



How to Become a (Really Good) Documentary Filmmaker (Documentary Filmmaking 101)

Nancy LeBrun (Emmy-Award Winning Film Maker)

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A few days after Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, I got a call at my Washington, DC home from a panicked producer in LA, begging me to do some short pieces about the 9/11 tragedy. She needed something to show on the Emmys® to acknowledge the attack, and the broadcast was just a few days away. I don't know how she found me, but I explained that I was not a news producer. She persisted. Somehow the desperation in her voice and the desperation of the tragedy coalesced, making it difficult, if not impossible for me to say no. So off I went, taking a colleague with me for support, not at all sure how to proceed. My background was in long-form documentaries: projects that take months or years to complete, not quick turnaround packages. But I was already on board, so I would just have to go for it.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Nancy LeBrun has been involved in the world of documentaries since the Stone Age. Her first Emmy was for producing a film for National Geographic on the explorer Ernest Shackleton and Ms. LeBrun has subsequently been awarded another four Emmys, two Dupont Columbia journalism awards, and a Peabody for projects she wrote, produced or executive produced. One series she EP'd, "Great Books" was awarded special recognition by NATAS. In addition to writing and producing, Ms. LeBrun is a dog person, married, and just moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area where she is reacquainting herself with grits.
www.nancylebrun.com

EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

Documentary, like all filmmaking, is largely a team sport. There's often a producer, a director, a director of photography, an audio engineer, an editor, and more. Some filmmakers take more of the auteur approach and direct, shoot, and edit themselves. If you suspect that you don't like to share or that the vision you have is a burning one, you might want to go this route. If you don't shoot, find a DP who gets you, or can at least execute your vision. Likewise make sure your editor, the other member of the triumvirate, is of like mind, because if you have a very specific vision you'll want your team to help you get as close to it as you can.

If you're doing a big doc series for TV, on the other hand, you're going to have a bigger crew and you may be picking up film crew in whatever city your shoot is located. That requires leadership and some essential management skills. Documentary film crews are generally easy and fun, but shoots can be grueling and tensions do arise. You're the Big Kahuna, but you're also responsible for a functioning crew that gets you what you need. Diplomacy, clarity, courtesy, and decisiveness are all required skills. You'll be overseen by the network and are likely to be on a fairly short leash. If they like what you're doing, the payoff can be terrific, monetarily and in terms of recognition even if the demands are high.

Here's a bit of terminology trivia for you: for years in TV docs, the producer and director roles were often mashed together and the terms used interchangeably. Today, there is often more of a differentiation, akin to

what feature films have. The producer is more the logistics and business manager, and participates in the editorial process to varying degrees. The director does just what the title suggests: directs the film and acts as the creative lynchpin. In TV reality shows and other kinds of non-fiction series, the Big Noise is called a Showrunner. In all of these configurations, the team answers to the network EP, or Executive Producer, who is answering to someone even higher up the food chain.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Introduction to Documentary Filmmaking

- + A Very Brief History of Documentaries
- + The Documentary Landscape Today

Getting Started

- + What Kind of Producer or Director Do You Want to Be?
- + 10 Steps to Getting Your Documentary Made
- + What Kind of Story Do You Want to Tell?

Keeping Afloat

- + The Funding Funhouse

...and much more

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Jennifer Wilson:

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