



AFTERIMAGE PUBLIC MEDIA, ITVS and ACTUAL FILMS  
in association with IMPACT PARTNERS  
present

# ***THE ISLAND PRESIDENT***

FROM THE FILMMAKERS OF  
THE RAPE OF EUROPA AND LOST BOYS OF SUDAN

WINNER OF THE TORONTO INT FILM FESTIVAL  
PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD FOR DOCUMENTARY

DIRECTED BY JON SHENK  
PRODUCED BY RICHARD BERGE AND BONNI COHEN

101 MINUTES

**In theatres March 28th!**

**ON FEBRUARY 7, 2012, MOHAMED NASHEED RESIGNED THE PRESIDENCY UNDER THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE IN A COUP D'ETAT PERPETRATED BY SECURITY FORCES LOYAL TO THE FORMER DICTATOR. THIS FILM IS THE STORY OF HIS FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE.**

**SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Jon Shenk's *The Island President* is the story of President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives, a man confronting a problem greater than any other world leader has ever faced—the literal survival of his country and everyone in it. After bringing democracy to the Maldives after thirty years of despotic rule, Nasheed is now faced with an even greater challenge: as one of the most low-lying countries in the world, a rise of three feet in sea level would submerge the 1200 islands of the Maldives enough to make them uninhabitable.

*The Island President* captures Nasheed's first year of office, culminating in his trip to the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009, where the film provides a rare glimpse of the political horse-trading that goes on at such a top-level global assembly. Nasheed is unusually candid about revealing his strategies—leveraging the Maldives' underdog position as a tiny country, harnessing the power of media, and overcoming deadlocks through an appeal to unity with other developing nations. When hope fades for a written accord to be signed, Nasheed makes a stirring speech which salvages an agreement. Despite the modest size of his country, Mohamed Nasheed has become one of the leading international voices for urgent action on climate change.

**LONG SYNOPSIS**

Jon Shenk's *The Island President* tells the story of President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives, a man confronting a problem greater than any other world leader has ever faced—the literal survival of his country and everyone in it.

After leading a twenty-year pro-democracy movement against the brutal regime of [Maumoon Abdul Gayoom](#), surviving repeated imprisonments and torture, Nasheed became president at 41, only to encounter a far more implacable adversary than a dictator—the ocean. Considered the lowest lying country in the world, a rise of a mere three meters in sea level would inundate the Maldives, rendering the country practically unlivable. Unless dramatic changes are made by the larger countries of the world, the Maldives, like a modern Atlantis, will disappear under the waves.

As much as its plight is one-of-a-kind, the Maldives itself is a country like no other. A Shangri-la of breathtakingly beautiful turquoise reefs, beaches, and palm trees, the

Maldives is composed of 1200 coral islands off of the Indian sub-continent, of which 200 are inhabited. Arrayed across 400 miles of open sea like necklace-shaped constellations, the Maldives is one of the most geographically dispersed nations on earth.

Democracy came to the Maldives, a Sunni Muslim country, in 2008, in a way that was uncannily similar to the recent Middle Eastern populist revolts against autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. What made the Maldives movement different from the ones that have followed it is the existence of a clear opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which had in its co-founder, Nasheed, a popular and charismatic leader ready to usher his country into democracy. Educated in Sri Lanka and England, Nasheed proved to be an unusually shrewd and sophisticated politician who grasped that the only way he could stand up to the catastrophic issues of climate change facing his country would be to take the Maldives cause to the world stage.

*The Island President* captures Nasheed's first year of office, a time when he influences the direction of international events in a way that few leaders have ever done, even in countries many times the size of the Maldives. Nasheed's story culminates in his trip to the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009, where the film provides a rare glimpse of the political horse-trading that goes on at such a top-level global assembly. Nasheed is unusually candid about revealing his strategies—leveraging the Maldives' underdog position, harnessing the power of media, and overcoming deadlocks through an appeal to unity with other developing nations. Despite his country's dire situation, Nasheed remains cool, pragmatic and flexible, willing to compromise and try again another day. When all hope fades for any kind of written accord to be signed, Nasheed makes a stirring speech which salvages an agreement. While Copenhagen is judged by many as a failure, it marked the first time in history that China, India, and the United States agreed to reduce carbon emissions.

In this age of political consultants and talking points, it is almost unheard of nowadays for filmmakers to get the astonishing degree of access that director Jon Shenk and his filmmaking team secured from Nasheed in *The Island President*. An award-winning cinematographer as well as a director, Shenk suffuses *The Island President* with the unearthly beauty of the Maldives. Seen from the sky, set against the haunting music of Radiohead, the coral islands seem unreal, more like glowing iridescent creatures than geographic areas. The parallel is apt, as the Maldives are as endangered as any species, and unless strong actions are taken, this magical country could become extinct.

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## **COUP D'ETAT PERPETRATED BY SECURITY FORCES LOYAL TO THE FORMER DICTATOR.**

### **THE ISLAND PRESIDENT**

#### **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

Shortly after Mohamed Nasheed was elected President in 2008, he began taking some actions that drew international media attention. First he made a public statement saying that, although it was wonderful to have democracy in his country, they needed to find new land, because the Maldives were going to be underwater. He seriously floated the idea of the people of the Maldives relocating to a new homeland in India or Australia or somewhere else. In 2009, he pledged to make the Maldives the first country to go carbon neutral within a decade by moving towards renewable energy sources. "I thought, 'this guy sounds incredible,'" says director Jon Shenk ("Lost Boys of Sudan"), "he's not afraid to make dramatic, honest pronouncements to call the world's attention to his country's problem." Together with his filmmaking partners, Richard Berge and Bonni Cohen, he set out to make a film on Nasheed.

To begin with, the filmmakers began a series of conversations with Nasheed's international press liaison, Paul Roberts. While many TV crews had previously done stories on Nasheed, what they were proposing was something much more ambitious and intrusive than Roberts had ever previously arranged. Says Shenk: "I felt that the way to make people care would be to humanize the Maldives by portraying Nasheed as personally as possible. That could only work if the camera could go into places you normally can't go with a political leader—their home, their private office, diplomatic meetings—to see how they act around their trusted colleagues, staff, and other leaders."

Unfortunately, Roberts told the filmmakers that they'd have to come to the Maldives to find out if Nasheed would even take part in the kind of film they were imagining. "He told us, 'the President doesn't work in the abstract,'" says Shenk. "You have to come here and make your pitch in person." While it was a costly leap of faith for the filmmakers to journey to the Maldives without a commitment, they had no choice: soon Shenk and Berge were on a 16-hour flight to Dubai, followed by another five-hour flight to the faraway island archipelago in the Indian Ocean. "During the last few hours of the flight, all we saw out the window was water," says Shenk, "until suddenly we laid eyes on these amazingly beautiful islands."

When Shenk and Berge sat down to speak with Nasheed the next morning, they discovered he was not one to waste time: "Tell me what you want to do," he said. As the filmmakers breathlessly attempted to spell out their plan, it was clear that Nasheed wasn't familiar with the kind of documentary they envisioned, and the high level of access it would require. "He listened to us for five minutes," says Shenk, "and then he agreed." Says Nasheed: "I thought, well, seeing as they are here, we might as well let them film what they have come all this way to film. Also, we felt we didn't have anything to hide, so why not allow us to be filmed." Hours later, the filmmakers were shooting. Over the coming year they would film Nasheed for 78 days in five continents. "We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into at the start," says Nasheed. "I thought they just wanted to do a longer interview than normal and would leave after a few days. I didn't expect them to stay for a year!"

Gaining and maintaining access to Nasheed's official and unofficial life was a constant battle. "We were pushing for a level of access unheard of for a head of state. Plus, the culture in the Maldives has a sense of removal for the office of the presidency, leftover from years of dictatorship. We constantly had to re-explain ourselves," says Shenk, "not only to Nasheed, but to his family, his staff, to the press corps that surrounded him in the Maldives, and to secret service at international events." When it came to bilateral meetings with leaders of other countries, the protocol is that media are allowed in the room to shoot photo ops, but are expected to leave as soon after the group shakes hands. "Fortunately for us, Nasheed doesn't play by the diplomatic protocols," says Berge. "As soon as he shakes hands with somebody he gets right down to business. The diplomats and other leaders wouldn't be ready for that. Even in the cases where we were eventually asked to leave, we were still be able to get a few moments of candid discussion on tape."

There was a tense moment when, in a private meeting in India during the lead-up to Copenhagen, the film crew was asked to leave. "We were really despairing about the prospects of the film," says Shenk, "but right after the meeting ended, Nasheed invited us back in the room. He told us that he understood that we wanted to film everything possible, but there were certain situations he couldn't control. When he was meeting with somebody from another country, he could advocate for us to be there, but only so far—ultimately he couldn't jeopardize his work.

What developed from that point was the unstated understanding that Nasheed would press as hard as possible to keep the camera in the room, but the crew would leave if it became evident the meeting couldn't continue with them there. "At the time we felt frustrated we were never getting enough," says Shenk, "and it was finally in the edit room that I realized we had captured a trove of scenes unprecedented from a sitting head of state."

The extra access that Nasheed offered the filmmakers was never more evident than at the Copenhagen Climate Summit, where they were credentialed as members of the Maldivian delegation rather than as journalists. While their camera and microphone made them look like press, their badges allowed them to go into areas where journalists weren't allowed to go. Without the credential, the filmmakers wouldn't even have been able to capture the internal discussions among the Maldivians. "Being in close proximity to the President gave us access to his interactions with the leaders of other countries."

Another hurdle was dealing with the Maldivian Divehi language while shooting internal meetings among cabinet members and staff. "When they were speaking in Divehi, we often had no idea what they were talking about," says Berge. "Instinct took over, and Jon had to follow verbal cues very carefully to cover the scene with his camera. He didn't know who was going to respond next."

Acquiring archival footage for the historical sections of "The Island President" was not an easy task, as there was no museum or national registry to search. While a lot of camcorder and cell phone video had been shot of police brutality and other events during the pro-democracy demonstrations, a large part of that material had been confiscated during police sweeps of phones and tapes. The filmmakers were eventually directed to the videographer for the democracy movement, who supplied many valuable images from those events. Other visual sources included police surveillance tapes that had been created to single out activists for arrests, and material from TV Maldives, the state-run TV network. "Nothing was labeled, and they were on a gazillion different formats," says Cohen. It was really challenging." Adds Berge: "The people at TV Maldives, the state-run TV network, seemed very nervous about giving us anything. I think they were apprehensive that the opposition might get back into power and they would be vulnerable for having given us footage of the old dictator."

Nasheed has a willingness to take risks that is rare in other politicians. "One common response we've had from people who have seen the film at early stages," says Shenk, "is that they wished our President was that unafraid to be honest, and stand up for what he believes in. I think those kinds of leaders are very unusual, because it requires a tremendous amount of charisma in order to keep the people on your side, and a tremendous lack of fear for your political future." Adds Berge: "Other diplomats and leaders know that Nasheed has been imprisoned and tortured for his principles, and that history gives him an uncommon gravity and street cred, which results in him having a degree of influence far greater than the size of the country would warrant."

With the U.S., China, India, and other larger countries reluctant to take action on climate change, it might seem hard to believe that a politician from a tiny country, no matter how shrewd or charismatic, can make a difference, but Nasheed is highly motivated to try, and is in a position to speak his mind in a way that other world leaders are unable to. “He doesn’t have to answer to the oil tycoons, the energy tycoons and to the car companies,” says Shenk. “He’s an individual whose entire country will going to be affected by what they do.” Says Cohen: “He is in a position to say what no one else can say. And the things that he is able to move forward as a result of being able to do that really matter. Although Copenhagen was viewed by many as a failure, Nasheed was able to play a critical role there in moving the climate negotiations forward. He helped keep the process from collapsing, and that work has already been built upon in subsequent climate meetings, even if it’s slower than some would want.”

“The thing about climate change that’s different than anything we’ve ever dealt with in the past,” says Shenk, “is that it’s so slow. It’s not like there’s an invading army in our backyard, and we need to rise up against it. It’s this slow, amorphous thing, and even when dramatic examples of extreme weather happen, people tend to focus on them for awhile and then let it pass from their mind, particularly if it happens somewhere far away.”

Perhaps Nasheed’s experience of struggling for twenty years to get democracy and civil rights for his country—and succeeding—has made him unafraid of a tough, seemingly unwinnable fight. “When he was a teenager,” says Shenk, “he realized that his country was ruled by an unfair government, and he essentially decided to get up every day and work towards a better system. It was a case of him simply putting one foot in front of another. If he got knocked down, he got back up and continued the fight. Even though it might seem crazy or impossible to do something about the world’s climate situation, I think in his mind it’s just the work you do every day—getting up and figuring out what the next move is in this grand plan. And he clearly enjoys it.”

# # #

**THE ISLAND PRESIDENT**

**CAST LIST, IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE**



**Mohamed "Anni" Nasheed**

President of the Republic of Maldives



**Ahmed Naseem**

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs  
(currently Minister of Foreign Affairs)



**Mohamed Aslam**

Minister of Housing and Environment



**Aminath Shauna**

Deputy Undersecretary, President's Office



**Mohamed Zuhair**

Press Secretary, President's Office



**Laila Ali**

Wife of President Mohamed Nasheed



**Ahmed Moosa**

President's Envoy for Science and Technology



**Paul Roberts**

Advisor on International Media &  
Communications, President's Office



**Dr. Mohamed Waheed**

Vice President of the Republic of Maldives



**Mark Lynas**

President's Advisor on Climate Change



**Mohamed Ziyad**

Executive Services Secretary, President's Office



**Dr. Ahmed Shaheed**

Minister of Foreign Affairs  
(currently UN Special Rapporteur on Iran)



**Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed**

Ambassador to the United Nations



**Ibrahim Hussein Zaki**

Special Envoy to the President



**Iruthisham Adam**

Ambassador to the UN Offices at Geneva

## **THE ISLAND PRESIDENT**

### **ABOUT THE MALDIVES**

- Situated in the Indian Ocean, 340 km (210 miles) southwest of India and stretching 750 km (450 miles) south past the Equator.
- An archipelago of approximately 1,200 coral islands, of which 200 are inhabited. The number rises to 2,000 when including all land forms like sandbanks and reefs that are exposed at low tide.
- Lowest country on earth: average elevation is 1.5 meters above sea level; highest point is 2.5 meters; 80% of the land is less than 1 meter above sea level.
- The low level of the Maldives makes it very sensitive to sea level rise, with some scientists fearing that it could be underwater by 2050 or 2100.
- 400 miles of coastline
- Population: nearly 400,000, a quarter of whom live in the capital island, Malé.
- A former British Protectorate that gained full independence in 1965. The Republic of Maldives has been led by three presidents since independence:

Amir Ibrahim Nasir	(1968 – 1978)
Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	(1978 – 2008)
Mohamed Nasheed	(2008 – present)

## THE ISLAND PRESIDENT

### **ABOUT MOHAMED NASHEED**

- Born in 1967 to a merchant family in the capital island, Malé.
- Attended Dauntsey's School and Liverpool John Moore's University in the UK.
- January 1990: Arrested by Gayoom regime for publishing the political magazine, *Sangu*.
- November, 1990: Arrested and kept in solitary confinement for 18 months. His then-girlfriend Laila Ali also arrested and sentenced to 6 months of house arrest.
- 1991: Named a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International.
- 1992: Held incommunicado for 14 months on the prison island of Gamaadhoo.
- 1996: Arrested again for political writings—detained for 3 months followed by house arrest.
- 1997: Nasheed and Laila's first daughter, Meera, is born.
- 1999: Wins election to the Maldivian parliament (the *Majlis*).
- 2001: Nasheed is arrested on false charges and loses his seat in parliament. While jailed in solitary confinement, Nasheed and Laila's second daughter, Zaya, is born.

Banished to Angolhitheem island (pop. 30) for 6 months, followed by 3 months of house arrest.

- 2003: Eevan Naseem is beaten to death during torture at the Maafushi prison. The incident sparks riots at the prison and in Malé. Nasheed leaves the country.

An exile in Sri Lanka, Nasheed co-founds the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), and party members lobby governments around the world for recognition.

- 2004: Granted political asylum in the UK.
- 2005: Returns to the Maldives to resume political activity at home, participating in a repeating cycle of peaceful demonstrations and arrests.
- 2008: Domestic and international pressure forces Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives 30 year ruler, to hold the country's first multi-party presidential elections.

Nasheed wins the election and is sworn in as president on November 11, 2008.

- 2009: Pledges to make the Maldives the first country to go carbon neutral within a decade by moving to renewable energy sources (March, 2009)

*Time* magazine names Nasheed as one of its 2009 Heroes of the Environment (September, 2009).

Nasheed addresses world leaders at the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit in New York (September, 2009).

To dramatize the threat that climate change poses to the Maldives, Nasheed dons SCUBA equipment and presides over the world's first underwater cabinet meeting (October, 2009).

Nasheed attends the Copenhagen Climate Conference (December, 2009).

- 2010: Nasheed awarded the Champions of the Earth Award, the United Nation's most prestigious environmental prize.

## THE ISLAND PRESIDENT

### THE FILMMAKERS

#### **JON SHENK (DIRECTOR / CINEMATOGRAPHER)**

Jon Shenk was the DP for the Academy Award-winning SMILE PINKI (2009). He won an Emmy for BLAME SOMEBODY ELSE (2007, PBS/Exposé). Shenk directed and photographed LOST BOYS OF SUDAN, Independent Spirit Award winner in 2004. He co-directed and photographed DEMOCRACY AFGHAN STYLE (2004). In 2005, he directed and photographed THE NEW HEROES. Early in his career, he directed and photographed THE BEGINNING (1999), a chronicle of George Lucas's Star Wars: Episode I. Shenk has produced and photographed dozens of documentaries for PBS, the BBC, A&E, Bravo, CBS, NBC, and National Geographic Television. He has been nominated twice for Emmys for his cinematography. He earned his Master's degree in Documentary Filmmaking from Stanford University in 1995 and his Bachelor's degree from Yale in 1991.

#### **RICHARD BERGE (PRODUCER)**

Richard Berge wrote, produced and directed THE RAPE OF EUROPA (2006) which was nominated for two Emmy Awards and for Best Documentary Screenplay by the Writers Guild of America. Working with director Barry Levinson, he wrote and produced YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS (1999). He was the line producer for Jon Else's SING FASTER: THE STAGEHAND'S RING CYCLE (1999). He wrote and produced profiles of visual and performing artists for MAKE: TELEVISION (2008) and SPARK! (2003-04), two weekly series for public television. Before completing the Master's program in Documentary Filmmaking at Stanford University in 1994, Berge worked at the Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He received his Bachelor's degree from Stanford University in 1984.

#### **BONNI COHEN (PRODUCER)**

Bonni Cohen recently produced and directed INSIDE GUANTANAMO (2009) for National Geographic Television. She produced and directed THE RAPE OF EUROPA (2006), nominated for two Emmy Awards and Best Documentary Screenplay by the Writers Guild of America. With director Jon Else, she produced WONDERS ARE MANY (2006). Cohen co-produced DEMOCRACY AFGHAN STYLE (2004). In 2003, she produced and directed THE NEW HEROES. In 2001, Cohen produced and directed THE NOBEL: VISIONS OF OUR CENTURY (2001). She directed and produced KOFI ANNAN: EYE OF THE STORM (1999). She produced THEY DREW FIRE (1998). Her other works include THE HUMAN SEXES with Desmond Morris. She produced Jon Else's film, OPEN OUTCRY (2000). Before coming to documentary film, Cohen worked as a journalist for Reuters Television and NBC, based in London and Jerusalem. Cohen earned a Masters degree in Documentary Film from Stanford University in 1994 and Bachelor's degree in International Relations from Tufts University in 1987.

**JON ELSE (EXECUTIVE PRODUCER)**

Jon Else is an award-winning filmmaker who, for thirty years, has made prime-time documentaries for public television. His films include THE DAY AFTER TRINITY: J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER AND THE ATOMIC BOMB (1981), YOSEMITE: THE FATE OF HEAVEN (1988), three films of the CADILLAC DESERT series (1997), SING FASTER (1998), and OPEN OUTCRY (2001). He worked closely with Henry Hampton at Blackside, Inc., where he served as series producer for EYES ON THE PRIZE: AMERICA'S CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS (1987) and as consulting producer on THE GREAT DEPRESSION (1993) and AMERICA'S WAR ON POVERTY (1995). His feature documentary WONDERS ARE MANY: THE MAKING OF DOCTOR ATOMIC premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. Else co-directed GUANTANAMO (2009) with Bonni Cohen for National Geographic Television, and he worked closely with Actual Films as editorial consultant on THE RAPE OF EUROPA (2006). Else is a Professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a MacArthur Fellow and has won four National Emmys, several Alfred I. DuPont and Peabody awards, the Prix Italia, the Sundance Special Jury Prize and Sundance Filmmaker's Trophy, as well as several Academy Award Nominations.

**PEDRO KOS (EDITOR)**

Pedro Kos edited the Academy Award nominated documentary WASTE LAND directed by Lucy Walker. WASTE LAND has received numerous awards including the audience awards at both the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival. Kos has also frequently collaborated with Academy Award winner Freida Lee Mock, and Sundance winner Jessica Sanders both as an editor and as a second unit director. He was the editor and second unit director on Ms. Mock's SING CHINA! And previously he was the second unit director on Ms. Sanders new film MARCH OF THE LIVING. He began his career as an editor on the making-of documentary to Terrence Malick's THE NEW WORLD. Kos was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and raised both there and in New York City and Miami, Florida. He received his Bachelor's degree in theater directing from Yale University.

**THE ISLAND PRESIDENT**

**CREDITS**

DIRECTED BY JON SHENK

PRODUCED BY RICHARD BERGE, BONNI COHEN

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JON ELSE

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JON SHENK

EDITED BY PEDRO KOS

SOUND RECORDIST LINCOLN ELSE

CO-EDITOR JOSH PETERSON

SOUND EDITOR JAMES LeBRECHT

MUSIC BY RADIOHEAD, STARS OF THE LID

ADDITIONAL MUSIC COMPOSED BY MARCO D'AMBROSIO

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER FOR ITVS SALLY Jo FIFER

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DAN COGAN

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