



CONTEMPORARY FILM DIRECTORS

## **Albert Maysles**

Joe McElhaney

ter relationship. Neither me nor anyone else I know in the profession had gone as deeply into the mother/daughter relationship. And suddenly we have on our hands a film that goes very deeply into that. There's a woman I met, Brigid Berlin, one of the Warhol people, and she called me up one day and she said, "You know, I've been looking for copies of *Grey Gardens*. Can I come over? I want to buy some from you. I've seen the film 120 times." How many films can you say that about?

JM: It's funny, but whenever I've shown the film to students, their response to the film, positive or negative, pretty much divides along gender lines. Women in the class love the film, and the men in the class are horrified by it. I think it may also have to do with the fact that you're looking at two aging female bodies exposed. And I don't think we're accustomed to seeing that. I think it's horrifying to a lot of men to see this, whereas in my experience women are not so bothered by it in the film.

AM: Have you ever seen Walter Goodman's review of the film? The guy's got a problem with age: "Why are you showing us all this rotten flesh?"

JM: Edie had a wonderful response to that. She said: "The film portrays age. Age portends death. Death brings God and Mr. Goodman cannot face God."

AM: Where did you find that quote? I'd like to get a copy of it. You know, we showed her the Goodman review, because my brother and I were going to respond to it. And she wrote a response to the *Times* as well.

JM: Did they print it?

AM: No. A month went by, and I called them and said, "Are you going to publish it?" They said, "No, no. She's schizophrenic." And she had the healthiest, most mature response to that review.

JM: Did you film her toward the end of her life?

AM: No. We were thinking of doing that. I was going to go down to Florida, and we talked about it.

JM: After the death of your brother, you collaborated with a number of other figures, especially Susan Froemke and Deborah Dickson. Is the dynamic different with them than it was with your brother, especially at the moment of filming? Or did they pick up directly where your brother left off? Was the chemistry different?

AM: Because it's Susan, you mean, rather than my brother?

JM: Yes, or whomever you happen to be working with. Was it hard to adjust at first, not having your brother there?

AM: No, not really. He was involved in both elements, filming and supervising the editing. We made a great team, especially when we worked with Charlotte, who was such a great editor.

JM: Have you seen her own films, outside of the work she did for you?

AM: I saw the one about the crazy musician [*Thelonius Monk: Straight, No Chaser*]. But you know, an editor is, in a sense, only as good as the material. And the material there wasn't quite that good.

JM: Most of your collaborators have been women, though. Why women?

AM: Interesting . . . hmmm. . . Well, why not women? We chose whom we thought were the best, and if it was a woman who was the best, then fine. Maybe better, in fact, because women don't always get the same opportunities.

JM: I read an interview with a filmmaker about two years ago in the *Village Voice* who lives in Los Angeles now, Thom Andersen, and he was talking about coming to New York in the seventies and that he was looking for work as a filmmaker. He said he didn't apply here because he heard that the Maysles brothers only hired women.

AM: [Laughs]

JM: How much input do Christo and Jeanne-Claude have into the films you've made about them? Do they set clear limits in terms of what you can or cannot shoot? Do they ever ask you to take things out of the films while you're editing?

AM: While we're making the film we might show it to them. And so far, it's been pretty consistent in terms of what they like and what we like. For example, we have the same aversion to music in documentaries.

JM: But there's underscoring in all of your later films, including the Christo and Jeanne-Claude films. Is that something you brought in reluctantly?

AM: There's music in *Running Fence*, but it was felt to be appropriate. Certainly we don't have as much music as some other documentary filmmakers today.

JM: My questions about the classical-music films and videos are along similar lines. Is your access to those subjects more or less unlimited, or are restrictions set?

AM: We're not really restricted, although you might think so, because so many of the classical-music films are produced by the organizations that represented the artists. What's it called? Artist's Management? Peter Gelb was their agent, Horowitz's agent, Marsalis's agent. That's how we got to make those films. But Peter never said, "That's improper." He never exercised that kind of power. It didn't happen.

JM: Kathleen Battle is such a sweetheart in the *Baroque Duet* film, such a contrast to her reputation. She was exactly like that throughout the shoot?

AM: Yes. No problem with her. And Wynton Marsalis has something of a reputation, too. But I never saw it.

JM: You do see some tension between him and Peter Martins in *Accent on the Offbeat*. But it never becomes a full-blown argument.

AM: Oh, yeah. That's not one of my favorite ones.

JM: Some of the credits of your later films read differently from the credits from your earlier films. It might be listed as "a film by Susan Froemke and Deborah Dickson with Albert Maysles" or "(by) and Albert Maysles." Are you less involved in some of these later projects?

AM: It was stupid on my part. I should have insisted on a comma rather than a "with."

JM: So you don't feel less involved in them?

AM: No, not at all. But I have a feeling that those who make documentary films for whom their work is so relevant to the nature of the film, they bring such a particular character to it, that they should be fully credited. With *The Jew on Trial* I'm having a problem because the guy who's working with me wants his director's credit to be listed separately and then "with" Albert Maysles.

JM: So you've opened the floodgates now. Everyone wants billing over you.

AM: But I've decided to hell with it.

JM: What's the status of *The Jew on Trial* [since retitled *Scapegoat on Trial*] now? The last time I heard you speak about it, you were talking about getting Arthur Penn to do some of the dramatized scenes.

AM: It's progressed now so that Josh Weletsky is working with me. So he's directing that. And the credit will be "Directed by Josh Weletsky with Albert Maysles." It's a pity, because I've gotten much less interested in it as a result, even though I'm going to have a very important say in it. It's five years now that I've had this thing, and there's somebody raising money for it now.

JM: It's a project unlike anything you've ever done.

AM: I know, I know. It can't possibly have the same kind of character as my other stuff. Have you seen the trailer for it?

JM: Yes, and some of the footage you shot in Eastern Europe. And *In Transit* [a project Maysles has worked on for many years in which he films and interviews various individuals on trains around the world]. What's the status of that?

AM: That's my number-one project. I've put together a trailer for it.

JM: So many of your later films deal with artists or musicians, so the ones that have social content—*Lalee's Kin*, *Abortion: Desperate Choices*, and *Letting Go: A Hospice Journey*—really stand out. How did they come about? Did they originate here, and were they taken to HBO? Or did HBO come to you?

AM: HBO came up with the ideas. One of HBO's big sponsors was involved with hospice care. And when she started to get into it, she said that we might be lucky if five people see this. She thought no one would want to watch it. But HBO still wanted to do it, and their advisors told them that if it wins awards, that's good enough. And it did win awards and got a very good viewership.

JM: Were these later films like *Abortion* or *Lalee's Kin* screened for their subjects?

AM: Oh yeah. Lots of feedback from *Lalee's Kin*.

JM: I read that the granddaughter, Granny, ended up pregnant.

AM: Yes.

JM: It's so strange because the film anticipates this in the slow-motion shot of her exchanging looks with a boy, they circle around each other. And you sense that this young woman has two options now: she can walk away from her present situation or stay there.

AM: Yes, she was only fourteen when she got pregnant. There's a moment [in the film] when the great grandson is asked what he wants to do when he grows up. He says he wants to be in prison.



JM: You were very unhappy with the PBS added subtitles to the Burk film. You thought it was a condescending gesture.

AM: No, I don't think so. I think that, as I recall, we really needed it.

JM: There was an interview around the time the film came out when you complained about it. Have you had second thoughts about that? Because *Lalee's Kin* also has subtitles.

AM: No, I think both films need it. But there may have been a little too much subtitling in both films.

JM: One of the most powerful scenes in the abortion film is when you go into the room with a woman while she has an abortion. How did you negotiate that? It's such a private space. Did you feel uncomfortable about doing that?

AM: I knew that if it got too intense we couldn't use it.

JM: When the sequence began, I sat there cringing, fearing that it was going to exploitive. But it doesn't happen.

AM: I was filming this woman having the abortion, right? And I walk around, and her legs are spread wide open, and I felt quite comfortable. You didn't see anything of the abortion. You saw along her thigh but never all the way. I had the good sense not to exploit that.

JM: Typically, you focus on the human response to the situation, the interaction between the woman having the abortion and the woman giving her the abortion, rather than the abortion itself. And *Letting Go* has extremely painful moments as well, where it must have been difficult to stay in those rooms and continue filming. But I think your background in psychology comes through very strongly in your attitude towards filming this material. A film like *Letting Go* can almost be a therapeutic process for the viewer. If you're horrified by it, you ask yourself why you're so horrified. What are we looking at except someone dying? Why is that something I should be looking away from? Why is it something that should be not necessarily be filmed?

AM: Exactly. I think there has been more criticism on this vulnerability and exploitation thing with *Grey Gardens*.

JM: But again the question arises: Why are people horrified? What are we looking at that's so horrifying in *Grey Gardens*? Two aging women. We're not used to looking at aging female flesh onscreen, or at images of literal, slow death.

AM: It's an interesting thing that I've come across: In our culture, we're supposed to get heart-to-heart with somebody. Why is it necessary to presume that someone's going to get hurt if you film them like this? It could be the healthiest, most positive thing that ever happened to them. Maybe you know better than I. Do we have a word that describes the possibility that something good is going to come out of it? It's hard to find that word. I don't think we even have it.