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Ross McElwee at Work

McElwee's March--As in Life, There Are No Scripts to Ross McElwee's Films and He Hopes To Keep It That Way

By Paula Hunt, *Movie Maker Magazine*, January 1994

MovieMaker

Ross McElwee spoke with Paula Hunt recently at the Vancouver film festival. Part One of this interview ran in our December issue.

MM: Although your title *Time Indefinite*, is taken from the Bible, religion isn't a strong presence in the film, except for your visit with the Jehovah's Witnesses and your discussion with Lucille.

RM: In *Six O'Clock News*, religion becomes a more salient presence than in this film, because what I discovered when I filmed people whose lives had been somehow struck with turmoil in *Six O'Clock News* was that religion comes up over and over again. You begin to realize that, in fact, the way many of us, most of us, probably get through life is by assuming that there is a heaven, there is an afterlife, and that God is eventually going to take care of us.

MM: At what point did you decide on the title *Time Indefinite* ?

RM: It wasn't until I got the material in the editing room and on the editing table. It's not a good title in terms of marketing, because it's very vague--people won't keep it locked into their minds. I have an award plaque that I got at some film festival that awarded the prize for best documentary to "Indefiniteness of Time." My distributor said, "Do you have to call it that?" and I said, "Yes, we have to call it that."

The distributor of First Run Features saw *Sherman's March* at the IFP (the Independent Features Project) in New York and immediately said he'd take it. I wanted to shop around a bit, because it's a very small company and I wanted to see what else was available. I got turned down by every other middle range distributor. I didn't even bother to go to the studios or the major distribution outlets. First Run Features was the only company willing to take a chance on it and, in fact, it did terrifically well. According to their statistics, until *Strangers in Good Company* came along, it was their top grossing film. It's supposed to be the tenth highest grossing feature documentary of all time. Isn't that incredible? I could never have imagined it being that kind of film.

MM: Does your success make getting money easier?

RM: Yes, absolutely, it's made a tremendous difference. That's its biggest benefit to me, not the money that I made off of distribution. But, of course, by the time the theaters take their share, the distributors take their share, and both theaters and distributors write off their expenses, there's not all that much left for the filmmaker.

MM: Did you get calls from Hollywood studios after the success of *Sherman's March* ?

RM: Yes, but most of them had not seen the film, they had just read about it. They would say things like, "someone with your sensibility is of great interest to us, we're really interested in talking to you." I think that the idea was not to let any talent fall between the cracks. When it comes down to it, I've never made a fiction film. It's a little bit presumptuous for me to think that I could do it when you have scores of people who have made fiction films. Who do I think I am to waltz into that when for fifteen years I haven't even been directing documentaries? I've been receiving, responding to the world with a documentary camera. The whole possibility of me making fiction seems improbable to me. There are times when I'm tempted because I get frustrated by the lack of control inherent in the kind of filmmaking I do, both in terms of shooting and editing--being unable to make a cut work because you didn't direct it, you didn't storyboard it. It can drive you crazy at the editing table and that's when I say "I can't make these films anymore, I have to try fiction, I have to write a script." But, then I sober up a bit and think about the rat race out there. I'm in a situation now where I have complete autonomy and control--autonomy and control are two very important things, neither of which I would have in Hollywood. I am loathe to jump into the piranha pool

with people who need their scripts produced or need director's positions.

MM: Do you believe there is more of a market for independent documentaries than for independent features?

RM: Yes, I think that the market is a little less crowded, there's a little more room to maneuver, but this is casting it all in terms of marketing decisions. I make these films because I like to make them, not because I've cleverly figured out that there is a market slot that I can fit into. I'm just lucky that there seems to be some sort of niche that I'm in now that I very well could be out of in five years. People just may not be interested in me anymore and I'll have to go get a real job.

MM: It sounds, though, that you've been fortunate in that you've been able to work fairly steadily in film.

RM: I have been lucky--I never really had to do anything other than film once I decided I wanted to do it. But some of those jobs weren't very interesting and you could load millions of magazines and after a point you aren't learning a damn thing.

MM: Do you ever shoot video?

RM: No, I very much believe in theatrical runs for my films, as modest as they are, and it's usually one art house per city that runs them, or a museum, or a university setting. Whatever, it's still a very important component of the overall distribution arrangement for me. I don't care what anybody says, even the best [video] systems aren't there yet. There's something wonderful about the quality of film when projected that so far can't be matched by video. If I were only shooting for television, I'd shoot video. You'd be a fool not to. Who's got all that extra money to burn? I don't. That means you just have to work all that much harder to raise the money. And I have to admit that there is also a part of me that really loves working with film. I'm older, to the mechanical versus the electronic is the tendency that I have. I think that I'm one of a handful of people still shoots on film and edits on a Steenbeck. Maybe I'm just lazy, but I don't have time to learn a whole new system.

MM: What kind of camera do you use?

RM: I shoot with an Auricon super 16 camera. *Time Indefinite* was blown up to 35 from super 16.

MM: What about *Sherman's March*?

RM: Regular 16. We never blew it up.

MM: What kind of sound equipment do you use?

RM: With *Backyard* I used a Nagra. It was a hard film to shoot because I had a huge Nagra over one shoulder and my camera, (at that time it was an Eclair,) on the other. On *Sherman's March* SM which is a miniature Nagra reel to reel recorder.

MM: Did that work well?

RM: Yes, very high quality sound, but it's difficult to change reels quickly because it's not a cassette. I have left that behind and have gone on to a SONY TCD Pro 5--2 which is a type of cassette recorder. It means that you can run more sound before you have to change to a new tape and you can change to a new tape more quickly. But I think that, actually, the sound quality isn't as good as the Nagra SM. The next step is digital tape, and that's what I'll use in the next film.

MM: Do you consider yourself a director?

RM: I don't direct anybody. "By Ross McElwee," that's enough for me.

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