



WHAT'S UP, DOC?

LISA CORTÉS, SIMON KILMURRY AND PJ RAVAL TALK THE GOOD AND
THE BAD OF THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF DOCUMENTARIES.

INTERVIEW BY DINO-RAY RAMOS

Documentary filmmakers **Lisa Cortés**, **Simon Kilmurry** and **PJ Raval** have made waves—and strong cultural statements—in the documentary film space with award-winning projects. Emmy winner Cortés, who previously worked on narrative films *The Woodsman* and *Precious*, helped make a significant impact on the 2020 election with the Stacey Abrams-fronted *All In: The Fight for Democracy*. Kilmurry, who has also won an Emmy, worked as an executive producer of PBS's indie documentary showcase POV and produced the Yance Ford-directed, Oscar-nominated *Strong Island*. Until recently, he served as executive director of the International Documentary Association (IDA). Raval, who previously worked in the narrative space, has become a strong documentary filmmaker as the director and producer of the award-winning docu feature *Call Her Ganda*, which tells the story of the murder of Filipina trans woman Jennifer Laude by U.S. Marine Joseph Scott Pemberton.

Each filmmaker has told impactful stories, but under a volatile U.S. presidency, racial reckoning, and a global pandemic, documentary filmmaking has shifted in the past four years—from diversity and inclusion to the execs making the decisions to the so-called “golden age” of documentaries. *Produced By* sat with Cortés, Kilmurry and Raval for a roundtable discussion about their experiences in the industry and a mélange of topics in the evolving documentary space.

WHAT WAS YOUR FORAY INTO THE DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING WORLD?

Simon Kilmurry: When I moved to New York from Scotland in 1987, New York still had a lot of old, second-run and repertory theaters. I remember going to Film Forum and seeing a movie called *Brother's Keeper* by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, and being blown away by a form of documentary storytelling I'd never seen on British television. It was this verité film about three older brothers on a farm in upstate New York, and I was mesmerized by it.

In 1988, a series called POV started on PBS, and I became a fan. I remember seeing films like *Silver Lake Life* and *Tongues Untied*, and was lured into this world. I was working in a nonprofit at the time, fundraising and on the business side. A friend told me a job was opening up there (at POV), and I applied for it and I got a job as managing director. That was my entree into the documentary world. I was there for 16 years, and after a few years, I got more and more involved in the editorial side of the work.

DOCUMENTARIES WILL PULL YOU IN NO MATTER WHAT. EVEN THE WORST DOCUMENTARY IS STILL GOOD IN ITS OWN WAY BECAUSE YOU WALK AWAY LEARNING SOMETHING.

SK: I agree in a lot of ways. There was something about the films I was watching, and even if I felt that there were flaws in their structure or how they were filmed, it was opening up my world in a way that few other art forms were doing at the time.

Lisa Cortés: Yeah, documentaries allow us to be an armchair traveler: to sit in your home and to visit and experience the lives of people around the world. As a young child, it was especially important for me because I grew up in this multicultural African American, Colombian household, and I needed to find ways to access my culture beyond what my family was giving me. Film became a very important source of feeding my imagination, allowing me to travel, and to not only read about but to actually see what my communities were doing in these various places.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE POINT IN YOUR LIFE WHERE YOU WANTED TO MAKE FILMS?

LC: When I went to college, I had a wonderful professor, a gentleman named Michael Roemer. He's really well known for a beautiful film he did called *Nothing But a Man*, a narrative film with Ivan Dixon and Abby Lincoln. What is amazing about this film in the early '60s that was shot in black and white about an African American couple in the South, dealing with race and class, is that it was made by a documentary narrative filmmaker, and he put such an interesting lens on their lives.

He also wasn't American, so all of those things came into play as I started to think about representation—whose stories get told. What has always been the connective tissue is finding community and seeing the multidimensionality of how lives are lived. Film was that way that could allow me to travel and to access.

After graduating, I got a call from Jennie Livingston when she was working

on *Paris Is Burning*. I helped with that film. So even before I fully stepped into documentary, I was intrigued by the humanity that could be brought to telling the stories of communities that would be called marginalized by some people, but who I saw as family.

PJ Raval: Yeah. Lisa, it's interesting that you mentioned *Paris Is Burning*, because I often cite that as one of the first films I saw that happened to be a documentary where I saw representation of a different type. I got interested in filmmaking through art and photography. My background is actually fiction and narrative filmmaking. So when I did study film, I made short narrative films. I started working professionally as a cinematographer. I shot independent narrative features, narrative short films.

HOW WAS IT LIKE FOR YOU WORKING IN THE NARRATIVE SPACE?

PR: I started getting a bit disillusioned by the film industry because I was working

in a lot of independent (projects). This is in the early to mid-2000s. I feel like the independent film scene at the time was, and still very much is, rooted in this kind of commercial and capitalistic practice. So many of the films were rooted on which star was going to be attached. How do you even start thinking about the value of a film based on who's in it?

Meanwhile, I was very interested in making films that were coming from a queer lens—from an Asian American BIPOC lens, and there weren't a lot of outlets for that. Even on the queer side, unless it was really heteronormative and a romance with sexy young guys, it was not really considered as something. Which is why for me films like *Paris Is Burning*, which presented different stories and identities, were interesting to me.

PJ, DID YOU, LIKE LISA AND SIMON, HAVE A BENCHMARK THAT MADE YOU DIVE INTO DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING?

PR: It wasn't until I started filming some documentaries that I started understanding the power of documentary and nonfiction. Specifically, I filmed *Trouble the Water* for Tia Lessin and Carl Deal. That was a big documentary training experience for me. Before that I had worked on some films that were much more improvisational in terms of the camera work. Suddenly it went from a very structured, controlling world to something more reactive and intuitive. Meanwhile, starting to work on *Trouble the Water*, I filmed another film called *Dirt* for NFB and ended up filming a lot in India, which was amazing.

I also filmed a (narrative) film in Palestine called *Habibi*. But what I loved about documentaries was that they were highly reactionary. Something was happening; you saw the filmmakers go out there, grab a camera, start filming. Meanwhile, I saw the scripted narrative filmmakers waiting for years to get funding.

In the narrative side, it was very much repackaging these stereotypical and trope

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narratives, just at various budgets. Like if you had a big budget, it was because you had a big actor. If you had lesser famous actors and lesser experienced crew, it was a smaller budget—but they're all trying to do the same thing. So I immediately gravitated toward documentary.

LC: I think it's really interesting that we both have this narrative background. I still love narratives and I love the films that I make. *Woodsmen* and *Precious* are unique vistas on characters who are rarely seen. However, I agree that most of the other stuff was formulaic and there was no space for revelation. Sometimes I watch a documentary and get confused who are the good and the bad guys. The stories I love are the ones that are so complex that they turn things inside out for me. They make me revisit my ideas about possibility.

SK: What you're saying, Lisa, has always attracted me to this form of storytelling. I most enjoy films that challenge my preconceptions about the world, that reveal something unexpected and surprising and where I'm not always clear on who the hero is and who the villain is. Life's complicated and not black and white. It's nuanced and gray, and there's good and bad in everything.

When I go into a movie, I want to come out with as many questions as I had going in, but the questions might be different, or they'll be reshaped, or my assumptions about the world will have been challenged in some fashion. That's what documentaries do so well, because they're dealing with the real world.

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH WITH NARRATIVE FILMMAKING YOU HAVE TO JUMP THROUGH SO MANY MORE HOOPS THAN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN ORDER TO GET AN AUTHENTIC STORY TOLD. WITH THAT IN MIND, ALL THREE OF YOU HAVE MADE SOME VERY IMPACTFUL FILMS IN THE PAST FOUR



Lisa Cortés (inset) spotlighted Stacey Abrams in the documentary *All In: The Fight for Democracy*, focusing on Black Americans' long struggle to participate in democracy.

YEARS—AND ALSO A LOT HAS HAPPENED IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS. HOW DO YOU THINK THIS DOCUMENTARY LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED?

LC: The last four years were really challenging politically for me. How to make work that had impact or provided solace occupied a lot of my attention because of the brutality that we were being exposed to.

I think documentary films lend themselves in a way that narratives don't. Some have campaigns. If you see a certain film and are inspired, the film tells you what you can do. *All In* had an extensive campaign that was used by stakeholder organizations as a tool for mobilizing and engaging people. The cumulative effects were incredible.

I look at a documentary like *Belly of the Beast* by Angela Tucker and Erica Cohen and what that has done for these women who had the agency of their body and their reproduction taken away from them. It's translated into legislation now, addressing what was done to these women. So you think about (the fact that) people have the power.

SK: I think *All In* is a great example of a film coming out at a time when we desperately needed hope and impact. Having Stacey Abrams as a beacon in the distance that we might move toward made a difference for a lot of people.

There's been a lot of talk that we're in a golden age (of documentary films). I don't think we are. I think we're in a bit of a dangerous place. I stole a quote from

NEW MEMBERS

A SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE NEWEST MEMBERS OF THE PRODUCERS GUILD AND WHAT MAKES THEM TICK



Tracy Ullman

Not to be confused with the comedy legend by the same name, Ullman has paved her path as a documentary producer and was inspired to enter the industry out of her desire to tell strong stories. She is currently transitioning away from documentaries and making a foray into the narrative space.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received about producing?

I was on a shoot for Nova/Horizon for my first producing role about Richard Branson and Steve Fawcett flying around the world in balloons. We had a crazy schedule. At one point, I snapped my fingers to ask our camera crew to film something in one of the control rooms, and all of the crews in the area stopped and stared at me. They told me I needed to respect everyone I work with. I made sure I never behaved that way again, and it's proven to be the best way to have smooth shoots.

Marcia Smith from Firelight Media where she talked about being in the Hollywood age of documentary films. I twisted it a wee bit and said it's also the corporate age of documentary films.

I've been around long enough where the only documentary outlets were public television and HBO, and that's not good enough. We need many more outlets, and I welcome them, but I'm a bit nervous at the moment. A lot of resources are being concentrated in kind of a 1% of makers, producers and directors. There's many more voices out there that are not getting access to the resources they need.

There's also been kind of a counter movement. It's been great seeing the growth of organizations like Brown Girls Doc Mafia, Documentary Filmmakers With Disabilities, and A-Doc. These grassroots organizations are holding people's feet to the fire to try to make some change—to be a counterbalance to Netflix, Amazon and all those guys. I love the people that work at those places, but we have to recognize their motivation is profit, and that doesn't always align with the motivation of the filmmakers.

SPEAKING OF STREAMING SERVICES, THEY HAVE EXPANDED ACCESS TO DOCUMENTARIES AND DOCUSERIES LIKE MY NAME IS PAULI MURRAY AND EVEN TIGER KING. BEFORE THE STREAMING ERA, THESE FILMS WERE ONLY AVAILABLE AT SMALL ART HOUSE THEATERS IN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS. NOW THEY ARE INSTANTLY AVAILABLE IN HOMES ALL OVER THE NATION. DO YOU THINK THIS IMMEDIATE ACCESSIBILITY HAS PROS AND CONS?

LC: I'm always looking at impact. It's wonderful to have a home that you can direct people to, but you still want to create that bridge to a community

to find this film and use it to make change in your life.

PR: I agree. To Lisa's point, what's great about documentaries is seeing social impact. The idea of how documentaries can contribute to cultural change, social change, maybe even legislative change is really amazing. But also to Simon's point, I agree it's kind of a dangerous age. What's happening is, so much of it was rooted in public broadcasting, and this idea of an organization like ITVS, or a platform like POV, where you can have your film shown to 30 million people across the United States and parts of North America—it's really amazing to have that reach and access. And then also to have funding you could be eligible for.

But it's gotten more difficult. POV can only program so many films per year. ITVS I think is only funding like 3% of all applications at this point. Also there's been this commercialization, and more cultural acceptance of documentary by the streamers, so you have the Netflixes and the Amazons. With that comes the concepts of binge watching and sensationalism. So when people are thinking of documentaries, I don't know if they're thinking anymore of the award-winning POV film, or if they are thinking, "I'm going to go home and veg out to this crime thriller." It becomes more of the hook and the lure rather than the actual content.

You were asking about change specifically within the four years. I've seen this amazing awareness that, yes, we need to have BIPOC filmmakers in the room. We need to have queer filmmakers. We need to have filmmakers of different abilities. But when I look at who are the people who make those decisions, and who are the people who write those checks, who decides if that ends up on something—I don't see those people.

To give you an example, within the last two years I'm getting a lot

of people talking to me about, “Oh, hey, we’re interested in this project, we’re looking for someone who has connections to the queer community or is Asian American. Let’s talk about this and see if we can bring you on or attach you.” But when I look at the team, the team does not reflect it at all. They’re looking for a director, which is great, but where’s my ability to say, “OK, I want to create a team that’s going to do this, and this is the funding that I’m able to get?”

PJ, your film *Call Her Ganda* made great impact and we still see its impact. And Lisa, *All In* helped create change, and as we come toward 2024, I feel that many people are fearing that election anxiety.

LC: How about 2022? Why postpone your

agony to 2024? (laughs)

It’s funny: I was looking at some of the stats (on *All In*), and we had 1.3 billion social impressions for the film, and for the campaign, for the website. It was phenomenal. If you asked me on January 5, I had a lot of joy. Georgia changed, and then Biden was elected. But if you asked me on January 6, it’s deflated. Every day when we see that we cannot pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, that the crazy rhetoric that is being thrown around about the big steal and how that’s being used to justify rolling back access to the vote for the communities who need to have their voice represented, it makes me so disappointed.

I’m hoping that those people who care are continuing to not be deflated

by what’s going on, because we know what’s coming. There’s no surprises. What we are doing is we’re still making certain that this film is an available tool. Because when people see the film, the history’s so revelatory. You get the connection between what happened to felons in Florida in the late 19th century and what is happening to returning citizens in Florida now—how there is this targeted approach to communities of color, and the detrimental effect it has in our communities from education to health to other public policy concerns.

SK: I think we need to be a little careful in the expectations of what a singular film can do in terms of impact. Films don’t exist in a vacuum. They exist as part of social movements, as part of groups that have been working toward change for many, many years.

Change often goes forward and moves back—and then goes forward and moves back. I remember the week I was leaving POV, it was the same week as the gay marriage ruling from the Supreme Court. POV had had a number of films on over the years dealing with LGBTQ issues and gay marriage, none of which were responsible for that ruling. But they were all part of a social, cultural dialogue over any many years.

Impact can often be on an individual level. Someone could have seen *Call Her Ganda* and have been moved in a way which, PJ, you’ll probably never know about, but it has an impact. I think *Belly of the Beast* is a fantastic story, but it’s a bit of a unicorn, where the legislation and the movie kind of happened at the same time. These things often happen on a much longer time frame, and as part of a much larger set of social movements, in concert with a movie.

AS WE MOVE INTO 2022 AND AS THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE CONTINUES TO CHANGE AT A MOMENT’S NOTICE, WHAT DO YOU HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING?



Simon Kilmurry (inset) produced the Oscar-nominated *Strong Island* (top), and executive produced the Peabody Award-winning *My Perestroika* (bottom) for POV.

I KNOW THAT'S A VERY BROAD AND HEAVY QUESTION.

PR: Simon, you go first. *(laughs)*

SK: I'm incredibly optimistic about documentary storytelling as a whole, because I know so many documentary filmmakers and I meet a lot of younger people entering the field with great ideas and skills. To PJ's point earlier, the barriers of entry to documentary are in some ways lower than ever. You can go out and shoot, and as soon as you have something to show people, you can begin to get access to grants and other areas of support. So I'm really optimistic that there's greater concern about who gets to tell what stories; who gets access to what resources; and who gets to be at the table. It has not changed nearly enough, but it is changing. It's not the way it was 10 years ago.

LC: I love this space to not only interrogate subjects, but also myself through the process. What are the values that are important to me; what can I bring to the set for my team and also equally for the storytelling?

There's still the question, as PJ pointed out, of who is making the decisions. You just can't make a decision off a short list; you have to open up that list to other people, to new filmmakers. When I think of the height of Blaxploitation, all the studios reached out and gave opportunities to Black directors, and then that moment died. I don't want that to happen for my BIPOC directors and producers in this space. I don't want us to become victims of a ghettoized approach.

If anything, so much of what I will be doing with my company next year is not just about incubating and telling stories, but also incubating the talent and the next wave of storytellers.

PR: A lot of people are questioning the narratives. Not only what the film is about and who is in the film, but also how it's made, who's making it, who will see it. I think that's pretty exciting,



In *Call Me Ganda*, PJ Raval tells the story of a young transgender Filipina woman and her murder at the hands of an American soldier.

because it really does put a spotlight on all the aspects that have been overlooked in the past.

As much as I've been critical of narrative filmmaking, I think the thing that's really great about it is how much empathy can be created. I think documentaries are very interested in that as well. In generations younger than myself, a lot of multi-hyphenate identities and personalities are emerging. I'm really enjoying that. I would love to think that we will get to the point where it's about storytelling, and it's amazing storytelling coming from this one person.

I do see some filmmakers starting

to do that in interesting ways. We can't help but look at someone like Ava DuVernay and think about all the things that she's able to do because people are interested in her, as a person and as a filmmaker, not necessarily just the project. I wish that would be the direction. Not, "Oh, something's happening in the Asian American community, so who's the one Asian American filmmaker we're going to look at to represent this?" It's more about genuine interest in what people have to make, and that freedom to explore it in all the different ways. At the end of the day, it's storytelling. That's the hope we should move toward. ■