As a team, we’re no strangers to conflict areas, >

## Direct ACTION

*The volunteers who risk their lives saving others as the bombs fall in Aleppo are the heroes of the new film by documentary maker Joanna Natasegara. By Ellen Burney*

Ten years ago, British film producer Joanna Natasegara was halfway through her application for a position in the Foreign Office when fate called “Cut!” With an MSc in human rights under her belt, the then 26-year-old was scouted by filmmakers seeking advice about how to navigate their way around the UN for a documentary they were making.

Fast-forward to 2014. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton is pulling Joanna aside to congratulate her on producing the Oscar-nominated documentary *Virunga* at a screening in New York co-hosted by Bill Clinton

and Leonardo DiCaprio (the film’s executive producer). The film investigated the controversial oil exploration of the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, home to endangered mountain gorillas. “Suddenly the number of secret-service personnel in the room doubled, and I saw Hillary at the back, casually leaning against a wall, dressed in trousers and a bomber jacket,” Joanna tells me at her home in south London. “She had real presence.” She wasn’t the only one to make an impact – *Virunga* went on to win nearly 50 international awards.

Joanna Natasegara, photographed at the Prince Regent, SE24. Sittings editor: Julia Brenard. Photographer: Jo Metson Scott



but in Syria there's such a big price on your head it would have been suicide."

How, then, to get from that rarefied rooftop in West Hollywood to eastern Aleppo and the plight of Syrian civilians trapped in their own city? "The White Helmets have wonderful support teams in Istanbul," she explains. "They had hand-held Go Pro cameras, but I travelled out to Turkey and gave them some additional broadcast-quality equipment." The documentary, which was shot over a couple of months from the end of February 2016, consists almost entirely of footage shot by Syrians in the field.

*The White Helmets* made waves across the globe. The *New York Times* ran a trailer for the film alongside a report about George Clooney, Ben Affleck and Daniel Craig among others signing a petition urging the Nobel committee to award its 2016 peace prize to the Syrian volunteer force (the Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos eventually won). Although celebrity activism is often sneered at, Raed Al Saleh, head of the White Helmets, said it was "a huge morale boost" to see such international support for their work. He joined Joanna for a question-and-answer session following a screening of the documentary at the United Nations in New York, hosted by America's ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power. "By making the film, we wanted to raise the profile of what was happening in Syria," Joanna tells me, "and show that, despite the complexities, there were some extraordinarily good people there doing altruistic work against all the odds."

While Hollywood may beckon (there's talk of a feature film), for now, south London is Joanna's base – indeed, her production company, Violet Films, is in the converted attic of her house. She admits that as an Asian woman in film she has faced barriers, but will only say these "episodes" are "to be fought but not dwelt upon", adding, "They've made me more determined in the end." Indeed, it is this determination that has led to films such as *The White Helmets* and *Virunga* getting the green light in the first place. "Film breeds empathy," she says. "Features reach more people than documentaries, but both are important, and there's nothing like the latter to show you a world you didn't think you were interested in. In some cases you need to see the real-life people... With *The White Helmets* I felt the viewer had to physically see what's on the ground."

*The White Helmets* was first screened last year, at the "very prestigious and pretty" but tiny Telluride Film Festival, to the tune of its Damon Albarn-penned title track. "Telluride is full of total cinéastes who have been coming for more than 30 years," Joanna says. (It's where Oscar frontrunners *La La Land* and *Moonlight* both made their American debuts.) Amid the glamour, *The White Helmets* received a rapturous, emotional reception. "We had to hug a few audience members on the way out," Joanna remembers. "The situation is still so awful, it's hard to console people." From Telluride, the documentary went to the Toronto International Film Festival. "It's the opposite," Joanna continues. "It's huge and has thousands of films playing, with most of Hollywood in attendance."

During our conversation Joanna sits quite still, her legs curled up. It's telling of her professional role as an observer, not a performer. There's no dramatic gesticulating or rehearsed storytelling, just a fidgety habit of occasionally pulling at her top lip. She's been

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Rescue workers in Aleppo. The footage for *The White Helmets* was shot by members of the volunteer force themselves

interviewed on CNN, NBC and Fox News, and while this is a successful time for her, it's clearly a challenging one, too. "After *Virunga*, it was hard for Orlando and me to find a story with the same inspiring message, but this has that. The subject matter – daily life in a city under attack – is quite bleak, but the work of the White Helmets restores my faith in humanity."

Joanna married chartered surveyor Lawrence two years ago, with rings made from ethically sourced Congolese gold. So crowded is her schedule, however, that it was a further 18 months before the pair were able to take their honeymoon. They travelled to the Andaman Islands last March,

where they spent most of their time diving and swimming – two of Joanna's passions outside film. "I love scuba diving," she says. "I first learnt in Indonesia and have dived in Borneo, Egypt and the Maldives. I'm very cautious but very, very keen."

She also loves dressing up, and while she wore Prada to the Oscars in 2015, she's undecided what she will wear this year. "I like clothes in extremes," she admits. "Very masculine, but also occasionally very feminine. So 90 per cent of the time I'm in boy clothes, and then it's just a flash of ultra girl." A book lover, she reads anything she can get her hands on, although she's devoted to Jon Ronson. "I've read all of his books," she tells me, adding science podcasts and the *Financial Times* to the list. "I'm an old man, really; I like martinis in Dukes Hotel and the odd John le Carré." She later tells me she's spotted her dream outfit: a navy silk tuxedo with black trim by Rag & Bone.

But what about that abandoned venture into politics – any regrets?

"The artform of film feels just as powerful," she says. "*Virunga* captured the interest of both celebrities and the political elite. It actually worked, it created change." Indeed, since the oil company left the park, the Virunga Foundation that runs it (Joanna now sits on the board) has raised millions of dollars (including sizeable donations from DiCaprio's and Howard G Buffett's foundations) for sustainable development projects.

Does she ever wonder how she ended up here?

"My mother, Barbara, who's the director of an NGO, was a big influence. Like many, she fought to break barriers for us to get where we are, and we have a duty to keep pushing up and breaking down even more of our own." And to keep pushing into corners where there are too few women or people of colour? "Most filmmakers are still wealthy white males but some of the best content is made by women. There still aren't enough coming through as directors, though, much like mainstream politics."

I think we can rest assured, however, that Joanna will keep pushing until that changes.

*"The White Helmets" is on Netflix*