

THE AUSTRALIAN

SPORT

The dreamer who defied death

The surfer who bravely returned to tame the wave that nearly killed her and the Australian cinematographer who risked his life to capture the moment.

By [WILL SWANTON](#)



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Maya and the Wave is the best surfing documentary I've seen. The personal story is brave, emotional, and deeply touching.

The cinematography is stunning, graceful, elegant and powerful. It's the sort of flick that delivers goosebumps and a lump in your throat. The general theme? How large and thunderous is your dream?

Maya is [Maya Gabeira](#), a Brazilian surfer who's scribbled in her teenage diary that one day she'll hold the world record for the biggest wave ever ridden by a woman. Neither the page nor the aspiration have been discarded.

"I was born a dreamer," she says. "From a very young age, I had something inside me that made me not fit in. The first time I carried a surfboard ... I felt like I belonged to something. I wanted it."

[The wave is Nazare](#). A big, bold, ballsy, beautiful, chaotic, violent, bone-jarring, teeth-chattering, board-shattering A-frame peak just a couple of hundred metres off Portugal's Silver Coast.



Australian big-wave cinematographer Tim Bonython at Nazare, Portugal

“Mayhem,” says Gabeira of the holy grail of big-wave surfing while ducking and weaving the chauvinism of boofhead blokes who don’t want her in the water; while enduring umpteen surgeries for injuries; while experiencing sickening wipeouts “like a terror movie”, she says; while reeling from mental discombobulations her mum calls “trauma of the soul”; in between crying before sessions at Nazare because the joint is terrifying and tempting in equal measure.

She stacks it at Tahiti’s deadly Teahupo’o. An unnamed, renowned figure in big-wave surfing approaches her and sneers.

“He told me I made tow-in surfing look really bad,” Maya says. “And that I was a shame for the sport. All those dreams I had just became, ‘No, you can’t’.”

And yet she’s a dreamer, and dreamers take some stopping, fuelled by hearts that non-dreamers dislike and fail to understand.

Maya soldiers on like Michelle Payne chasing the Melbourne Cup. The blokes can get stuffed. There’s breathtaking, heart-stopping footage of Maya’s breath being taken and her heart nearly stopping. She passes out in the water at Nazare, facedown,

dragged to the sand while her jetski driver, Carlos Burle, runs in circles and shouts, “She’s dead! She’s dead! Oh, my God. She’s dead!”



Surfer Maya Gabeira

She lives but big-wave legend Laird Hamilton says dismissively, “Maya does not have the skill to be in these conditions. She should not be in this kind of surf.”

Maya tells her mum, “If I die doing what I love, I die.” Her Dad says of her childhood days, “I noticed she had a tendency to like adrenaline.”

She has a busted ankle, wounded pride, dodgy back, crook shoulder, debilitating herniated disk. Getting into bed is painful. Getting out of bed is painful. Walking through a supermarket is painful. “Everything is pain,” she says before the near-drowning at Nazare causes severe mental trauma. Stop the car! She’s shouting from the passenger seat, disoriented, panicking. Stop the car! Something’s wrong! She gets out and vomits on the road. “Sorry,” she says. “So sorry. I just need to go home.”

A spinal fusion is the last resort to fix her back. It works. She weeps upon returning to the scene of her near-death wipe-out.

I’m alive! I’m alive! Oh, my God. I’m alive! She’s petrified. Two factors remain ever in her favour. She’s still a dreamer. Still has a tendency to like adrenaline.

“I am scared of drowning,” she admits. “I am scared of being out of breath. I am scared of the impact. I am scared of the waves. People ask if I don’t feel fear. I do feel scared! I do it *because* I’m afraid.”



Australian big-wave cinematographer Tim Bonython braving the surf at Nazare

How large and thunderous is your dream? Maya’s is 73ft (22.4m), towering over her right now, heaven and hell, sounding like a freight train, rearing above her like it’s undecided if it will hug or destroy her. Thrill or kill her. Look at the photo. Pure guts.

Courage. Determination to swing left. She's out of her depth – everyone is at Nazare – and she's gotta swing left before the avalanche swallows her whole.

You know what I reckon? I reckon Nazare recognised Maya from the time it nearly killed her. I reckon it respected the fact she was courageous enough to try again. I reckon Nazare knew everything she had written in her diary and all she had been through since. I reckon the wave nodded its approval and doffed its cap and allowed her a magic carpet ride.

Does Maya realise her dream? Was Pope Francis a Catholic? It's still in the Guinness Book of Records. She's the hero of Maya and the Wave, for it's Maya's life and Maya's wave, and yet I believe there's another lionheart in the water. The cinematographer. Without his jaw-dropping water footage, there's no evidence of Mother Nature at her roaring, foot-stomping best, no proof of Maya's heart-in-mouth, do-or-die rides, no evidence of her world record (spoiler alert!), no movie to make audiences hoot and holler when it goes on tour in Australia next week.



Bonython also risked his life to capture the record-breaking wave on film.

Yes, the surfer is brave. The cinematographer needs just as much ticker to throw himself into the fray with a camera slung over his shoulder. His name is Tim Bonython, a bright-eyed, adventurous Australian who's the best in the world at his

craft. A bloke who doesn't mind a little adrenaline himself. Perhaps you're only truly passionate about your craft when you're willing to die for it. Mirroring Maya, Tim accepts the risks of his chosen vocation.

"If I end up in the drink, I might die," he says. "But the camera will get washed up on the beach and you'll still have the footage."

Tim's Surfing Visions YouTube channel is incredible viewing on a rainy day, a sun-kissed day, any day. He's peerless. The industry is blessed to have him documenting this stuff.

He first saw Maya, and Nazare while sitting at home on Sydney's northern beaches in 2013, watching an amateurish live feed of a session when the wave, 120km north of Lisbon, was starting to make a name for itself. It was the session that nearly killed Maya.

"I saw Maya getting towed onto a 60-footer. Then I saw her wipe out and it was brutal," Time says. "Next thing, the camera is trying to find her body in the water. The zoom's going in and out, there's no smooth panning, and then you see Maya on the inside section with no energy because she's taken a couple more waves on the head. She's face down in the water. They get her onto the beach and I'm thinking, 'Am I watching someone drown live on the internet? What is this? It's crazy. I can't believe what I was seeing. The camera stays on her. They start pumping her chest on the beach and doing CPR ... it's full-on. That's when I think, 'This wave is as serious as it gets.' It's visually incredible. Obviously dangerous. I have to go and check it out."

He goes and checks it out. "I get to Nazare and stand in front of the lighthouse on the hill," he says. "The lighthouse has been there for 400, 500 years. I'm just gobsmacked by the power of the wave and how incredibly accessible it is to watch. It's this minefield of a crazy, violent, powerful, incredible wave. From day one, I know it's the beginning of the place becoming one of the most famous waves in the world. Which it is now.

"The future looked incredible. It was like being in Torquay in the 1980s. Nazare's become a mecca for big-wave surfing and anyone who wants to watch it. This sleepy old fishing village now gets a million visitors a year ... all to watch this wave."

Tim is taking Maya and the Wave on a 12-stop tour that starts at Sydney's Hayden Orpheum Picture Palace on Tuesday, swinging through Noosa, Southport, Byron Bay, Port Macquarie and Melbourne, among other locations, before drawing the curtain at Ulladulla's Arcadia Cinema on May 31.

How big is your dream? I want to witness a 100-footer at Nazare as eagerly as I want to stand at the foot of Mount Everest.

"I want to see Mother Nature in boss mode. I want to feel small and insignificant and awed. What better places to do it?

"I've seen 100-foot waves at Nazare. Probably bigger," Bonython says.

"Unbelievable, A-frame, teepee waves, these big, crazy, rideable waves. It's so appealing. You stand there in a big natural amphitheatre and watch the most incredible free show on the planet. If you can get there to see a big swell – it's one of the great things you will do in your lifetime."

Visit www.mayaandthewave.com for screening times.

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**WILL SWANTON** SPORT REPORTER

Will Swanton is a Walkley Award-winning features writer. He's won the Melbourne Press Club's Harry Gordon Award for Australian Sports Journalist of the Year and he's also a seven-time winner of Sport Australia Media Awards and a winner of the Peter Ruehl Award for Outstanding Columnist at the Kennedy Awards. He's covered Test and World Cup cricket, State of Origin and Test rugby league, Test rugby union, international football, the NRL, AFL, UFC, world championship boxing, grand slam tennis, Formula One, the NBA Finals, Super Bowl, Melbourne Cups, the World Surf League, the Commonwealth Games, Paralympic Games and Olympic Games. He's a News Awards finalist for Achievements in Storytelling.

✉ Will Swanton
