

WALKING BETWEEN

WORLDS

The Feature Writer as Documentarian



George Hickenlooper interviews Dennis Hopper

PHOTO BY: Kate McCallum

An Interview with Award-Winning Writer-Director

George Hickenlooper

by Kate McCallum

It's somewhere in the summer of 1988 in Venice, California. I'm standing quietly behind my affable Pasadena neighbor, George Hickenlooper, as he interviews the legendary actor Dennis Hopper for what will eventually become *Art, Acting and the Suicide Chair*, George's first documentary. George had asked me to take still photos of the shoot; and, of course, I jumped at the opportunity. Between clicking off shots, I listened as George questioned this famous actor, and was very impressed with the intelligence of his questions and the ease he exuded while he carried on the interview. As I watched and listened, I had an intuitive knowing that George was going to realize his dreams of becoming a storyteller in the film medium.

CUT TO:

Present day. A post-production house, somewhere in the heart of Hollywood. I'm standing quietly behind George once again. George is deep in the mix of his latest documentary *Mayor of Sunset Strip*, a feature-length exposé examining the history of fame through the eyes of pop star impresario and radio DJ, Rodney Bingenheimer.

Since that day in 1988, George has been prolific. He authored the book *Reel Conversations*, has written and directed (and even acted in) several documentaries and features and was awarded an Emmy® for directing the documentary *Hearts of Darkness*, the story of Francis Ford Coppola

and the making of *Apocalypse Now*. He's credited as writer-director on the following documentaries: *Picture This: The Times of Peter Bogdanovich in Archer City*; *Monte Hellman: American Auteur*; and the feature films: *The Killing Box*, *Lowlife*, *Dogtown*, *The Big Brass Ring*; and as a director of the features *Persons Unknown* and *The Man From Elysian Fields*. The latter was released last fall by Samuel Goldwyn Films to spectacular reviews. Roger Ebert cited it as being one of the best films of 2002. George also produced, directed and edited the short film *Some Folks Call It a Slingblade*, which went on to become the feature film by Billy Bob Thornton. His next project is directing the feature *Diary* for Columbia Pictures.

scr(i)pt: You started your career writing and directing documentaries. Was this intentional?

George Hickenlooper: Absolutely not. I fell into it accidentally. I always intended to make fictional films. I had made student films in high school and college. I came to Los Angeles after having graduated from Yale and worked for Roger Corman with the hope of finding a place working in fictional film. Through Roger I met Peter Bogdanovich, and, ultimately, was able to sort of con my way into doing a documentary about the making of *The Last Picture Show* while [Bogdanovich] was shooting *Texasville*. [*Picture This*] was my first feature-length documentary.

Prior to that, I was scraping by writing liner notes for adult films at a company called Image Entertainment. They were a laserdisc distribution company trying to become legitimate by licensing mainstream titles from the studios. Having studied at Yale and worked on the *Yale Daily News*, I used my journalistic skills to get access to the film directors because the laserdiscs in 1987 were a new medium, and directors loved them. This was the dawn of ancillary material, which is now very common on DVDs; so I knew that if I went to a director and asked if I could do an interview, I would get access.

I interviewed people like Oliver Stone, Louis Malle—he even came to my office on Hollywood Boulevard himself because he loved this technology. They loved the art. I shot Dennis Hopper on video. That was the first thing I did, and then, armed with these interviews, I was able to talk Peter Bogdanovich into doing the documentary. [The project] was initially meant to be an EPK (electronic press kit); but the narrative throughline was told from the point of view of his estranged wife, Polly Platt. It turned into a sort of visceral deconstruction of Peter's life ... I think much to his dismay. That project led to *Hearts of Darkness*.

scr(i)pt: How did you get involved with *Hearts of Darkness*?

GH: Eleanor Coppola had shot all this

footage in the Philippines in 1976 while her husband was shooting *Apocalypse Now*. She had seen my Bogdanovich documentary. She didn't feel that she had the wherewithal to do [a documentary] by herself, so I was brought on by George Zaloom, the producer, who had a company called ZM Productions.

scr(i)pt: *They had already set up a deal somewhere?*

GH: Yes, they had the deal set up at Showtime. Originally, it was meant to be a one-hour TV special. Once I got involved, we went through all the material; and we realized what we had. We talked them into upping the budget and turning it into a feature. [*Hearts of Darkness*] was released theatrically and premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. I think it aired on Showtime at midnight one night before it was released.

scr(i)pt: *And you won an Emmy for that?*

GH: Yes.

scr(i)pt: *What would you say is the primary difference between documentaries and fictional features?*

GH: They are both the same, and they are both completely different. They're the same

in the sense that you're trying to tell a story that emotionally moves people, and at the same time is informational.

In a documentary, obviously, you're taking material and you're creating a story out of the material. It's almost like sculpting out of clay—whereas making a fictional film is like having blueprints and building an architectural structure.

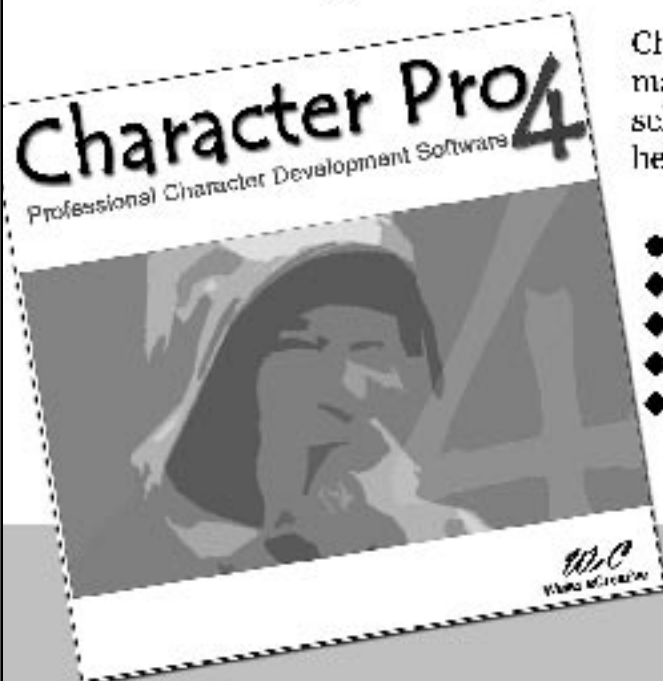
This is my third feature-length documentary, and I find it more creatively intensive and very laborious, but rewarding. You really are creating magic out of nothing; it's like sculpting in that sense. You really come to appreciate and understand the power of the medium, the power of montage—which is really cinema. [Documentary making] is one of the plastic arts, but montage editing is what sets it apart because you're manipulating time, and also the perception of space. You really get a sense of filmmaking's strength through making documentaries, as opposed to fictional film where it's a little more linear in the process. You start with a script. You shoot the script; and if the script doesn't work, then sometimes you have to apply some documentary methods to make a fictional piece work.

scr(i)pt: *Can you speak about the writing process for documentaries?*

GH: It's basically like writing a really long research paper. I apply my journalistic background when I interview a subject. Let's talk about *Mayor of Sunset Strip*. I was interested in making a film about this character, Rodney Bingenheimer; but I was also interested in Rodney becoming a doorway to exploring a much larger question of celebrity. Knowing Rodney's accomplishments, I saw him as a metaphor for American culture at the beginning of the 21st century. We have become a culture that is completely obsessed by celebrity, and I wanted to ask: Why is that? I think it has a lot to do with the breakdown of the nuclear family, and fragmentation of society and religion, and all that; but I was trying to address all these questions through Rodney's life.

Through Rodney I had access to all these pop stars and celebrities; so I would ask these questions relevant to this theme I was trying to deconstruct, and I would interview a subject and ask them all these questions about the phenomenon of celebrity. That subject itself is completely relative to any question about life and death. Such a broad subject, it's a sort of function of human exist-

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Writer-director **George Hickenlooper**

tence, wanting attention, wanting love and questions of mortality; I had a plethora of questions I would ask the subject.

After interviewing over 50 people or so, I created this 12-and-a-half to 13-hour version of the movie. Then my editor, Julie Janata, and I broke it down into subjects and themes and kept cutting it down and cutting it down, molding it, and shaping it, and finally ended up with a 93-minute film.

scr(i)pt: *On what format did you shoot this?*

GH: It was shot on every medium you can imagine, and we will finish it on HD.

scr(i)pt: *Can you describe how you pitched this and sold it, where your financing came from?*

GH: One of the producers, Chris Carter, is a DJ on a KLSX here in L.A. and hosts Breakfast with the Beatles on Sunday morning. He was in a very popular 80's band called Dramarama and was very friendly with Rodney, because Rodney had launched his band's career. I knew about Rodney on the Roq from listening to him on KROQ, and he always had this very unprepossessing kind of voice, a very child-like voice. I wanted to meet him. Chris was also writing a book about [Rodney] and was making a documentary on his home video camera.

I went to Rodney's apartment. He lives in a one-room apartment in a very seedy part of Sunset surrounded by photos of himself with just about everyone you can imagine. He was almost like this Forest Gump, Zelig-like creature. I thought, "This was interesting." I didn't think Rodney's success in the music industry itself would sustain a riveting, compelling documentary; but these other questions about celebrity made it a universal story, one I was interested in telling.

scr(i)pt: *Then you and Chris took this project to whom for financing?*

GH: A single investor. You never know who you're going to meet in Hollywood. I was single and going to this bar called The Atlantic all the time, and I met Tommy Perna there, who was bartending. I told him I had this idea for a documentary and he said, "I can get you money." Tommy introduced me to a very supportive friend of his, and he's been financing the movie over the last five years. We plan to get distribution for it. We'll finish it and probably have a premiere this summer at the Hollywood Cinerama Dome. There are a lot of major distributors very interested in this picture. The soundtrack potential of this film alone is huge. Everybody's in it from Coldplay to Bowie to No Doubt to Led Zeppelin to The Monkees. It's very cool and eclectic. College kids to adults will love it.

scr(i)pt: *Who would be your ideal buyer?*

GH: I would be happy to make a deal with Lion's Gate, Sony Classics or Artisan; generally, the distributors who pick up documentaries. When I did *Hearts of Darkness*, the model for that film was *Burden of Dreams*, the Les Blank documentary. The model for this one is *Crumb*. There's something very *Crumb*-like about this movie.

scr(i)pt: *What did you present to the investor?*

GH: We put together an extended proposal about Rodney's life with his collection of photographs with all these incredible people and a copy of *Hearts of Darkness*.

scr(i)pt: *Were you writing screenplays at the same time, and was writing or directing your primary focus?*

GH: I was always trying to write screenplays, but a lot of them were not very successful scripts. I think I've always been a stronger director. I thought I was a writer, but I really wasn't. I've written a least a dozen unproduced scripts, but each one's gotten better. I have a couple of studio deals now, so obviously somebody thinks I'm doing something right.

scr(i)pt: *Was Dogtown your original script and your first produced screenplay?*

GH: Yes, it was my first solely credited, produced screenplay. I was a co-writer on the *Low Life*, which was a script that was originally written by a fellow named John Enbom, a very funny, talented guy. I felt the

script wasn't taken as far as it could be, so I introduced a major character, the Sean Astin character. That was my contribution.

scr(i)pt: *Can you talk about the Big Brass Ring?*

GH: It was an unproduced Orson Welles' script. I loved the original screenplay. My great uncle had been a Senator and Governor of the state of Iowa, and his private life was very different from his public life, so I was very interested in that milieu—in the political world where you have to be someone completely different in the public eye. I loved Welles' original script; but I had the audacity to make it my own. I treated it like an adaptation, as you would adapt William Shakespeare or any great writer for the screen.

scr(i)pt: *How did you acquire the script?*

GH: We optioned it from the Orson Welles' estate. It took awhile to get it made. I worked on it a long time, from '91, and we finally got it financed in '97. My learning curve as a writer was through Orson Welles because the more I worked on the *Big Brass Ring*, the better I got as a writer. Eventually, I brought in FX Feeney, who's a wonderful screenwriter, a critic for the *LA Weekly*; and he's got a book coming out about Orson Welles this summer. I think I learned a great deal from FX.

scr(i)pt: *If a writer is interested in breaking into documentaries, does he or she also have to put on the director's hat?*

GH: I don't think you "break into" documentaries. It's not like mainstream Hollywood. Anyone can make documentaries. In terms of making a sustained living in documentaries, that's very tough. It would even be tough for me if that's what I wanted to do full time. Most documentaries are funded by private foundations or political groups; and in order to really make a market documentary, you have to be leaning heavily to the left, almost to the point of driving in circles. Propaganda. Michael Moore is a case in point.

scr(i)pt: *Are there any organizations or resources you would recommend for someone wanting to step into documentary making?*

GH: Well, keep as far away from Michael Moore as possible. That's my advice. That guy absolutely irritates me. As a documentary filmmaker, he is guilty of being consistent

with the political left's inability to separate emotion from facts. Sure, he means well, but his fudging of the truth to make a case for his liberal views is typical.

scr(i)pt: *What about the IDA?*

GH: The IDA* treated me very shabbily after the making of *Hearts of Darkness*, so I have very little respect for them. It's very political, and my experience with them left me hurt and angry. I also think their calling Michael Moore's film the greatest documentary of all time was just plain silly. What about *Nanuck of the North*? I mean, come on.

[*The International Documentary Association, www.documentary.org, is a membership organization dedicated to the making of documentaries. Their web site contains a comprehensive list of resources for festivals and funding sources as well as other pertinent information.]

scr(i)pt: *How did you come to write the book Reel Conversations?*

GH: The book came about because I compiled all the interviews I had done for the laserdisc company, wrote little introductions for each one and sold it to Citadel Press.

scr(i)pt: *What are you writing now?*

GH: I just turned *Diary* in today, which I'm very excited about. This is the Columbia movie I'm directing. It was written by a fellow named Eric Nichols, and I just did a polish on it.

scr(i)pt: *And that was part of the deal?*

GH: Yes, I am able to do rewrites, the director's prerogative. The translation of [the script] onto the screen is completely different from what the material is literally on the page. I can't tell you how many scripts I've directed that I've written on; like *The Man From Elysian Fields*. I got no writing credit, but I rewrote about 50 percent of that script.

scr(i)pt: *What about submitting to festivals?*

GH: If you have a documentary and you want to premiere it in a festival, Sundance, Toronto and the Los Angeles Film Festival are probably the three premiere film festivals for documentaries. Maybe Tribeca and the New York Festival, too. If you really want to get your film seen, get distribution, you need to get it into a premiere film festival. It's great to play the [smaller film festivals], but it's not going to move your career forward. It's just going to get you a pat on the back from audiences, which is fun, too. Early in

my career, for the first five years of my work, I went to every city in the continental U.S., and it was fun meeting people.

scr(i)pt: *Is DVD enhancement production another good route for writers?*

GH: I don't know what it's like now, but I imagine. When I started at ZM Productions, there were a lot of directors there; for instance Peyton Reed, who just directed *Down With Love*, the Renée Zellweger and Ewan McGregor film, and also *Bring It On*, the *Citizen Kane* of cheerleading movies he calls it—great guy. John Schultz, a very well-respected director, started at ZM. Fax Bahr, who was my partner on *Hearts of Darkness*, has *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*. So, for me in the early 90s, coming out of the EPK world was fantastic.

scr(i)pt: *Are there any particular issues or themes you would like to address in your future work?*

GH: My childhood [laughs]. That's a good question. I am interested in dealing with the phenomenon of cultural narcissism that has taken over this country, which I think is the direct result of what happened in the 1960s. The 60s has been sort of celebrated as this romantic, great period; but I think it was a very dark, cynical period, which led to this eruption of narcissism, which has led to a sort of very cynical post-modern world. Particularly in the art world. Post-modernism is the thing that really irks me the most. In order to be a filmmaker today, you have to be perceived as A) politically correct, and B) just cynical and emotionally detached enough that the *New York Times* will like you. I think that if you want to make films that deal with real, honest human emotions and don't pander to the dark sensibilities of the New York literati, then you're screwed. Filmmakers like George Cukor, or John Ford, or William Wyler would have a hard time getting any attention today because of that.

scr(i)pt: *Any advice to aspiring writers?*

GH: My best advice to writers today is to read, read, read. Don't watch movies. Read Anton Chekov, read Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, read Shakespeare and William Faulkner. Read all the great writers so that you have a huge canvas from which to draw.

If you only watch or just read Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Ron Bass or Stephen Gaghan; if you're only reading

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screenplays, you're narrowing your view of the world. I think a lot of films today are so derivative of other movies because of that. Expose yourself to art history and history. Get a really solid liberal arts background, and your work will be richer and more nuanced because of it.

Anyone can be a writer if you have a typewriter or a computer. Today, all you need is a home video camera. For a screenwriter just starting out, if you want to direct or write, do it yourself and have the will and desire to do it. You're better off if you're in New York or Los Angeles, preferably Los Angeles. Try to get your work seen. Storytelling is about life experience. Don't waste your money on film school. It's a complete sham. Use the tuition money to make a film.

Finally, if you really want to do this—be a screenwriter, a filmmaker—for a living then you have to ask yourself one question, and that is: "Is this the only thing I really want to do with my life, and am I going to be absolutely miserable if I don't do it?" If so, then you have to dedicate your whole body, your soul, your whole mind to it. Because it's hard. It's not easy. If there is anything else you even think about doing—doctor, lawyer, teacher—then go do that. It's much easier. Be a teacher—we need great teachers. It's a more worthy profession ... (i)

KATE MCCALLUM is an independent producer-writer-consultant and photographer. She was producer on the NBC TV movie *What Kind of Mother Are You?*, and is currently developing *The Emmett Till Story* at Showtime with Gregory Hines and Diane Keaton while working with Showrunner-Executive Producer Michael Chernuchin on the TV series *Law & Order*. She is pursuing an MA in Consciousness Studies with an emphasis on the creative process and is available as a personal writing/career consultant. Contact her at www.lifeonthedrawingboard.com