documentary

NON-FICTION FILMING

2004 SUNDANCE DOCUMENTARIES TRY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY DANAE ELON

This year has been an exceptional time for documentary films, which have been shown in a larger number of commercial theaters than ever before. At a time when information and its meaning are less easily provided by the commercial media, one can be grateful to those films that present a revealing aspect of the world we live in. Political agendas these days seem to "embed" the camera and its operator; we've had a better opportunity lately to see films that take a hard and close look at the way we tell stories.

Sundance with its emphasis on the documentary format has helped bring these films into the commercial arena. There were many documentaries shot by ICG cinematographers at Sundance this year including Joan Churchill with *Home of The Brave*, Sandy Sissel with *Chisholm 72 – Unbought and Unbossed*, Laela Kilbourn with *Word Wars*, Bob Richman with *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* and Richard Rutkowski with *Persons of Interest*. Some of these films expressed, each in its own way, the importance of making a difference. Documentary filmmaking is leaning more and more towards feature length and American audiences are willing to pay for a box office ticket to see these films. The feature documentary format has also given cinematographers the chance to affect the story of a film.

An interview with Joan Churchill, Sandy Sissel and Laela Kilbourn allows a small glimpse into how this year's Sundance documentary films came about with each cinematographer taking a leading part in their productions. How did they feel about their responsibilities as cinematographers and how did they participate in the film's storytelling? Each film has a different point to make, but the overall impression is that given the current political climate, they all felt the need to express a strong opinion. Two had political activism as their base, the necessity to participate and vote and the need to make a difference.

Chisholm 72 – Unbought and Unbossed was shot by Sandy Sissel and tells the story of Shirley Chisholm, who in 1972 became the first African-American woman to run for president. The film classically intersperses the traditional form of documentary film—talking heads are juxtaposed dynamically with archival footage and graphic effects. It successfully delivers a clear portrait of an outstanding political figure in American history. The rich archival material works well with the close up portrait as well as the ideas and personalities involved in those times.

photo courtesy of Sandy Sissel

Below: *Chisholm 72—Unbought and Unbossed* was shot by Sandy Sissel and tells the story of Shirley Chisholm, who in 1972 became the first African-American woman to run for president. Above Right: Shirley Chisholm with cinematographer Sandy Sissel.

photo by Rose Greene

"When I first talked to (director) Shola Lynch about this film, it was a 'get out and vote' film, aimed at the 2004 election," explains Sissel, who was determined to make her political activism work for the film. "If I could manage to get two more people out to vote against George Bush, I was very happy to take the job. I wasn't doing it for the money."

"Also, Shirley Chisholm is a hero of mine," continues Sissel. "To hear Shirley talk about being a female congresswoman, going to Washington, walking into the White House lunch room and having Southern white congressmen refuse to sit at the table with her, blew me away. It really hit me because what we are talking about happened only thirty years ago. I have a great interest in politics. While making the film, my memory jogged back to my youth in politics and what it was like in 1972."

Chisholm is a movie driven by interviews and archival footage. "Producer Phil Bertelsen and Lynch decided that they wanted an editor and a cinematographer who were going to be with them from beginning to end," says Sissel. "One of the sad things that has happened over the years with documentary cinematographers, is that directors will just pick up a camera person in New York or Los Angeles. There's no sense of the continuity that documentaries had in the 70's and early 80's."

Sissel heads the cinematography department at NYU and has dedicated her life and ideas to the craft of cinematography. Her credits include more than thirty-five titles in feature films, commercials and television productions. Among her film credits are *Night Sins*, *The Reef*, *Salaam Bombay* and *The People Under the Stairs*. She is enthusiastic about working with first time directors because of their passion and enthusiasm. "You are only a first time director once," says Sissel. "If you are a very smart first time director, you can seduce a great cinematographer and a great editor.

"Shola knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to admit she didn't know the technical aspects of filmmaking. Too often, directors hide their lack of experience in a bravado that makes it difficult to collaborate. In this case it was an easy collaboration. The editor they used, Sam Pollard, is a friend of mine, so we had a definite concept and a style—an evolved unit."

The production used two Sony DSR-500 DVCAM camcorders, a small lighting package and a large gray card to achieve the desired look. Shooting the interviews with two cameras allowed one camera to be

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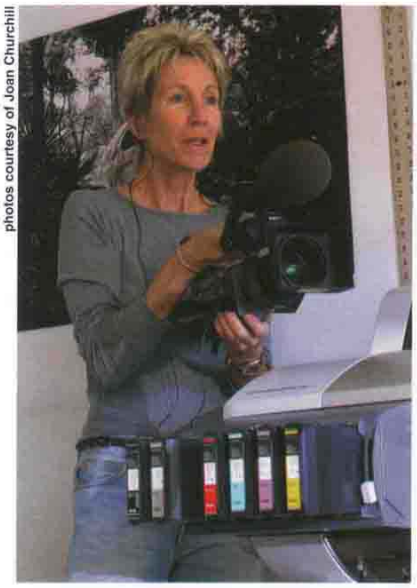
photos courtesy of Joan Churchill



Home of the Brave, directed by Paola di Florio and shot by cinematographer Joan Churchill, tells the story of Viola Liuzzo, the single white woman murdered during the American civil rights protests. Through the eyes of her children, the documentary takes the audience on a journey to understand why Liuzzo never became a well-known American hero.

frontally placed before the characters, and the other was positioned sideways with the gray card providing a background. For editing, this allowed for a very stylized cutting option—half the frame would be the interview with no distracting background environment and the other would be archival footage. This concept of shooting and editing was carried out throughout the entire film.

Another documentary selection at this year's Sundance Film Festival was *Home of the Brave*, directed by Paola di Florio and shot by cinematographer Joan Churchill. The film tells the story of Viola Liuzzo, the single white woman murdered during the American civil rights protests. Through the eyes of her children, the documentary takes the audience on a journey toward trying to understand why she never became a well-known American hero.

"I am very lucky in that I have always been asked to work on films that I want to do," says Churchill. "*Kurt and Courtney, Lily Tomlin, River of Song* are only a few. I am not known as a lighting cameraperson, but better known as a 'Verite' cameraperson. I generally get hired because of that skill. I really responded to the story of Viola Liuzzo because my own mother had recently passed away. She was an activist and founded an organization to monitor local law enforcement here in LA, primarily the LAPD. I was making a film about her at the time. I loved the way Paola planned to make this film, which was to take one of Liuzzo's daughters to re-create the route Liuzzo took on the night of her murder when she went from Detroit to Selma, Alabama. I just knew there would be a lot of 'Verite' in the shooting."

Churchill stresses that "Cinema Verite" is "wanting what you get" rather than "getting what you want." One of her observations about "Verite" shooting is that it is necessary to have as small a crew as possible, which generally means working with just a sound person. "There is no space for extra bodies," she says. "The greater the number of people on a crew, the more you become the center of attention and it takes away from the filming process. 'Verite' is not so much directing, but being there and being able to follow people in what they are doing.

"You are there following, not leading or setting things up," continues Churchill. "You are there to become part of that subculture. There is nothing like capturing a reality over which you have no control, somehow recreating the reality for an audience in hopes they might experience the same thing that the camera crew does.

"The greatest skill a 'Verite' shooter can possess is to empathize—to be truly interested in other people. It is very important to minimize the technical aspects of shooting. You are there as a person reacting to your subjects, rather than as a technician sticking light meters in a person's face.

"In my own film, I don't really interview people because when you interview people, especially in a formal setting, they become very presentational—they present to the camera what they would like to be represented as. You never really see the true person that way."

The three women, Churchill, director Paola di Florio and Liuzzo's daughter, Mary, journeyed down to Selma following the route Viola had taken on her last trip. "It was a journey that none of us had ever been on, not even Paola," says Churchill. "We

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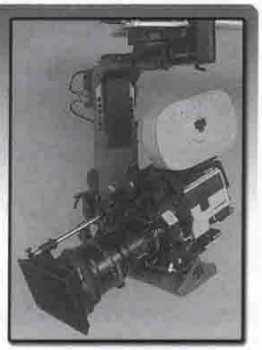

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arrived in Selma during the Gore/Bush election of 2000 and it felt like we'd stepped back 50 years. They were voting whether or not to make interracial marriages legal. We could not believe it. We went to some of the polling stations and asked people if it was odd that they were voting on interracial marriage and whether or not it should be legal and we literally got kicked out. They were very angry.

"Another experience we had was probably one of the most moving moments I've ever filmed," continues Churchill. "We went to the place where Viola was killed, which Mary had never visited. She was really upset that the site of her mother's death was 'imprisoned' by a fence and felt it was ironic that her mother ended up behind bars. Cows were in the pasture and there was a horrible feeling in the air. We were taken back to what it must have been like for Viola late at night, being run off the road—if she was in fact run off the road—and killed.

"This is an important film. I think the message of the film is incredibly important before the elections. It shows that you can do something to make a difference. Viola Liuzzo's death, tragic as it was, helped enact the civil rights act. The message of this film is to go out and vote because your vote does count."

A very different note comes from *Word Wars*, a film about four competitors in a Scrabble tournament. The film was shot by cinematographer Laela Kilbourn and was directed by Eric Chaikin and Julian Petrillo. For Kilbourn, translating the strategy of the mind into images was a challenging experience.

"It wasn't easy," says Kilbourn, "because it took some time to learn the rules of Scrabble, which is a very strategic game. The main problem is that much of the game takes place inside a player's head. You need to capture the visible, but you also need to capture the thought process of each player, which means a large number of games and an enormous amount of coverage. Also, because it's a documentary, you don't know which games are going to be important. That's where the relationship between the two directors and I became very important. I was paying attention to the shooting and the potential editing while they were thinking about the words and the anagrams from the point of view of the Scrabble players.

"Eric had to tell me what word was important," continues Kilbourn. "That was the learning process as we shot game after game. We brought all those elements together in order that we might present a cohesive whole in a very small amount of time. A Scrabble game lasts an hour—our whole movie is little over an hour."

Kilbourn did not feel her camera had a specific role in the film. She wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible and tried not make a mark on what was happening. "That was impossible because you are there with a camera and people respond to that," says Kilbourn. "The role of the camera here was to capture what was happening with these people, to show how they behaved in each situation and to express the greatest truth that we could. The camera had to absorb the action as it happened.

"You never know what might happen next. When you shoot, you can express an opinion or do other things to alter a feeling in a shot. I think if you do this deliberately, you draw a filter over what is happening or you might not even see what is actually happening. Sometimes that's the film they want to make, but that was not what I was trying to shoot."

Under such circumstances, the characters' unpredictable moments were the most compelling aspects of the film. "One way of dealing with the unpredictable is to prepare as if you know what to expect," says Kilbourn. "So when events happen, you are ready for them. There are golden moments when filming and times where I just feel that everything is meant to happen right there and then. It usually happens because that's what you are working towards and it's not just luck. As long as you are prepared and in communication with the director, the moments that feel as if you planned them will usually happen.

"I was the one holding the camera and making the shot choices," adds Kilbourn. "There was no video village. My daily question to the directors was, 'What do you want to get today?' Each morning they would tell me to get specific kinds of shots, but one of the things I really like about documentary shooting, as opposed to fiction narrative shooting, is that you have much more control. You are the one looking through the eyepiece and making choices as they happen."

The documentary camera is an essential tool in the storytelling side of a film. The difference between choosing a particular cinematographer over another can make the difference between a good film or bad film because the subject matter may not always be enough. Whether the shooting is based on "Verite," "Following," or "Capturing," the cinematographer's choices bring forth a definitive point of view. ●

frame courtesy of 7th Art Releasing

photo courtesy of Amanda Steigerwald

Above: *Word Wars* is a film about four competitors in a Scrabble tournament. The film was shot by cinematographer Laela Kilbourn. Below: Cinematographer Laela Kilbourn (left), sound mixer Gabriel Miller (background) and director/producer Cheryl Furjanic (right) on location for *Sync Or Swim*, a documentary about the U.S. Olympic synchronized swimming team.