

PEOPLE



SADIE TILLERY

Director of Programming, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

Last year Full Frame celebrated many accomplishments: three Full Frame award-winning films were shortlisted for Academy Awards, the festival was named one of the "Top 50 Film Festivals in the World" by *IndieWire*, and director of programming Sadie Tillery was named one of the "Most Powerful People in Documentary" by Tom Roston's POV blog.

In this excerpt from an interview with Joel Mora, the publishing intern at CDS, Tillery talks about what it's like to select and screen movies for Durham's Full Frame Documentary Film Festival.

JM: When you're between festivals what goes on at Full Frame?

ST: We have quarterly year-round programming. This summer we did a series of music films in Durham at the American Tobacco complex—screening them outside—and this fall we had a series of weekend showings, called the Full Frame Fix, at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke that featured a few films that were sell outs at this past year's festival and a few films that haven't reached North Carolina yet. This winter we'll do a series of screenings as well.

A lot of our work as a staff during the year is figuring out the best and most efficient way to organize the festival for the upcoming year—the best ticketing systems and line systems. And we fund-raise. An anonymous donor has agreed to match up to \$25,000 in new gifts, so now we're looking for new donors or for past donors to increase their donations to Full Frame.

JM: Are you ever trying to top yourselves, think of new things for the festival?

ST: Absolutely. We have this rare, intimate four-day experience, and we hear time and time again that what filmmakers really love is being able to come and speak with their colleagues and hear conversations that they wouldn't be able to hear elsewhere. So programmatically, I think where we're trying to grow and achieve the most, is how do we create more conversation around the art form? Last year we had this A&E speakeasy venue where we programmed one-hour panel conversations in between the bands of programming, so it was really easy for patrons to get out of the film and then pop in and hear a little bit of this conversation and go back and get in line for their next movie.

JM: What films have you screened in past years that have really taken off?

ST: It's really exciting to be a part of a film's—what's the word?—springboard, and sometimes those aren't necessarily films that we premiere or show for the very first time. A film that comes to mind is *Buck*, which won our audience award in 2011 and has had a really successful theatrical run. I think it's mutually beneficial because they were able to dip their toe in the water by showing here in Durham and received a lot of audience support, won the award, and now Full Frame's laurels are at the top of its trailer.

JM: Are you getting a lot more films from newcomers or from people who are established?

ST: We offer an Emerging Artist award every year, so that always calls attention to how many first-time filmmakers' work we end up programming and that list grows every year. I think last year it was in the twenties. There are people at other events who feel that too many films are being made, and there are too many festivals, and that somehow that will water down the quality of work, but I don't feel that way. A festival is a really unique experience because it's a rare thing for a filmmaker to be present when his or her film is shown, to hear the audience react.

JM: You were a filmmaker and studied film.

ST: I did—I went to Hollins University in Virginia and studied film and photography. I was studying at Hollins when I started interning at Full Frame. I did a fair amount of work in 16mm, experimental stuff, some of it centering around my family.

JM: How do you think your background in film influences your thinking during the selection process?

ST: A few things come to mind. One is that having done some work with film gives you an appreciation of just how hard it is to make a *good* movie. I feel really grateful to have had some experience because I think it makes me a more conscious watcher. You're looking for the reason a film doesn't belong—it's a very different screening process. I'm aware that to get to the really good work I will have to let go of other films.

JM: So you're cutting out more than adding on?

ST: We have to. With 1,200 submissions and 60 spots, we have to be thinking about how to make cuts. The hardest part of my job is saying no, and it's one of the biggest parts of my job and it's heartbreaking. People spend years making their films, and there are many more wonderful films than we can show.

JM: I read that your system of choosing isn't necessarily based on rank but is more discussion-based...

ST: Yeah, it's not based on written comments or on any type of score sheet but on conversations the selection committee and

FULL FRAME Documentary Film Festival April 12-15, 2012

The Full Frame Documentary Film Festival is an annual international event dedicated to the theatrical exhibition of nonfiction cinema. Each spring Full Frame welcomes filmmakers and film lovers from around the world to historic downtown Durham, North Carolina, for a four-day, morning to midnight array of over 100 films as well as discussions, panels, and southern hospitality. Set within a four-block radius, the intimate festival landscape fosters community and conversation between filmmakers, film professionals, and the public.

Passes go on sale January 5 through the Full Frame website. Pass holders enjoy special benefits at the jam-packed four-day event, including the opportunity to buy tickets to their preferred screenings before the general public. Schedules and film descriptions will be online and in print the third week of March.

The festival is a program of the Center for Documentary Studies and receives support from corporate sponsors, private foundations, and individual donors whose generosity provides the foundation that makes the event possible. The Presenting Sponsor of the festival is Duke University.

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staff has around each title. So much of what I'm trying to do is be a listener and a filter—carefully hear how films are affecting other people so that I can imagine how they might affect a whole room of people—a weekend of people. We're looking for the whole package—for films that are affecting either because they're visually striking or emotionally resonant or are exploring an important and timely subject or issue.

JM: I won't ask you about a favorite Full Frame film, because I know you wouldn't tell me, but what about certain moments? And as the program director, what kind of legacy are you hoping to build?

ST: There are so many moments, and they are all more about the people than they are about the films. When a filmmaker is walking into Fletcher Hall and sees a thousand people in the audience, it's a wonderful moment.

As for a legacy... I guess there are two main things, and one is to be able to look back and say, those were incredible films, an incredible spectrum of work over all those years, that filmmakers and audiences were able to appreciate. I hope to show films to the best of our ability, to be able to say that we grew an audience for documentary film by doing that. And more personally, as an individual in an industry that can be painful and full of rejection, I want to look artists in the eye and let them know we appreciate what they are doing because we all need their films.

DUNCAN MURRELL

CDS Writer In Residence

Duncan Murrell is an award-winning writer and journalist from North Carolina. He is a contributing editor at *Harper's Magazine* and *The Normal School* and a consulting editor at *Southern Cultures*. Murrell has written about living in New Orleans for a year after Hurricane Katrina, as well as on such topics as immigration, politicians, termites, vultures, and hogs. Duncan's essay "The Meat Horses of Serbia" was recently named a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2011*, edited by Edwidge Danticat.

Joel Mora, CDS publishing intern, talks with Murrell about teaching documentary writing and CDS's interest in enhancing and refining its writing program.

JM: Congratulations on being featured in *The Best American Essays 2011*. There is an interesting line in that essay where you write, "I'm not a Dane. I'm an improviser." I was wondering if you think about that in terms of your writing. When I read "In the Year of the Storm," [about Katrina] none of what happens seems predictable, or at least the way you wrote it, it doesn't.

DM: I do try to improvise. I mean, I go into reporting or documenting with some ideas of what I want a story to be but not a complete idea. There's this discovery process that happens when I sit down to write—of course I've already discovered a lot of it—but I try to represent that discovery process in the piece itself and that's where I hope surprise, as you put it, comes in.

JM: So you were in New Orleans a long time. If you were a journalist, you would get in and get out. Is this where the documentary writing comes in?

DM: The kind of literature that I would like to make derives from that feeling of being a little bit unmoored and uncertain and that seems to me like life—we're uncertain, we're sort of poking forward in the dark. I'd like to get that feeling across, and it happens fairly often in my work, but the truth is that I begin like every other journalist/documentarian. I call a bunch of people, I do some phone interviews, I arrange to meet people, and early on I pay attention to all those pseudo-events like press conferences and rallies, but at some point I quit. Not consciously, but I find more interesting things to write about.

JM: Let's fast-forward a bit. What brought you to CDS?

DM: After I published the story about New Orleans, I talked with some people here at CDS, and they wanted me to teach writing. So, I did. I've been teaching documentary writing one



semester a year for the last three years, and they asked me if I could help develop a more robust writing program, by suggesting things for the curriculum but also by doing things to help to establish CDS as a place for writing in addition to a place for film and audio and photography. One thing led to another, and they hired me.

JM: Coming from a journalism background, I had never heard the term "documentary writing." Is it "literary journalism"?

DM: Documentary writing is a term that has been coined here, and in some ways it's a term of convenience—it makes sense to have "documentary" in the title. You're right, it is congruent with literary journalism, narrative nonfiction, and creative nonfiction in many ways, but I've come to the idea that documentary writing as a term is actually very descriptive of what we're trying to do here. I think it's essential as we move through the changes that are occurring in technology and the consumption of art, that we see the intersections between writing, photography, film, and audio. Documentary writing implies two things to me: a certain cross-media-rich approach as well as a departure from journalism. Documentary implies an expenditure of time. A documentarian is the person who is there after others have left. I think that is an ethic that we ought to encourage among writers.

JM: When people think about CDS, they often think of images. How do you see writing fitting in?

DM: There is a really unique opportunity here at CDS to think about writing outward-directed nonfiction writing in new ways. There is almost nothing hidebound about CDS, nothing written in stone—that you have to do things *this* way. That means there is a lot of opportunity to try something new in instruction, in what we produce, to think from the ground up.

There is a growing concern—especially within journalism—that if you're too tied to one way of doing things that the world moves past you. The best way of telling that story might ultimately be a written work or it could be a film or it could be an audio piece; we should have students leave here knowing how to tell a story in more than one medium. I would like writing to be a component of a well-rounded documentarian's box of tricks. Technology is going to come and go and change, but if you are someone who is able to tell a story across media, you'll always be able to follow it.

There are just different ways of observing—different ways of simply going about your business. You can't miss it here,

ABOVE: Duncan Murrell. Photograph by Joel Mora. OPPOSITE: Sadie Tillery. Photograph by Joel Mora.