



ASSASSINS

DIRECTED BY Ryan White

RELEASE DATE: February 11, 2021

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February 11**

ACMI, Melbourne: starts February 12

Perth Festival February 15-19, 21

RUNNING TIME 1 hour 44 mins

RATED TBC

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TAGLINE

The audacious murder of the brother of North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jon-un in a crowded Malaysian airport sparked a worldwide media frenzy.

SYNOPSIS

In 2017, Kim Jong-nam - the half-brother of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un - was assassinated in the bustling departures hall of Malaysia's international airport. The spectacularly brazen murder happened in broad daylight, filmed entirely by security cameras. Footage showed two young women approaching Jong-nam from behind, covering his eyes with their hands, and pressing VX - the most lethal nerve gas on earth - into his eyes. He stumbled away and was dead within an hour. But if the murder was extreme, the story that came next was even more bizarre.

The latest film from Ryan White, the award-winning director of *The Case Against 8* and *Ask Dr. Ruth*, tells an extraordinary tale of manipulation and subterfuge in the age of social media. A masterful investigation that offers an unprecedented look at a real-life murder story, *ASSASSINS* is the wildly improbable tale of a calculating dictator, a nefarious plot, a very public murder and two women fighting for their lives.

INTERVIEW WITH RYAN WHITE & JESSICA HARGRAVE

What drew you to this project? How did you get involved?

Ryan White (RW): Kim Jong-nam was assassinated in February of 2017. To go back and look at history, that was Donald Trump's first full month in office. Most Americans, when I talk to them about the assassination, remember it as a huge news story the day that it happened, but very quickly it subsided in the American news because so much of the airwaves were dedicated to Trump. The assassination became one of those stories that everyone remembers happened but they don't remember exactly what happened. They remember bits and pieces, they remember that it was something sensational. People say, "Weren't they female assassins?" And then they have some crazy version of how the women killed Kim Jong-nam, and those stories are always very elaborate and wrong: We've heard poisonous lipstick, we've heard darts, we've heard guns—everything but what actually happened. I was one of those people too. But in late 2017, a journalist named Doug Bock Clark reached out to us. We had just released *The Keepers* on Netflix, which had become this true crime phenomenon, and Clark had written an article in GQ called *The Untold Story of Kim Jong-nam's Assassination*. It was a really amazing investigative deep dive into the Indonesian assassin Siti Aisyah. It was pretty explosive and one of the most popular online articles that year. Doug happened to have gone to the same university as I did. We didn't overlap, he's younger than I am, but he knew I was a documentary filmmaker, he'd heard of *The Keepers*, and he was getting a lot of outreach from documentary companies to option his article. He reached out just to say, "Can you give me advice on this?" So Jess and I had a phone call with him and after that phone call we thought, "Maybe we should do this project ourselves." Just a month or two later I went with Doug to Malaysia on a preliminary trip where he and I and a cameraperson met a lot of the undercover sources that he had used in his article, and also Siti's lawyers. That shoot solidified for me that this was too amazing of a story not to be part of. The trial of Siti and Doan Thi Huong was just getting started so we knew we had a great through line and that we could return to Malaysia to film at key junctures. That was the beginning of what became a two-year long shoot. And Doug is one of our executive producers on the film.

Jessica Hargrave (JH): As much as many people, Ryan and I included, recognized when the story broke that it was so bizarre, once we dug into it, it was even more bizarre. That was really striking to both of us. Initially we had no idea about what had actually happened so when we found that out, we knew we wanted to do this project, to learn more, to get to know the people who were involved.

The way that you've constructed the film, it creates a real sense of apprehension about whether Siti and Doan will be found guilty and put to death. Since you started filming at the beginning of the trial, what was it like to be on that rollercoaster of not knowing what would happen to them?

RW: I think worldwide almost everyone presumed that Siti and Doan were guilty, that they must have been part of this regime in some way, or that they were paid assassins. No one would ever jump to the conclusion that two people could be tricked into pulling off a major political assassination. Then having read Doug's article and been on the ground in Malaysia with people who were saying, "Wait, wait, you need to look at all of the evidence, we need to show you the full story of the background of these women," that was the most eye-opening part. As we began to entrench ourselves in the worlds of the women—which are completely different worlds, Siti and Doan are from different countries, they have different backgrounds, they have different

educations—it was really chilling, the idea of what might have happened to them. We were always very careful of assuming that they weren't assassins, and I think that is the real process that unfolds through the film—by the end there is a glaring absence of evidence that they were knowing assassins. That was the real emotional process for us. And because I consider myself a very personal documentary filmmaker—I like getting to know the people I work with and living inside of their lives for a few years—it was so strange to make a film where the main characters were two women I had never met. I got to see them every day as they were escorted into court with Uzis but I'd never physically spent any time with them or spoken to them. That was a different way of filmmaking for us and eye-opening as well.

At what point in it all did you conclude the women were not guilty?

RW: Once the lawyers opened up and we saw the evidence. One of the real cachés of our film is that it documents the actual evidence—evidence that never came out in court, or in the press for that matter, because the women were released before the defence had to present. I've done films about lawyers before; law is by nature the most conservative and careful industry in the world, so to make a film side by side with them can be pretty tricky. We probably spent more time with the lawyers than anyone else to win their trust. And once both legal teams were willing to turn over everything that they had—the women's digital footprint, all of their text messages, all of their social media profiles—and we were able to look through it and connect the dots ourselves on their communications with the North Koreans and the people who connected them to the North Koreans, there was just such an absence of anything that pointed to their knowledge of what they were doing. It was during that research that it became obvious to us that they might have been duped.

Once you had the sense that they had been duped into this, was it hard to watch them on trial?

RW: Totally. Everybody on the ground thought that they were going to be convicted, the odds were so stacked against them. So the more we realized that they might be innocent and the further it got into the trial and the more likely it looked that they were going to be executed, the more heart-wrenching it was. Somewhat morbidly we assumed that because they were going to be convicted and sentenced to death, we were going to have to have our film ready to go at that very moment. Our plan was to release the film right after they were convicted but before they were put to death to try to start a sort of international outcry, to use our film to prove their innocence since it wasn't coming out in the courtroom. The lawyers are very compelling, very smart, and clearly very dedicated to their clients.

How did they come to be representing Siti and Doan? And were you struck by their dedication to their clients?

RW: Siti was represented by the Gooi & Azura law firm. They have a contract with the Indonesian embassy in Kuala Lumpur so any time an Indonesian citizen in Malaysia is on trial facing the death penalty, they get that case. They automatically appeared for Siti from the moment she was charged. Doan's situation was a little bit different: The Vietnam Bar Association ended up hiring a team to represent her, three different lawyers in two different firms. Hisyam Teh Poh Teik, the main character in our film who's her representative, is a big-time lawyer in Malaysia and in death penalty cases specifically. We feel that Siti's and Doan's lawyers don't get enough credit for how brave what they were doing actually was. They were two of the only groups to publicly point the finger at North Korea in a way that the Malaysian government would not, in the way that other foreign governments would not. It was almost as if

nobody wanted to take on that assertion, to say clearly that even if these women were the assassins, they were not the masterminds. The lawyers were so unafraid of doing that from the moment I met them. These are people who don't have their own protection, people living day-to-day lives in Kuala Lumpur, a city North Korean agents had obviously infiltrated to organize this whole plot. But they were so unafraid of pointing to what the real story was. I don't think that they get enough credit so hopefully the film shows that.

The two journalists you include in the film are also very compelling. How did you find them?

RW: Hadi Azmi, the Malaysian journalist, we found on the ground. I'm not the type of filmmaker who puts myself in my films so there was no real shepherd to take us through the trial or Malaysian culture and the Malaysian judicial system. Then we met Hadi. The press was at the courthouse every day of the trial and most members were from all over Asia—we were one of the few Western teams that was always there. Everybody got to know each other really well because court would last all day long and you'd just be sitting outside waiting for press conferences or to find out what happened that day. We were really compelled by Hadi right away, and especially because he works for an international organization, he was able to somewhat circumvent the restrictions on press freedom in Malaysia; we knew his reporting was allowed to go outside the scope of what some other Malaysian reporters were allowed to do. So we began spending a lot of time with him. In the film, he tells the story of what is going down locally. Anna Fifield, who is the Beijing bureau chief of The Washington Post, is pretty renowned as a journalist and she published a book last year called *The Great Successor*, which is an amazing account of Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un is so often lampooned, as we know that led to the whole Sony hack a few years ago, how he was portrayed in that film. I feel like he's often seen as a caricature—he's laughed at, Trump calls him "Rocketman"—and Anna's book really traced his pathway to power in a way that treats him seriously. When we read her book, it was like a missing link from our film. We're verité filmmakers who were following this trial and these women's lives, we didn't have that big-picture view of the arc of Kim Jong-un's rise to power and what role Kim Jong-nam's assassination played in that rise. So when we read Anna's book we knew she was the perfect person to tell that story.

There's a theme to the whole story about vulnerability and the exploitation of young women—it's almost as if they have to force themselves to be gullible because they're so desperate to survive and find a way forward. Is that something that drew you to the story or something that you hadn't really been aware of but that you became more aware of as you made the film?

JH: I think that definitely drew us to the film. The story feels so bizarre, and so distant that in a way your first thought is that you don't relate to these women. And then as you dig deeper into it and you realize exactly what happened to them, you recognize that this could have happened to anybody—that this appeal of fame and opportunity and a better life, particularly when you are more vulnerable, could lead you to do things that others may see as ridiculous. I think when you're hoping so much to find a better life for yourself and you're presented with something that seems like it will give you that, of course you're going to want to do it. And also they had seen it happen successfully to other people around the world, people who had found fame and fortune with social media and Internet opportunities. So it didn't seem far-fetched that it could happen to them. What's so interesting about it is that in the end it did bring them fame but for the worst possible reason, for a crime neither of them knew they were committing. To see them toward the end with all of these cameras was just so ironic because in a way that's what they both wanted but certainly not under those circumstances.

Did you sit around and wonder how on earth the North Koreans came up with this plan?

RW: That is something that we were always batting around. And there's going to be no answer. No one will ever know why it was done in such a spectacle. There are various theories around the personality of Kim Jong-un, who loves the world of pop culture and spectacle, that perhaps that world influenced the choice of the way to do it. The one common denominator that most people come to is that this murder was a message to opponents of the Kim regime that you're never safe no matter where you are, that they can get you at any time. This murder was so brazen and so terrifying, done in a public space, all over camera, by people who might not even be assassins and in a way that would grab the headlines in a sensational way. It's a warning to all of North Korea's enemies.

JH: Even though there are so many factors that implicate North Korea and specifically Kim Jong-un, we can't say for sure. Assuming he is responsible, he had so many ways and opportunities to kill Kim Jong-nam and yet he chose to do it this way. He created an international spectacle. He had women from two different countries, he did it in a major international airport in a third country, so already he's roping in the governments of three countries, who all have to decide how to deal with him and what to do about these two women who are left to be the scapegoats. I agree that it's showing the power that he has and it's also showing that he can get away with anything and that he doesn't care if other people suffer as long as he gets what he wants. When Siti says, "They thought I was nothing" - yes, they did. They left the women behind to take the fall and got their own people out immediately.

What was it like after the trial was over to film Siti and Doan back in their home countries?

RW: To me they were the most famous of famous people by that point, I'd been tracking every part of their lives. So it was surreal. I met Siti first and then Doan later. I'd been at Siti's house a couple of times already to meet her family, but to show up there and see her actually walk out of the door gave me goosebumps in a good way like, "Oh my god, how did she survive this?" A few months later, I got to meet Doan on the day of her release—I literally met her on the airplane before we took off for Hanoi. Her lawyers brought me to her seat and introduced me to her. To get to shake her hand and say, "I've been making a film about you for two years, I'm so happy that you're safe and that I get to meet you in person" was a very special moment. They're both almost the opposite of how I perceived them through the trial. I thought Siti was going to be this very quiet and meek persona. But she has a huge personality, fun and jovial. Meeting her really humanized her in a way I had not gotten during the trial. I felt, this is a young woman who's just like any of my friends or any of the people I grew up with. And she could have died multiple times: She was exposed to VX and she was facing the death penalty. When I met Doan, she was much quieter than I imagined she would be. She had had such aspirations for so long to be famous and she had tried so hard to reach that goal. It was sad to see her spirit and ambition somewhat broken by this whole experience.

What for each of you is the most powerful moment in the film?

JH: Every time that our team followed the women at trial, day in and day out, the women were immediately escorted onto the elevator and up to the courtroom. And one day the elevator wasn't there on time so the women had to wait a second and our cameraman was able to get this single shot of Doan clenching her fists with her handcuffs on. That shot gives me goosebumps because you can just feel what she's feeling. Her hands are bound behind her and she's feeling so much emotion and that's how she's expressing it—with these hands that she can't

move as she walks into a courtroom where she listens to a trial that's not in her native tongue and faces the death penalty. It just brings it home to me what she was feeling inside that whole time for years of trial not knowing what her fate would be. That was the most powerful moment for me.

RW: When I watch certain scenes, I'm back in those moments. There's a place in Hanoi called Hay Bar and it's where Doan was recruited by the North Koreans. To actually go to that place—undercover, just me and my DP John Benam and a Vietnamese fixer—to go to this tiny little bar in a bustling part of Hanoi and to be in this place where Doan said that everything changed in her life... we were sitting next to North Koreans because North Koreans are everywhere in Hanoi. Also, that moment when Siti walks out of the courthouse. We had heard the same thing that Hadi says in the film, that something big was going to happen that day. But we never imagined that it would be her leaving the courthouse as a free woman. To see her walk out of the courtroom without handcuffs was so shocking and confusing.

What would you like the impact of the film to be?

RW: I feel that the nexus of the film is the exploitation of young women. I think even though this story goes in the most warped, bizarre, perverse direction, in the end these were women who were exploited because of the circumstances that they were in, who were vulnerable. And that is happening worldwide. One of the more heartbreaking parts of the film is when Doan says that the world used to be pink to her and now she won't trust people in the same way that she did. It's so sad because that was robbed from her, why shouldn't she be allowed to be trusting? But this film illustrates how dangerous the world can be if you are too trusting.

JH: I hope that people will realize that they should look beyond the headlines, to try to understand the deeper story. I do think that one of the things that's a beautiful part of the film is the friendship of these two women. They were judged so harshly and so quickly, they had no connection besides this one horrible moment in time for each of them, and they were able to form a lasting friendship through different languages and jail cell walls.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ryan White - Director, Producer

Ryan White is the director of *Visible: Out on Television*, the first documentary series on Apple TV+. Premiering in February, the five-part series explores the history of the LGBTQ movement through the lens of television. White is the director of *Ask Dr. Ruth*, a documentary portrait now available on Hulu which chronicles the incredible life of Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a Holocaust survivor who became America's most famous sex therapist. He also directed *The Keepers*, an Emmy-nominated seven-part Netflix documentary series that investigates the unsolved murder of a young nun in Baltimore and the horrific secrets and pain that linger nearly five decades after her death. White co-directed *The Case Against 8*, a behind-the-scenes look at the five-year battle to overturn Proposition 8. The film won the Directing Award at Sundance, had its broadcast premiere on HBO, was nominated for two Emmys and was shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary. White also directed *Serena* (Epix), a year in the life of tennis legend Serena Williams, *Good Ol' Freda* (Magnolia Pictures), which tells the story of the Beatles' long-time secretary Freda Kelly, and *Pelada* (PBS, Cinetic), a journey around the world through the lens of pick-up soccer. White graduated from Duke University with a certificate from the Center for Documentary Studies.

Jessica Hargrave - Producer

Jessica Hargrave is the producer of *Visible: Out on Television*, the first documentary series on Apple TV+. Premiering in February, the five-part series explores the history of the LGBTQ movement through the lens of television. Hargrave also produced *Ask Dr. Ruth* (Hulu), a documentary portrait chronicling the incredible life of Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a Holocaust survivor who became America's most famous sex therapist. She is executive producer of *The Keepers*, a seven-part Emmy-nominated Netflix documentary series that investigates the unsolved murder of a young nun in Baltimore and the horrific secrets and pain that linger nearly five decades after her death. Prior to *The Keepers*, Hargrave was the producer/writer of *Good Ol' Freda* (Magnolia Pictures), which tells the story of the Beatles' long-time secretary Freda Kelly, and the co-producer of *The Case Against 8* (HBO), a behind-the-scenes look at the five-year battle to overturn Proposition 8. *The Case Against 8* was nominated for two Emmys and shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary. Hargrave was the producer of marketing and distribution for *Pelada*, a journey around the world through the lens of pick-up soccer. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Emory University.

Doug Bock Clark - Executive Producer

Doug Bock Clark is an executive producer of *Assassins* and the author of the GQ magazine article that inspired it. A Correspondent for *GQ* and a Contributor for *The New Yorker* magazine, his journalism has received numerous honours. His first book, *The Last Whalers*, was chosen as one of the best 100 books of 2019 by *The New York Times* and was a finalist for the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Book Award.

Geralyn White Dreyfous - Executive Producer

Geralyn Dreyfous has a wide, distinguished background in the arts, extensive experience in consulting in the philanthropic sector, and participates on numerous boards and initiatives.

Geralyn is the Founder and Board Chair of the Utah Film Center, a non-profit that curates free screenings and outreach programs for communities throughout Utah. In 2007, she co-founded Impact Partners Film Fund with Dan Cogan, bringing together financiers and filmmakers so that they can create great films that entertain audiences, enrich lives, and ignite social change. Since its inception, IP has been involved in the financing of over 70 films, including: *The Cove* (2010 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature); *The Garden* (2009 Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary Feature); *Freeheld* (2008 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Film); and *Hell and Back Again* (2012 Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary Feature) and multiple film festival award winning films such as *E-Team* (2014 Sundance Film Festival Cinematography Award, US Documentary), *The Overnighters* (2014 Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Prize), and *Alive Inside: A Story of Music & Memory* (2014 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award, US Documentary). In 2013, Geralyn became a founding member of Gamechanger, the first for-profit film fund dedicated exclusively to financing narrative features directed by women. Geralyn's independent executive producing and producing credits include the Academy Award-winning *Born into Brothels*; Emmy-nominated *The Day My God Died*, Academy Award-nominated and Emmy Award-winning *The Square*, Academy Award-nominated and Peabody Award-winning *The Invisible War*, and multiple film festival winners such as *Miss Representation*, *Meet the Patels*, *Anita*, *In Football we Trust*, *The Hunting Ground*, *Dreamcatcher* and *Alive Inside*. Geralyn was honoured by the International Documentary Association with the Amicus Award in 2013 for her significant contribution to documentary filmmaking. Variety recognized Geralyn in their 2014 Women's Impact Report highlighting her work in the entertainment industry.

Dan Cogan – Executive Producer

Dan Cogan is the Academy Award-winning producer of *Icarus* and the Co-Founder of Impact Partners, a fund and advisory service for investors and philanthropists who seek to promote social change through film. Since its inception in 2007, Impact Partners has financed over 100 films, including: *Icarus*, which won the 2018 Academy Award for Documentary Feature; *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, which won the 2019 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary; *Of Fathers & Sons*, which was nominated for the 2019 Academy Award for Documentary Feature and won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival; *Dina*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and was named Best Feature by the International Documentary Association; *The Eagle Huntress*, which was nominated for the 2016 BAFTA Award for Best Documentary; *How to Survive A Plague*, which was nominated for the 2013 Academy Award for Documentary Feature; *The Queen of Versailles*, which won the U.S. Directing Award at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival; *Hell and Back Again*, which was nominated for the 2011 Academy Award for Documentary Feature and won the Grand Jury Prize and Cinematography Awards at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival; and *The Cove*, which won the 2010 Academy Award for Documentary Feature. In 2013, Cogan co-founded Gamechanger Films, which was the first for-profit film fund dedicated exclusively to financing narrative features directed by women. Its films include *The Tale* and *Land Ho!* Cogan received his B.A. from Harvard University, magna cum laude, and attended the Film Division at Columbia University's Graduate School of the Arts. In 2014, he was awarded the Leading Light Award at DOC NYC alongside filmmakers Albert Maysles and D.A. Pennebaker, as well as the America Abroad Media Award in Washington, D.C.

John Benam - Director of Photography

Two-time Emmy Award-winning DP John Benam brings extraordinary and important stories to the screen. In January 2020, his latest doc project, *Assassins* had its World Premiere at the Sundance film festival. His passion for diversity and social justice is evident in his critically acclaimed films. The film *Charm City*, which was shortlisted for the Oscars and earned worldwide theatrical release in 2018, revealed the complex world of community-police relations. That same year at the Sundance Film Festival, *This is Home* chronicled the plight of a Syrian refugee family as they navigate a new life in the United States. As Director of Photography on Netflix's 2017 Emmy-nominated series *The Keepers*, John created an authentic connection with the courageous survivors of abuse, who trusted him to help bring their truth to the screen. John works with National Geographic, HBO, PBS, and Oprah Winfrey's OWN and has a rich network of spirited collaborators and colleagues. A lifelong resident of Maryland, John resides in Baltimore with his wife, Angela, and their two sons.

Helen Kearns - Editor

Los Angeles-based editor Helen Kearns has been working in documentary since 2013, when she cut her first feature *Good Ol' Freda* for director Ryan White (*The Case Against 8*, *The Keepers*). Her other editing credits include *Ask Dr. Ruth*, a feature following America's favourite sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the environmental science doc *Inventing Tomorrow*, Netflix's *The Keepers*, and *The Music of Strangers*, a feature on Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Her most recent project as editor is *Assassins*, a political thriller following the trial of the women accused of assassinating the brother of the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un. The film premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival.

Blake Neely - Composer

Blake Neely is an award-winning composer, whose work spans film, television and the concert world. He has scored more than 30 television series and 15 films. He has received three Emmy Award nominations for his scores to ABC's *Pan Am*, the HBO mini-series *The Pacific*, and for his main title theme from the series *Everwood*. *Assassins* marks Neely's sixth project with director Ryan White. Previous work includes *Visible: Out on Television*, *Ask Dr. Ruth*, *The Keepers*, *Serena* and *The Case Against 8*. Neely has been a featured lecturer on film music at the Sundance Institute, University of Southern California, Columbia College, UCLA, Hollywood Music Workshop Vienna, Conservatory of Music Puerto Rico, NYU, and Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. He is a board member of Education Through Music Los Angeles. And he is also the author of the original *Piano for Dummies*.

CREDITS

A film by Ryan White and Jessica Hargrave

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Ryan White

Producers
Jessica Hargrave
Ryan White

Editor
Helen Kearns

Director of Photography
John Benam

Composer
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