

# Carolina Living

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## Reel Life In Durham

Nancy Buirski, DoubleTake Documentary Film Festival

Southern Living®

*Last spring, filmmakers and film buffs descended on the Triangle for the lively debut of one of the country's largest documentary film festivals. On April 8-11, the festival again promises reel recognition for our state.*

**N**ancy Buirski pauses on the steps of the Carolina Theatre in Durham, smiles, and politely answers questions about the event underway inside the venerable movie hall. For the next three days, here and at the N.C. Museum of Art in Raleigh, 2,000 film buffs—many local, but some from as far away as New York and the Midwest—will sit on the edge of their seats as reel after

# Film Fest

reel of reality unfolds before them. Film luminaries, from veteran documentarian Ken Burns to relative newcomer Tim Kirkman, will be on hand to offer insights about their films and the art of the documentary.

Buirski positively glows at the commotion she has wrought with the debut of the *Doubletake* Documentary Film Festival. Her interest in documentary comes naturally. A New York native, she served as the foreign picture editor for *The New York Times* before moving to

Durham in 1997. She came to Duke for a one-month journalism fellowship. While here, she met local architect Ken Friedlein and the two later married.

"In many ways, I was responsible for what the public saw of the world," says Buirski about her former position. "[With the festival] I was looking to deal with documentary in a more prolonged and more profound way than I had."

Prolonged and profound it is. Some 25 films, from the lighthearted

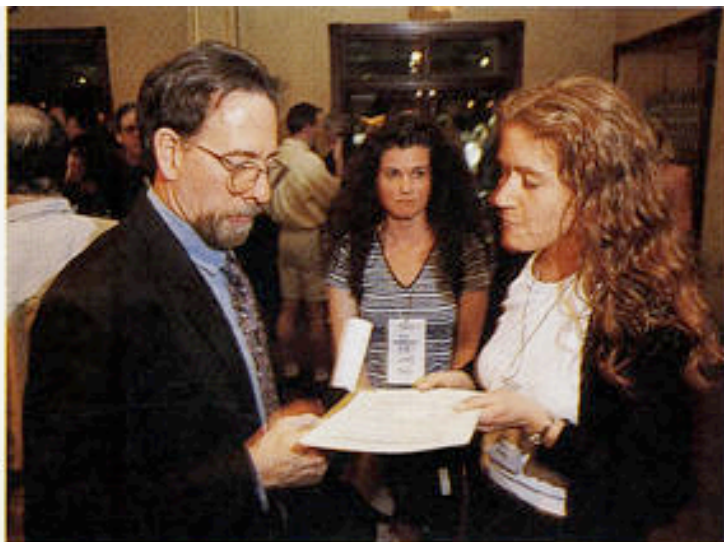
to the gritty, are shown. Among these are Burns's film on esteemed architect Frank Lloyd Wright and North Carolina native Kirkman's *Dear Jesse*, which consists of a letter to North Carolina senator Jesse Helms from the gay filmmaker.

Also on hand is Charlotte-native Ross McElwee, best known for his *Sherman's March*, which depicts

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Nancy Buirski won the support of some of the biggest names in film for the Durham festival.  
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Charlotte native Ross McElwee says, "Other festivals allow documentary films in, but they're always the sort of poor step-cousins of feature films." His *Sherman's March* depicts Civil War maneuvers—and the filmmaker's search for new love.



both the Civil War campaign *and* the filmmaker's search for a girlfriend. Actresses Patricia Neal and Faye Dunaway are here, as is actress and *Amistad* producer Debbie Allen.

Robert Coles, founder of *Double-Take* magazine, is co-chair. The magazine is the festival's chief sponsor, along with the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

The other co-chair is filmmaker Martin Scorsese. Although the famed director didn't attend, he lent his words and financial support. "I'm constantly challenged by the desire to get to the truth of things, and I find the documentary form to be one of the most vital means of expression in film," he said when the event was announced. "This promises to be an exciting and important new international film festival."

The 26-member board also includes such notables as Ken Burns (*The Civil War*, *Baseball*); Jonathan Demme (*Silence of the Lambs*); Gordon Smith (founder of the Exploris Museum); Elizabeth Buford (deputy secretary of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources); Frank Capra, Jr. (owner of Screen Gems Studios in Wilmington); Robert Redford (director, actor, and founder of the Sundance independent film festival in Utah); Joanne Woodward (documentary



filmmaker and Oscar-winning actress); Lawrence Wheeler (director of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh); Thom Mount (Durham native and film producer of the feature film, *Bull Durham*); and a host of others.

"North Carolina is a natural choice for this event because of the state's growing reputation and importance in the film industry," Buirski says. "There's a very diverse community, an educated community, a cultured community, that is reaching out for more stimulation here."

Burns agrees. "[The festival] is filling a void, not only a creative void, but a void of need," he says. "Our goal is to spread the gospel of this form of communication. Documentary is an attitude, it's a way of collecting materials, a way of looking at the world. And it's a way of acknowledging, in a sense,

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"This whole area has been kind of like a cradle for my whole family," Debbie Allen says about the region. "My mother and father were educated in the Carolinas. I have a lot of history here. There is a spirit here that allows for the capture of intellect, diversity, and creativity." Allen produced the well-received film, *Amistad*.

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Tim Kirkman, writer and director, and Mary Beth Mann, producer, showed their work, *Dear Jesse*. The film is a letter to North Carolina senator Jesse Helms from the gay filmmaker and depicts the similarities and differences between the two Monroe natives.

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that God is the greatest dramatist," he concludes.

For Buirski, too, documentaries transform. "They have the power to change," she says.

That's why festival organizers plan to introduce an educational element to area schools at the 1999 event. "What we want to do is develop a curriculum to help educators deal with documentary films and focus on tolerance as a theme," says Buirski. Eventually, the festival planners hope to "put cameras in the hands of some of those students."

Such hands-on endeavors should help dispel the bad rap that documentaries suffer in some quarters. "Our popular notion is that there are feature films and then there are these things called documentaries, which you look at in school and they are good for you," says Burns. He laughs and adds, "That is, of course, the kiss of death." But, he argues, documentary filmmakers



"A documentary demands the attention of the viewer," says Ken Burns. His 11-hour film *The Civil War* appeared on the Public Broadcasting System in 1990 and earned 40 million viewers, the highest-rated series ever for PBS. He showcased his film on architect Frank Lloyd Wright at the 1998 *DoubleTake* festival.

have the freedom to depart from the formula that Hollywood films often follow. "[Film festivals] remind people of the possibility of the [documentary] form and fill a much needed gap in people's attention, understanding, and perhaps, who knows? Maybe some kid will be inspired to devote the rest of his or her life to that."

Festival attendee Butter Fisher of Winston-Salem is far from a kid—she readily admits she's the oldest student at the N.C. School of the Arts' new School of Filmmaking in Winston-Salem. But she's as excited as any youngster about the documentary festival. And she's grateful to be working on her own documentary about bluegrass music in this film-nurturing state.

Citing this and other film festivals, the film school, and film production in Wilmington and across the state, Fisher says, "There's really a kind of a groundswell of excitement about

the film industry here. We're a long way from Hollywood, but I think we have our own way of telling stories, our own way of looking at things."

For Buirski, success is crucial. "Everyone goes to movies," she tells potential sponsors. "Not everyone reads, not everyone goes to church, or even finishes their higher education. [Film] may be the only opportunity we have left to bring a community together, to entertain, stimulate, and nourish an audience with intelligent, exciting, possibly life-changing ideas." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

#### REEL LIFE

The second international showcase of documentary films will be in Durham on April 8-11. The theme is "Documentary as Witness: Great Films of the 20th Century." For ticket information write Karen Cirillo, *DoubleTake* Documentary Film Festival, Center for Documentary Studies, 1317 West Pettigrew Street, Durham, NC 27705; call 919-660-3699; or print an order form from the Web site at [www.doubletakemagazine.org/filmfestival](http://www.doubletakemagazine.org/filmfestival). A festival pass is \$100; film buff pass is \$500; and a student pass is \$50.

**The DoubleTake Documentary Film Festival**  
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