

Why We Make Documentaries: Reflections of a Producer

by Jacquie Jones (2000)

Few things on earth are as tedious as making movies, documentaries in particular. In the pie chart of production, the lion's share of time is invariably allotted to logistics, dealing with the shenanigans of wily interview subjects and their limited availability, begging for free locations, managing problems setting up and breaking down equipment, and making the most subtle of subtle alterations imperceptible to 99% of the people who will see the thing (assuming you ever finish it at all).

And the worst part is that, without fail, whether you're making a 9 part PBS extravaganza or a 22 minute personal film about your grandmother, at some point the money will run out and you will be called upon to turn nothing into something, water into wine. In every inaugural conversation, it seems, the filmmaker in charge is required to utter the standard disclaimer - "We have a very limited budget and not much time," - before he or she goes on to explain the altruistic reason that has brought your gifted team together to do the good work of documenting whatever it is. "Listen," they tell you, "we didn't get into this business to make our fortunes. We're in it to make a difference," or something like that.

Then there is the feedback. If you're lucky this comes from people who liked your work to begin with, who support your vision and who wish you well in general. If you are not lucky, as is often the case, feedback comes from an executive producer, a festival programmer or a cable television vice-president endowed with the power to stop, at a moment's notice, the much-anticipated flow of money into your paltry checking account. There are also overly academic advisers, put-upon production assistants, and writers and, from time to time, they all wonder how you got your job in the first place and why you don't get fired.

You wonder the same thing sometimes as you sit watching a fine cut of your masterpiece, your editor glaring at you, realizing that the story you're trying to tell not only lacks depth, drama and intrigue but is also factually inaccurate and visually flat. You're suddenly seized by the reality that you'll have to start all over, revise the structure and add a new element which will somehow elevate this pointless film to the searing portrait you intended. But then you go home and get some sleep and it all looks better in the morning.

The truth is, the whole endeavor is so precarious, so completely unlikely, that it is a miracle that it ever gets off the ground. And no one knows this better than you. That's why in the final moments of post production you will hear yourself asking aloud the questions that you've been asking in your head all along. Does this work? Is anybody going to sit through this? Why did this ever seem like an

interesting story? What am I going to do when I'm exposed as a hack and driven out of polite society?

So, given all this, the question might rightly be asked: Why do we make documentary films? We can't all be masochists, can we?

Well, I must concede, it is a noble profession. Many smart, well-meaning people have done it. Geniuses, even. Our lives are enriched by the work of these great visionaries - Henry Hampton and Jon Else, Mira Nair and Marlon Riggs, Albert Maysles and Jackie Shearer, Louis Masiah. These are just a few of the many who have made us laugh and cry and see and understand. Through documentaries and the windows they open on our world, our collective horizon grows ever wider and brings us together with a common language. We share one experience through culture and that experience deepens our humanity. In some cases documentaries can even urgently draw attention to problems that plague us and aid in the process of change.

I remember sitting in my apartment my senior year in college watching "Eye on the Prize" every Wednesday night, weeping. I couldn't help but think that if those people could do what they did for all of us who followed them, there must be something I could do to make things better for those who would follow me. I knew that I was forever changed by those films, and am indebted to other films and filmmakers as well.

There are filmmakers who change us through the beauty and poetry of their images and narrative webs. They transform what could be simple polemics into intricate memoirs and chronicles that teach us something about why we think what we think. Now, I'm thinking of Jeanne Jordan, Debbie Hoffman and Ellen Bruno and the legions they've inspired.

But, in all honesty, the heroism of the work is only part of the reason we submit to the call. And if you have ever seen a small child discover the spellbinding properties of a mirror, you need read no farther. It is that. The simple magic of reflection. The ordinary beauty of all that is taken for granted as we live and die, fall in love and endure, fail and prosper. The adventure and the romance of daily life. Whether that mirror is in the hands of Stephen Hawking or your nephew, it will teach you something you'll never forget.

A very good friend, a very respected producer said this to me: "Sometimes when I am listening to someone tell me their story, when I connect to them in a certain way, I feel like they are giving me a wonderful gift. I feel like they are teaching me something about not only the questions we all have about being a human being but they are also teaching me about the answers. The level of intimacy you sometimes have with a complete stranger defies anything you ever learned about everything."

For sure you'll do more by 9 AM than most people do in a whole day (especially if you are shooting at an historic site) but you'll take away from it more than most people get in a lifetime. Just look at me: I've met Hugh Hefner and Joycelyn Elders, descendents of Thomas Jefferson and veterans of the Hungarian Revolution, Olympic gold medallists and reformed drug dealers. And I'm just getting started.

There is cunning and truth, despair and grace in every story we hear. And it is our job to hear them. Some are stories that can be told over and over again and still be new. Some are stories that will be told only once. And some are stories that will be told only to you. There are sunsets and moons and waves crashing ashore reflected in the eyes of those who've lived to tell the tale. It is all, as they say, subjective.

And, oh, the places you'll go! Leper colonies, lost cities, behind the scenes, inside the human brain. Political campaigns, human rights campaigns. Births and deaths. There is reading and reading and reading; newspapers and magazines, racing forms and stock reports, biographies and plantation inventories. There is history and news. The detail that is the window. The artifact that is the door. The photograph that is the key. The forgotten home movie, the coveted prize.

It all happens so quickly, is over so quickly, that the extraordinary experience becomes, after everything, simply a couple of lines on a résumé. A foothold on the next thing.

We forget the crazy rush of meeting Haitian expatriates finally returning home that day when we hadn't eaten in twelve hours or the 33-year-old virgin we interviewed on a fluke outside UCLA who didn't make it into the final cut of the film. And we forget the petty bickering about missing FedEx or the misguided idea to forgo all sound effects, but those things happen to the best of us. Still, we never forget the way the editor smiles at us when we've fumbled our way to the missing piece of the puzzle, putting it together, or the way the associate producer squeezes us on the shoulder the day before the all important online edit (final edit) when nothing at all seems to make sense.

It is like a mantra for us: I'm just not sure I want to keep doing this. And there's no guarantee I'll ever be offered another job anyway. Maybe I'll teach. I think I would like to teach - summers off.

Then you get a call from another insolvent visionary. And there you are sitting on a 30-seat, Russian hand-me-down prop engine plane from Bamako, Mali to Timbuktu. But even at seven in the morning with Muslim prayers, snoring children and desert on all sides, you know exactly why you do this work. And there is something heroic, I suppose, about going to the ends of the earth just to know and to understand how very alike we all are, how very different.

Jacquie Jones is a producer and director of episode three of "Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery" which won a George Foster Peabody Award and a national Emmy for research. Her credits also include Robert Townsend's "From Behind Closed Doors: Sex in 20th Century America," which she produced and wrote. Her writing about popular culture can be found in important anthologies such as "Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography" and "Meditated Messages" as well as numerous periodicals. Ms. Jones was a guest filmmaker at the 1999 Robert Flaherty Film Seminar. A graduate of Howard and Stanford Universities, she recently relocated from Boston to New York City where she is developing several documentary projects.