



Literary Truth For Frederick Wiseman, there's nothing like the real thing

FREDERICK WISEMAN IS THE INVISIBLE MAN OF FILMMAKING. He doesn't have a lot of regard for the idea of direct cinema, but by placing the camera in the room and seemingly walking away, Wiseman is the definition of the slow reveal. Sees all, pares down. A Wiseman film is all about natural selection, even as he's taken up digital shooting. His is the work of a refined, restrained sensibility that seduces the surface layer to release its grip on the official story and let the truth escape.

Over the course of 40-plus years, Wiseman, who turned 81 on New Year's Day, has made some 40 documentaries, under bare-bones titles that define the world the viewer is about to enter: *Welfare*; *Hospital*; *Meat*; *Aspen*; *Juvenile Court*; *Model*; *Racetrack*; *La Danse*; *Belfast, Maine*; *Boxing Gym*. His camera finds more than people and places. Wiseman's films reveal the matrix.

Last September at the Toronto International Film Festival, I caught Wiseman and his latest film, *Crazy Horse*, about the legendary Parisian boîte that fueled the fantasy life of mid-century bad boys the world over and continues to put on shows.

Crazy Horse is another French project. Do you maintain a residence in Paris?

Over the last 10 years I've had a lot of projects there—three movies and two plays and another play in the spring—so I'm there a lot. And I like it there.

Across all your films, the Wiseman way has been to let the subject reveal itself.

Yeah, the films are all highly edited though. I try not to hit the audience over the head. When I read novels or watch plays, I don't like the writer to tell me directly what he's thinking about the characters. I like to infer it myself from the dialogue and the action. Since what I think I'm doing is making a narrative dramatic movie, even though they're found events, my guides are more literary than they are traditional TV documentary.

What responsibility do you have to the subject when you're filming?

To not demean the subject and to make sure the sequence is a fair reflection of what was going on while I was there. There's hardly a sequence in real time. They're all highly cut to create the illusion that it took place the way you're seeing it. There's no way you can measure faithfulness to the subject. Someone else looking at the same rushes—first of all, they wouldn't have the same rushes, but even if they did—wouldn't cut it the same way. Because their interests, values, and experience would be different.

Looking at your earlier films—*Titicut Follies*, *Welfare*, *Hospital*, *High School*—there was an implicit call to action.

I'm not sure I agree with you on that. It was true of *Titicut Follies* and to a lesser extent *High School*. Not since then. My thinking became less simpleminded, less utopian, less naïve. I don't think there's any measurable relationship between film and social change, particularly in a democratic society where so much information is available. It would be totally presumptuous of me to say *Titicut* changed the prison system in Massachusetts. It may have been an element in changing some aspects, but it was all over the news. It would be pretentious and naïve to think *Titicut* had more impact than that. Give me an example of any work in any form where there's a direct relationship between the work and social change.

>> IN FOCUS: *Crazy Horse* opens at New York's Film Forum on January 18.

So how do you understand the power that film has? What do you think you accomplish at the end of the day?

I don't know how to measure impact; I hope I made a good movie. Don't ask me what that is, because like anything else, it's completely subjective. I hope I've done the best I could with the material that I have, and that it's a clear representation of the experience I had being at the place. The only standard I have is my own, and it's hard enough to know what I think.

You came to film from a career as a lawyer.

On paper that's true. The reality is when I went to law school, after the first semester when I realized I could pass, I decided I didn't want to do it.

Is this what your parents would have chosen for you?

My father was a lawyer, a general practitioner. He was pleased when I went to law school but was frightened when I stopped. They were okay with my quitting, but what could they do?

And your mother?

She was the administrator of the psychiatric department of a children's hospital.

She must have had a big reaction to *Titicut*.

Oh, yeah! Both parents did. My mother was a frustrated actress. When she wanted to go to the American National Theatre and Academy in 1917, her father wouldn't let her enroll. She was a very good actress and a terrific mimic. My introduction to theater was when I would come home from school and she would imitate the people she met during the day.

Why have you spent your career making films about real subjects, real people in real places?

The short answer is because it interests me. The material you stumble across is amazing. They're not events that you created. But you recognized what they are. They're sad, funny, tragic. It's great literature. It's not staged. I didn't imagine it, but I recognized it and figured out a way of using it.

Your early films—*Hospital*, *Welfare*, *Titicut*—are about destruction. Your late films—*Boxing Gym*, *La Danse*, and now *Crazy Horse*—are about beauty. That's like a psychograph of what we think about as we age.

I've always been thinking about beauty. I think *Welfare* is beautiful. And in *La Danse* and *Crazy Horse*, only one of the subjects is beauty. I didn't plan it out as a trajectory. Chance is a better explanation.

What did you see in *Crazy Horse* that you thought would be revealing about the French, about youth?

Every one of my films is an illustration of the basic principle that operates through them: it's a crapshoot. I don't start off with the idea I'm going to show something about class structure or society. The same issues pop up no matter what the subject, no matter what the country. There are going to be issues of class, power, and authority in some abstract way. The only question is, what form are they going to take? The finished film is what I've learned about those general issues in this particular place. My mind works in relation to these issues more toward the end of the film, in the editing. Part of the fun of doing it is being on the ready alert for what is unexpected.

How much footage did you have?

One hundred and fifty hours. In the beginning it's always a great big glop of material and



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you say, “How am I going to do this?” Then you just chisel away. You have to be patient. The last three months of an edit, you sit there seven days a week. I lost some shots of *Crazy Horse* but no major sequences.

What drives the film?

If the film is really going to work, it has to work on two levels. It has to work on the level of the literal. This is the place, this is how it's put together, these are the numbers, this is the illustration, etc. But if a film is really going to work, it also has to work on an abstract level. I would say that *Crazy Horse* is one of the most abstract films I've ever made. One of the issues it raises is what constitutes eroticism or sensuality, the difference between natural beauty and artifice.

The film embraces eroticism. It shows women who are happy in their erotic work. I can think of audiences who don't want to hear that on both the Right and Left, but I was relieved there was no *Chorus Line* template. I didn't want to know all of the dancers' backgrounds and how they got to the show.

Neither did I. If they talk about that, all well and good. But I was interested in their professional lives. Almost all had been to dance conservatories. It was true in *La Danse* as well that the dancers didn't reveal much in their conversations. They showed up, they worked all day or night, they chitchatted occasionally but about nothing of any personal significance.

Did you include the transgender dancer's audition for what it says about where the limits are?

It's a great question. It's clear from the film they have a legacy to maintain. There are no men in the show other than the tap dancers. None of the acts suggest heterosexual sex.

It was the point where you show France as it is, an essentially conservative society.

France is much more class-ridden, hierarchical, and traditional.

The audition is the place where anything can happen.

It's a key sequence. That's where you see what *Crazy Horse* thinks its brand is, by the movement it asks the girls to make.

Stick your butt out.

Absolutely. □