Metro

Street hustle

Tales of survival don't come much grittier than *Revolving Door*, which opens the St Kilda Film Festival tonight. By **Claire Halliday**.

Filmmakers David and Alexandra Beesley. The former sex worker is proud that she survived her life as a prostitute but is worried about all the others who may not be so lucky.

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

THERE is a packet of cigarettes in the pocket of her jacket. If she wants one now — to calm the rising thinness in her voice — she doesn't show it. Alexandra Beesley has always been capable of bursts of intense self-control. She proved that when, as a dominatrix using the working name of Gillian, she made a business of "slicing and dicing" for high-end clients, often doctors and lawyers who paid her to humiliate them and take them past the edge of raw pain without ever letting the blade cut too deep.

But there were also times, when she was much younger, when control was taken away. She had, she says, some terrible experiences as a ward of the state when she was 15. And before that, it was her father, the way he used to rape her.

Despite the sadness that filled her childhood and early 20s, for Beesley, 50, the need to share her story — the story of the Gillian persona she adopted to eke out a living as a drug-addicted sex worker — outweighs any sense of shame.

When the St Kilda Film Festival opens tonight, it will be with Gillian's story, told in the short film *Revolving Door*. "It's perfect that it is playing in St Kilda," Beesley says of the film she made in collaboration with the directorial talents of her husband, David.

With its animated drawings (by Beesley) layered over real footage shot in the inner-suburban milieu that is St Kilda, *Revolving Door* aims, Beesley says, to tell "the whole story". It shows the difficult relationship between police and sex workers, the struggles of outreach workers desperate to make a difference, and the frustration of local residents and the Port Phillip Action Group — all keen to improve safety for everyone concerned.

"St Kilda is a huge part of Gillian," Beesley says. She lived at Fitzroy Street's infamous Gatwick Hotel long before the strip's gentrification. And it was St Kilda where Gillian sat in shadowy cars with strange men, trading comfort for cash; St Kilda where Gillian suffered but survived the bashings from the bad clients who trawled the suburb's streets.

"The Gillian character worked on the streets of St Kilda from when she was very young," says her husband, David. "The Gillian I know has transcended that, which is pretty cool. She's come out the other side."

He refers to her, as Beesley does, in the third person. It's a habit designed to maintain objectivity, deal with the painful subject matter and soften the blow of the memories that just keep coming. But some things will never go away. "I was never allowed to play with anybody," Beesley says. "I came from a very dysfunctional family."

She remembers, after being continually uprooted and taken around the world, being brought to Australia, aged 14.

"My father got into trouble and then we were here. I didn't want to be here and then about six weeks after I came here, just everything disintegrated," she says.

Her father had always beaten her mother but this time, she says, "I thought he was going to kill her".

That was when something in her snapped. She remembers hitting him, wanting to kill him. There was a frying pan in her hand and, eventually, her father was on the floor and she thought he was dead.

"And then I freaked and slashed my wrists," she says. "I was taken to Prince Henry's. The police picked me up three days later, locked me up and that was it."

She was charged over the assault, deemed uncontrollable and made a ward of the state.

Although the making of *Revolving Door* shows that she has come to terms with her life as a sex worker, it is the details surrounding her wardship that Beesley is still not ready to face.

"I don't know what's in the memory but every time I touch it I start to shake," she says. "I have had the file there for eight months but I can't really finish looking at it all. There's a lot of pain and suffering."

I was trying to block pain. Who wants to feel that? I had no family. I had nobody. Not one single human being that gave a f--- about me.

ALEXANDRA BEESLEY

She has only just recently learned that she had been given electric shock therapy — a realisation that, she says, explains some of the gaps in her memory.

She has an image that keeps flashing back, of her on her hands and knees, scrubbing a floor with a toothbrush. She remembers the un-hygienic conditions and the painful strep infection that saw her hospitalised for months.

She was sent back to her parents but it only lasted two weeks. "Then I was put with some Baptists. Then, from there, I was put in with the woman who introduced me to working on the streets," she pauses for a moment before she says it. Takes a sharp inhale of air. "She's got blonde hair, her name is Joanne and they won't give me her file. Joanne was her working name. Cheryl was her real name."

Cheryl told Beesley that it would be a good way to make some extra money, that it wouldn't really be like having sex. She was taken to La Chateau in Elsternwick (today the site of the Daily Planet), with, she says, "some really heavy-duty Mafia-type guys".

"I'd just turned 17," she continues. "Mothers and daughters were a very big thing in those days. I remember there was another mother-and-daughter team working there as well. There was big money in that and I think that's the reason why she had me in care."

It was another sex worker who helped her get away. She'd been using barbiturates since the age of 11 and now she started doing heroin. To support her habit, she hit the streets as a sex worker, desperate to avoid authorities until her 18th birthday signalled the end of her state care.

"I was trying to block pain. Who wants to feel that? I had no family. I had nobody. Not one single human being that gave a f--- about me. I felt like I was a piece of shit. It was so much better to be asleep."

Even when her drug habit was at its worst, Beesley says, she never robbed anyone. That control again. When outreach workers identified something in her worth saving and coaxed her into rehab, she did it without methadone.

There were many lapses. She had a son at age 19, temporarily lost custody of him when he was two, and went back to work as a sex worker to save for furniture and a place to live in order to get him back. After that, she never lost custody again. She balanced life as a sex worker with motherhood and, eventually, used her interest in filmmaking, writing and drawing — and a wealth of experience gained by working on other people's short films — to create yet another persona. She became Alexandra Beesley, married to a man she met 20 years ago at a community television benefit gig, and perhaps closer to the person she was meant to be all along.

Beesley's father is dead now and, although her mother is still alive and was even one of the pool of people — mainly David's family — to help colour the drawings used in *Revolving Door*, their relationship is understandably difficult.

"She knows she screwed up but she has to live in denial because if she faces it, she just spirals into depression," Beesley says.

She is proud that she has survived — that she did not overdose or go crazy — but, as her activism in the earliest days of the Prostitutes Collective Victoria (now Rhed) shows, she is worried about all the others who may not be so lucky.

"Just because everyone thinks we're throwaway women and we don't count; well, we do count," Beesley says. "We're someone's sister. Someone's mother. Someone's auntie. Someone's daughter. Someone. Someone out there. We belong to somebody."

Revolving Doors opens at the Astor tonight as part of the St Kilda Film Festival.

LINKS
- www.stkildafilmfestival.com.au
- www.sexworker.org.au

ONLINE
- Watch more of Claire Halliday's interview with Alexandra Beesley at theage.com.au

Critical view: a festival of the ordinary

YOU want to see teenage girls chatting about their mobile phones? Sexual shenanigans in a waterfront hotel? An old man mourning the death of his dog? It's all here at the St Kilda Film Festival, Melbourne's most prominent showcase for local short filmmaking talent.

It is, however, also an event that doesn't seem to have expanded its horizons greatly since the last time I checked in. Whether aiming to elicit laughter or tears, the samples available for preview seemed geared towards whimsy, with little evidence of strong passion or even much comedy of a sharp-witted or alarming kind.

Indeed, if one word could sum up the way that many of these films appear to view their characters, it would be "average".

There's the average-looking guy in Jonathan Daw's *Extreme Makeover*, who books himself in for $1 plastic surgery; the average couple in Brett Swain's *Opportunity Knocks*, who turn the tables on a pair of burglars; and the average thirtysomething in Abe Forsythe's *Eucalyptus*, who unwisely tries to breathe life back into his marriage by proposing a partner swap.

Of course, what counts as average (or unusual) depends on where you're standing. Still, many of these movies seem concerned above all with a question that faces any budding filmmaker: how do you stand apart from the pack? Often, workable premises lead to disappointing conclusions: the difficulty lies in coming up with a punchline that's neither too limp nor too glib.

Judging from the catalogue notes, other parts of the program range further afield. There are science-fiction stories, documentaries about remarkable events, selected highlights from several international festivals, and two sessions of music videos to be presented under the "SoundKilda" banner.

Of the films I did get to see, the most successful were also the most modest. Jack Parry's *Flutterby* is a brief but enchanting digitally animated caprice, set to gypsy music and starring a frustrated spider who's both full of personality and true to his biological nature.

Shelley Matulick's *Our Brilliant Second Life* (part of a series of SBS-commissioned shorts exploring "the impact of digital communications") is a nice little documentary about yet another "average" couple, who spend most of their time in an alternate online universe.

This film would do as well as any to represent the spirit of St Kilda: beneath the trappings of technological novelty, it's one more in a long line of faintly melancholic portraits of Australian dreamers following quirky paths to self-realisation.

St Kilda Film Festival, George Palace Cinemas and Astor Theatre, June 5-10.

JAKE WILSON

SHARON GRAY

The border issues

Stateless people need more than a one-size-fits-all passport.

A PASSPORT is a beautiful thing. If you have one, take it out of that safe place and kiss it, because you don't know how precious it is until you can't get one. A passport is also a privilege — were we not all slightly shaken when the Prime Minister said he could stop the cricketers going to Zimbabwe by taking their passports? I haven't had a passport for 10 years, because I spent so many years travelling that my greatest pleasure now is to watch my vegetable garden grow.

The Queen does not have a passport because they are issued in her name. The Dalai Lama does not have a passport because he is a stateless person. When he travels he carries a certificate of identity (IC) issued by the Indian Home Ministry, which must be renewed every two years. It is a yellow passport-size document of just five pages, which, when you travel as often as he does, quickly get used up.

Quite often passport control in various countries like to see when a person on an IC last entered their country, so the last IC gets stapled onto the back of the new one. Frequent travellers need several ICs stapled together and it is very possible that the Dalai Lama's IC looks like a small yellow brick.

The Dalai Lama does not have to endure the numbing bureaucratic trials other Indian IC applicants must face but like them his IC must bear a NORI (no objection to return to India) stamp and is a cutting reminder of their international status.

Canada offered the Dalai Lama honorary citizenship but he prefers to be one with his people.

The thousands of Tibetan refugees braving the hardships of fleeing that violently abused country and arriving in Nepal all want to go to Dharamsala in India, to be near His Holiness. Until recently the Nepalese Government packed them into buses with a group permit, which was taken off them at the Indian border. Now they receive an entry permit from the Indian embassy in Kathmandu that allows them only a few days in the country.

They may also receive a card stating, "The holder of this card is a person of concern to the UNHCR". However, these are not always available, do not carry the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees logo and are often forged.

In his suitcase the Dalai Lama carries the Tibetan texts from which he will teach. These long, loose-leaf books, called pecha, are wrapped in coloured cloth or brocade. I once had the pleasure of photographing the contents of one well-known and much-travelled Tibetan monk's suitcase — a rainbow of at least 100 such texts. His suitcases are famously heavy.

ILLUSTRATION: FRANK MAIORANA

I have seen the Dalai Lama many times and not once was he wearing Gucci shoes, though Rupert Murdoch's bitter line certainly has media traction. Like all monks, the Dalai Lama owns only 13 articles and considers additional items the property of his abbot.

It is only correct that in a democracy public figures are subject to scrutiny but there is a particular flavour of ridicule apportioned religious leaders — especially one who has antagonised the greatest economic force in the world today — of which we can only expect to see more when the Dalai Lama arrives in Melbourne on Thursday.

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1.10pm-2.10pm **Package 3** Short films for 7 to 15-year-olds
1.30pm-2.40pm **Feature film** *Bob the Builder: Built to be Wild* for 2 to 5-year-olds
2.40pm-3.40pm **Package 10** Short films for 11 to 15-year-olds
3pm-4pm **Package 4** Short films for 7 to 12-year-olds
4.15pm-5.15pm **Package 1** Short films for 5 to 8-year-olds
4.30pm-5.30pm **Feature film** *Marta and Her Flying Grandfather* for 8 to 15-year-olds

Sunday June 10
10.15am-11.15am **Package 8** Short films for 2 to 5-year-olds
10.30am-11.30am **Package 12** Short films for 5 to 10-year-olds
11.45am-1.10pm **Feature film** *Little Heroes* for 8 to 15-year-olds
12pm-1pm **Package 9** Short films for 5 to 10-year-olds
1.30pm-2.30pm **Package 3** Short films for 7 to 15-year-olds
1.40pm-2.40pm **Feature film** *Bob the Builder: Built to be Wild* for 2 to 5-year-olds
3pm-4pm **Package 5** Short films for 8 to 15-year-olds
3.10pm-4.10pm **Package 11** Short films for 7 to 12-year-olds
4.30pm-5.30pm **Package 2** Short films for 5 to 15-year-olds

Monday June 11
10am-11am **Package 1** Short films for 5 to 8-year-olds
10.30am-11.30am **Package 5** Short films for 8 to 15-year-olds
11.30am-12.30pm **Package 10** Short films for 11 to 15-year-olds
12pm-1pm **Package 7** Short films for 8 to 12-year-olds
1.30pm-2.30pm **Package 6** Short films for 7 to 15-year-olds
3pm-4pm **Package 4** Short films for 7 to 12-year-olds
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