

When the Levees Broke



A Conversation with Co-Producer and Editor Sam Pollard

by Sheila Curran Bernard

Sam Pollard has edited several of Spike Lee's dramatic features, including *Mo' Better Blues*, *Clockers*, and *Bamboozled*. For HBO, he co-produced and edited Lee's *4 Little Girls*, nominated for an Academy Award. Their latest film for HBO, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, will air in two parts on August 21 and 22, and in its entirety on August 29, the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

How did this film come about?

We were driving downtown [last September], and Spike says, "You know, Sam, I've got a great title: *When The Levees Broke*. I want to do a documentary about New Orleans." So that night, I did some research on the Internet and wrote some notes. And the next day, I said, "We could do a doc that looks at the complications and the evolution of the hurricane and the personal stories of the people who were there." So Spike called Sheila Nevins at HBO and set up meeting.

When was your first shoot in New Orleans?

Thanksgiving. We went down with this mammoth crew of 25 people. Normally when you shoot a doc, it's you as the producer; camera; an assistant, if you're shooting film; sound; and maybe a p.a. [production assistant]. But when we flew out of Newark the day after Thanksgiving, it was Spike, me, a line producer, three

cameramen, four assistants, and six graduate students from NYU. Then, when we got to New Orleans, we got a location manager with his four location people, five vans, five drivers, a camera loader – I mean, it was like an army. And Spike gave us our assignments: This crew goes to this parish, this crew goes here.

Spike returned to New Orleans several times, and also filmed evacuees in New York. I've read that there were about 130 interviews in all, some 200 hours of footage. I'm curious about your role, not only as editor but also as co-producer.

Basically, my charge is to figure out how to make this thing a film. As with *4 Little Girls*, I'm given a task of combing through all this material and trying to figure out a structure to make it come to life. Spike will come in and critique it and want changes, but I'm trying to build it, trying to tell a story and figure out how to make it exciting. And I've got about 18, 20 weeks to make it happen.

When did you start to edit?

I brought three assistants on in February 2006 to start logging and digitizing the interviews, and they were all transcribed, and the assistants went through the transcript books and wrote down the time code numbers. Then I figured out what I call subject bins, such as *The Days Before The Hurricane*; *The Day Katrina Hit*; *They Thought They Had Dodged The Bullet*. If anybody talked about one

of those particular subjects, the assistants put that bite into that bin. And then when I started, on March 6, I started going through each bin, putting together all the interview bites and whittling them down, shaping them. I don't go but so far, because I know that as soon as I start to put footage in, which is the next stage, it'll change.

Do you draft a script on paper before you cut?

I don't usually do a paper cut, I'm more instinctual now. But I will write out a structure – where I want to start, how I want to get to the end. I sketch out scenes and what the order should be. Then I start adding footage and stills, assembling edited sequences. What happens in this process of building is that I'll see things from my paper structure that aren't working, so I start to move things around. And I'll go back through the transcripts sometimes, like when I need a way to transition to certain footage. And then when I show Spike a cut, he'll ask, "How come you didn't put this in, how come you didn't add this sequence?" So I'll go back and look at the material and rebuild.

Do you find that your subject pulls – those bins – stay intact as sequences?

Not always. For example, initially I had a Superdome subject bin. But I've opened up: one sequence is about when people first got to the Superdome, another is about people dealing with it after they were there for four days, and another is about people evacuating the Superdome. So it's broken up into different sections.

With 130 storytellers, isn't there a risk that the film will be a long montage, and not a coherent story that carries viewers through an experience?

That's the challenge. Everybody's got different pieces of the story, and someone who might be good at the beginning is not so good when it comes to talking about the evacuation. Someone who doesn't say much in the beginning is great when it comes to talking about the flooding. So I'm trying to find the rhythms of these people, to create a journey, an arc. I've noticed in a lot of sequences where we've tried to intercut people telling the same story, I've gone back and I've taken out some voices, to allow one person tell the story. If you find the right characters, the right interviews, they can give you a visceral sense of immediacy, of being there, so you feel emotionally connected to it. When this man tells you about finding his mother's body under the refrigerator, because she hadn't gotten out... Or this woman whose daughter went to stay with her father in the Ninth Ward, and she couldn't find her and was having dreams that she was falling, falling, falling, and then a few months later they found her daughter's body... That's powerful. You try to get out of the way, not to condense too much, edit it too much.

You also have a unique challenge in that the four-hour film will be shown in various configurations – as a 4-hour special, in two 2-hour blocks, and as individual hours. How do you make each of those presentations feel complete?

I have a beginning, middle and end for each hour, and we're also doing it by acts – my first hour is act one, the second hour is act

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Photo courtesy of HBO



two, and so on. The first hour begins pre-Katrina and ends on people who were in the Superdome, who do anything – songs, games – to keep their spirits up. Act two looks at the city in tremendous chaos, and the evacuation of people, and ends with all of these dead bodies. Act three picks up with where the people landed, and what happened when they arrived there, and builds to the question of staying or coming back. And also deals with the psychic and emotional toll of the hurricane. The fourth act gets into what happened when people did come back, and rebuilding.

If each of the hours is an act, what is the over-arching story?

A people under siege. One and two are chronologically driven; three and four [edited by Geeta Gandbhir and Nancy Novack, who started work in April] are more thematically driven.

How do you think your experience editing dramatic features impacts your work in documentary, and vice versa?

What we're involved in, always, is trying to tell a story. Before I became a producer in documentaries [in 1988, on the PBS historical series *Eyes on the Prize*], I had edited a lot of docs, but I wasn't always thinking about how to tell a story and have it escalate dramatically and emotionally. That's something I learned from the irascible Henry Hampton [executive producer of *Eyes*, which applied three-act dramatic structure to historical storytelling]. And then right after, Spike called me about cutting *Mo' Better Blues*, and I've worked with him since on a series of

narrative fiction features. What I've learned from both is to always make the story dramatic. Get the characters up a tree, how're we going to get 'em down? I apply three-act structure to everything. I don't always adhere to it as closely as we did on *Eyes*, but it's always in the back of my mind.

Last question. Given their cost, which is money that might be spent elsewhere, why do documentaries matter?

Being documentary filmmakers, I think part of our responsibility is to be able to make people aware of history: social history, racial history, economic history. Nine times out of ten, people can only deal with that history when it's in the past, 30 years, 40 years. Sometimes you've got to jolt people a little. Because if you don't deal with what's happening now, you're just going to repeat the same problems, which we can see now in New Orleans. I think, because of Spike, that this film will have tremendous impact. It will reawaken people's outrage and frustration at what happened last year in New Orleans. It's present history, that needs to be considered, needs to be evaluated.

*Sheila Curran Bernard is an award-winning filmmaker and the author of *Documentary Storytelling* (Focal Press). Portions of this interview will appear in the second edition of the book, due in February 2007. She and Sam Pollard worked together on the PBS series, *Eyes on the Prize* and *I'll Make Me A World*.*