

The Stunning Sports Doc That Died and Came Back to Life

Maya Gabeira survived a near-fatal injury to surf the world's biggest wave. Then the film, director and cinematographer faced their own incredible journey

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A DOC'S SECOND CHANCE Maya Gabeira is a seven-time big wave surfing champion who holds two Guinness World Records. (Courtesy of *Maya and the Wave*)

I've got a story that begins back in the festival season of 2022, and actually goes back a decade before that, when the documentary filmmaker **Stephanie Johns** went looking for a female athlete to be the subject of her next film. What she found was a story both on and offscreen that was filled, hope, heartbreak and tragedy, and that would completely transform not just her life, but those of her subject and her cinematographer.

‘A Jaw-Dropping Athletic Feat’



When Johnes watched Brazilian surfer **Maya Gabeira** gliding down 80-foot waves, taller than a five-story building and ferociously strong, she felt terror, but probably not the kind that you or I would feel. “I was more terrified that I was going to miss it,” Johnes told me recently. “You don’t know if she’s going to make a world record.”

Gabeira and Johnes spent a decade filming enormous waves waiting for the moment that Gabeira would conquer the biggest wave in the world. When it happened in 2020, it was [global news](#), but the story of what it took to get there — and the record wave two years earlier that wasn’t even recognized — is far more complex and fascinating.

A woman in a sport dominated by men, Gabeira has been continually underestimated by both sports media and fellow surfers, who seem as baffled by her skills as **Billie Jean King’s** rivals were by hers in the 70s. In the film Johnes interviews surfers who openly assume a woman cannot surf the same waves as men. She also captures Gabeira’s determination as she overcomes a nearly fatal surfing accident and a world full of skeptics to return again and again to the massive waves in Nazaré, Portugal, ready to catch the one that will make history.

Maya and the Wave premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2022, on an IMAX

screen around the same size as the wave Maya rode. “It’s an incredible feminist portrait,” says **Thom Powers**, the documentary programmer for TIFF (and [friend of The Ankler](#)) who introduced that IMAX premiere. “But it’s also a jaw-dropping athletic feat that stands amongst the best sports documentaries. You could assign the most skilled Pulitzer Prize-winning *New Yorker* longform writer to write the story of Maya Gabeira, and it would never be able to capture what she goes through and what an epic scale of nature she’s contending with.”

Johnes and Gabeira attended the TIFF premiere alongside members of their families and the film’s cinematographer and co-producer **Jorge Leal**, who was a well-known videographer in Nazaré before he partnered with Johnes on the film.



HIGH HOPES From left: Julian Cautherley, Jorge Leal, Maya Gabeira, Stephanie Johnes, Alexandra Johnes and guest at the TIFF premiere in 2022. (Leon Bennett/Getty Images)

“It was just such a great celebration after this decade of work,” says Johnes. “It was a great memory. It was my last great memory.”

A Tragic Turn

Maya and the Wave *Maya and the Wave* *Maya and the Wave* was the first runner-up for the festival's audience award, and Johnes and the rest of the team had every reason to expect distributors to come calling. But with Covid uncertainty still lingering and Netflix still fresh from the great correction that stalled its acquisition sprees, *Maya and the Wave* was left on the sidelines.

"It was a very tough year, and you never really know why nobody got behind it," says Johnes with an air of peaceful acceptance. "It seems like such an obvious crowd pleaser, but it also has what I think is a nice, strong gender equity message. It has some substance. Maybe that was a little uncomfy."

"Let's not ignore misogyny," Powers says bluntly when asked about *Maya and the Wave* not being acquired, pointing to 2023's *Copa 71* as another female focused sports documentary that "did not have the kinds of offers that I thought that they should have had."

A month after TIFF, Johnes was preparing for the next festival premiere, as the opening night of DOC NYC, when Maya called her in a panic. "She said, something happened with Jorge," Johnes remembers. "We thought he had a heart attack."

It turns out it was a brain stem stroke that left Leal completely immobilized, except for blinking his eyes. Johnes and Gabeira both joined him in the hospital in Portugal, where the doctors were convinced he was brain dead.

Then they had the idea that saved him.

A Mission of Friendship



CAMERA OBSCURA Jorge Leal at work. (Courtesy of Stephanie Johnes)

“It was **Maya actually** who had the idea,” Johnes says. “She was like, we can find out if he’s there because his eyes were opening and closing. And I remembered [The Diving Bell and the Butterfly](#). I was like, we can talk to him by blinking.”

Gabeira and Johnes started by asking Leal simple questions that he could answer through blinks — Who is the president? What is the code to unlock your cell phone? — that proved he was alive in there, despite what the doctors said. The women moved him to a hospital in Spain that specialized in the kind of massive rehabilitation he needed, and spent the next 10 months by his side.

“It was definitely a friend mission,” Johnes says. “He really leaned in so hard to help me with the film, made it so beautiful. He put his reputation behind this woman that so many people have trashed. That was a deep part of the love and appreciation.”

“Jorge survived but barely, and the first year was very very difficult,” Gabeira adds via email. “I feel I am still recovering from all of it emotionally. And glad he is at home now, with his family and still rehabbing.”

Today Leal, now 49, is living with family members and “adapting to a new reality,” as Johnes puts it. He’s regained the use of one arm and some speech, has completed hundreds of paintings, co-wrote a book of poetry, wrote a screenplay about his experience and has become a chess grandmaster, among other things.

As a surf videographer Leal was given the nickname Polpo, which means octopus — “because he could literally fly a drone, hold a radio, film with a camera, he could do 10 things at once,” Johnes says. Now that his mobility is limited, “you just realize so much creativity is mental,” Johnes continues. “There’s so much that you can do just by having a creative mind.”

Johnes spent the bulk of 2023 caring for Leal, working on the music licensing for *Maya and the Wave* but otherwise set the film aside. “I was getting invites to festivals, but it’s like, am I going to go celebrate while my friend is literally in the worst condition? So I just wrote to festivals and said, please think about us for next year.”

A Challenge as Intense as the Film



MAYA VS. NATURE Johnes' documentary captures Gabeira's stunning feats on a surfboard. (Courtesy of Maya and the Wave)

Many of those festivals *did* follow up; *Maya and the Wave* is currently in the midst of a [global tour](#): Miami, Tel Aviv, Nantucket, Melbourne, Munich and many more. The film will be on a self-produced, Oscar-qualifying tour through U.S. and U.K. cities in the fall.

That's not the release plan anyone expected after the premiere two years ago, but nobody involved in *Maya and the Wave* has ever been known to step down from a challenge. "I hope people like it and appreciate the amount of effort it took to live, make and show this film to the world," writes Gabeira. "The movie has an intense story, but the story behind what it took to be done might be just as intense as the film itself."

"It would be wonderful if some big distributor wanted to put it out, but I also like the challenge of figuring out how to do it," says Johnes with a smile. Without sharing the film's specific budget she acknowledges she has over six figures personally invested in the project, and worked on it for a decade without ever taking a fee. "Maya almost died and came back. Jorge was kind of dead there for a while. It definitely feels like that's what I'm doing with this movie. I'm like, I can get this movie back to life. Watch me."