

FREDERICK WISEMAN BIOGRAPHY

Frederick Wiseman is an American filmmaker, born on January 1st, 1930, in Boston, Massachusetts. A documentary filmmaker, most of his films paint a portrait of leading North American institutions.

After studying law he started teaching the subject without any real interest. In decided he should work at something he liked and had the idea to make a movie of Warren Miller's novel, *The Cool World*. Since at that point he had no film experience he asked Shirley Clarke to direct the film. Producing *The Cool World* demystified the film making process for him and he decided to direct, produce and edit his own films. Three years later came the theatrical release of his first documentary, *Titicut Follies*, an uncompromising look at a prison for the criminally insane.

With this first film, he established the style he would use in all his documentaries. He collects an average of 100 hours of film for each subject, shoots the films with no preconceived view and discovers the films in the editing which usually takes one year. His films, which can be compared to literary essays, contain no interviews, no added music, no commentary and follow no chronological order. They are made up of thematic segments that echo each other and form links through contrast and comparison. Wiseman is especially interested in preserving the ambiguity and complexity inherent in each subject. The point of view of his films is revealed in the structure but the editing always allows enough room for the audience to make up its own mind about the meaning of the material. On all his shoots, he records the sound himself and directs his cameraman.

After his first film, *Titicut Follies*, he directed, edited and produced a series of documentaries, one a year, with evocative titles in which he pursued his study of American institutions. The films are thematically related and in one sense can be considered as one long film about contemporary life. The institutions he has chosen to film in America all have their counterpart in all societies. The subjects of his films include *High School* and *Law and Order* in

1969, *Hospital* in 1970, *Juvenile Court* in 1973 and *Welfare* in 1975. In addition to *Zoo* (1993), he directed three other documentaries on our relationship with the animal world: *Primate* in 1974, *Meat* in 1976 and *Racetrack* in 1985 respectively about scientific experiments on animals, the mass production of beef cattle destined for the slaughterhouse and consumers and the Belmont racetrack one of the major American racetracks.

He began an examination of the consumer society with *Model* in 1980 and *The Store* in 1983. The sharpness of his gaze, his biting humour and his compassion characterize his exploration of the model agency and the big store Neiman Marcus, temples of western modernity. In 1995, he slipped into the wings of the theatre and directed *La Comédie-Française ou l'amour joué*. He tackled new social themes with *Public Housing* (1997), the analysis of social housing in a black ghetto in Chicago, and *Belfast, Maine* (1999), an X-ray of daily life in a New England coastal town. *Domestic Violence I and II* (2001-2003), filmed in Tampa, Florida, shows the work of the main reception centre providing shelter for women and children who are victims of physical violence and the court that resolves the legal issues connected to domestic violence. In *State Legislature* (2006), an ode to representative democracy and the legislative process, Wiseman follows the work of the two chambers of the Idaho State Capitol. In 2002, he directed at the Comédie Française *La Dernière Lettre (The Last Letter)* based on a chapter of a novel by Vassily Grossman. *The Last Letter* is monologue recounting the last days of a Jewish woman doctor living in a ghetto in Ukraine who writes a letter to her son several days before she is killed by the Germans. He has also directed a number of other plays, the most recent being *Oh les beaux jours (Happy Days)* by Samuel Beckett at the Comédie Française in 2006.

Frederick Wiseman's films have been selected for and won awards at numerous festivals throughout the world, notably in Cannes, Venice and Berlin.

FILMOGRAPHY

TITICUT FOLLIES	1967	ADJUSTMENT & WORK	1986
HIGH SCHOOL	1968	MULTI-HANDICAPPED	1986
LAW AND ORDER	1969	MISSILE	1987
HOSPITAL	1969	NEAR DEATH	1989
BASIC TRAINING	1971	CENTRAL PARK	1989
ESSENE	1972	ASPEN	1991
JUVENILE COURT	1973	ZOO	1993
PRIMATE	1974	HIGH SCHOOL II	1994
WELFARE	1975	BALLET	1995
MEAT	1976	LA COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE	1996
CANAL ZONE	1977	PUBLIC HOUSING	1997
SINAI FIELD MISSION	1978	BELFAST, MAINE	1999
MANOEUVRE	1979	LA DERNIÈRE LETTRE	2000
MODEL	1980	DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	2001
SERAPHITA'S DIARY	1982	DOMESTIC VIOLENCE 2	2002
THE STORE	1983	MADISON SQUARE GARDEN	2004
RACE TRACK	1985	STATE LEGISLATURE	2006
DEAF	1986	LA DANSE	2009
BLIND	1986	BOXING GYM	2009

FRANCE/USA - 2009 - 159 MIN - 1.66 - DOLBY SRD - 35 MM - HDCAM

SALES

DOC & FILM International
Daniela Elstner

Cell : + 33 6 82 54 66 85

13, rue Portefoin 75003 Paris - FRANCE

Tél : +33(0)1 42 77 56 87

d.elstner@docandfilm.com

PRESS

RENDEZ-VOUS

Viviana Andriani

Tel/fax: +33 1 42 66 36 35

In Venice : +39 348 3316681

viviana@rv-press.com

Download Presskit and Stills

www.docandfilm.com


66
VENEZIA 2009
Orizzonti

 tiff.
toronto
international
film festival

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2009

IDÉALE AUDIENCE AND ZIPPORAH FILMS PRESENT

LA DANSE

THE PARIS OPERA BALLET
A FILM BY FREDERICK WISEMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN DAVEY - SOUND: FREDERICK WISEMAN - EDITING: FREDERICK WISEMAN AND VALÉRIE PICO - MIX: EMMANUEL CROSET - SOUND EDITOR: HERVÉ GUYADER
PRODUCED BY PIERRE-OLIVIER BARDET, FREDERICK WISEMAN AND FRANÇOISE GAZIO. COPRODUCED BY IDÉALE AUDIENCE, ZIPPORAH FILMS AND THE OPÉRA NATIONAL DE PARIS, IN ASSOCIATION WITH PBS AND THE PARTICIPATION OF TPS STAR, PLANÈTE, YLÉ, LE FRESNOY (STUDIO NATIONAL DES ARTS CONTEMPORAINS) WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE, FLORENCE GOULD FOUNDATION, JOHN YOUNG - PERSHING SQUARE FOUNDATION, KAREN AND WILLIAM ACKMAN - DISTRIBUTED BY SOPHIE DULAC DISTRIBUTION

SYNOPSIS

The Paris Opera Ballet is one of the world's great ballet companies. Frederick Wiseman has filmed all the aspects of the work and life of this cultural institutional monument. By filming daily courses, repetitions and performances, Frederick Wiseman highlights the French school of ballet known for its emphasis on rigorous attention to technical perfection and precision of movement.

This new opus is part of Wiseman's long working method, a craftsman approach to film-making entirely shaped by his own aim: that of listening to the institution as it "speaks", trying to identify the rule it lives by.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PIERRE LEGENDRE AND FREDERICK WISEMAN

Pierre Legendre – After the Comédie Française, you have turned your attention to the Ballet Company of the Paris Opera. Frederick, why did you want to make this film in the home of dance?

Frederick Wiseman – First of all, I wanted to study what dance is and its relationship to the body and the mind. Every gesture that a dancer makes is a result of instruction and practice. From the age of 6 or 7 a dancer is taught how to manipulate their body and achieve formal beauty. Then, as they age, they often suffer dance-related injuries. Dance uses artifice to create beauty and temporarily interrupt the natural progression of the body toward decay and death. Performance, like the body, is transient. It is a privilege to watch people who have consecrated themselves to this life of dance and who cannot win this battle against decay and death, or only for a very short moment. I am fascinated by the evanescence of dance.

P. L. – Yes, I had the following thought while watching the film: as soon as dance comes to life it has already faded away. It's the precarious art par excellence.

F. W. – Yes, it's like the wind. I have a great deal of admiration for these people who struggle in the face of death to create such beauty.

P. L. – The other arts also deal with this struggle against one's destiny, against death; but here, on top of all that, the body acts as a key witness.

F. W. – Yes, you see Pierre Lacotte at 65 and his wife, working with the dancers in Paquita, you observe someone who in his gestures has the grace of the great dancer he once was. His body is no longer young, you see the long journey it has made. And his wife, who also used to be a great star, now has difficulty walking.

P. L. – And, at the same time, the young people who dance with all the impetus of youth see what will become of them later. And that's an extraordinary lesson today. I'm also struck by the "cut-aways", for instance, painters who repaint the walls... What do you have in mind when you shoot a sequence?

F. W. – Many things. First of all, in every country, above all France, everything is linked to class, all aspects of life are organized into hierarchies. Who are the people who work as painters? We notice that they are Black... Secondly, I have in mind their physical movements. You have to make precise gestures when you paint; perhaps not like dancers but I like to watch the way people walk along the street or when they walk along corridors. These are all examples of different movements, as well as possible moments of transition to use in the film. During the shooting, I don't think where in editing the final film I will use these shots but know that during the editing, when I am trying to find the rhythm of the film they will be very useful. I love editing because it is logical, associative and instinctive. Over the years, I have learned the importance of paying attention to the peripheral thoughts at the edge of my mind, associations are just as important as formal logic. Also, since reading Watt by Beckett, I no longer feel that everything in a film has to have an explanation.

P. L. – And what is so powerful in what you do with this film is that we see clearly that dance is thought, not a sporting performance transposed for aesthetic reasons. Do you agree?

F. W. – Yes, it's the expression of thought.

P. L. – That is what is so impressive about your films, particularly here since the body is in the foreground. And not just a certain type of body, the aesthetic body of the performers, but everyone's body, in the Opera offices...

F. W. – Yes, that's right. When you see the dancers' bodies, that reminds me of the movement of bodies in everyday life, the people who take care of the machines, who make the meals, walk down the street.

P. L. – Once, in the German magazine *Ballett*, I read a question that asked: is the dancer an instrument in the hands of the

choreographer? Because he more or less saw the ballet master as a dictator...

F. W. – It is true that the choreographer or ballet master has the final word. But the dancers often make suggestions. There's an example of this in one of my favourite sequences, a rehearsal of *Genus*, by the British choreographer Wayne McGregor. Marie-Agnès Gillot and Benjamin Pech are dancing and, often, their dancing in rehearsals is at the same level as in a performance, and occasionally higher. At the end of one of the rehearsals, Benjamin Pech sets Marie-Agnès Gillot down on the floor and Wayne McGregor thinks that it's an excellent idea and should be retained, even if it isn't in the original choreography.

P. L. – In the editing, we switch from the Brownian moment of intense agitation to the formal instant of the uncluttered sequence, the sequence that the audience is going to see...

F. W. – This contract with and/or the expectations of the audience is a curious thing. A dancer can't repeat, can't correct mistakes, apologize or start again. That's understood. If they make a mistake or fall they have to get back up right away and carry on. For me, what happened at the rehearsals was often more interesting than the formal aspects of the performance since in rehearsal one sees the mistakes, hesitations and doubts and the skill and perseverance required to overcome them. Then again, when a ballet works, there is something so beautiful that we are carried away by the illusion. I recently saw *Le Parc*, a ballet by Preljocaj, and there was a duet between Nicolas Le Riche and Emilie Cosette that was so romantic, so beautiful, that I was totally transported. Everything about the duet was absolutely perfect. It's an illusion that lasts only sixty seconds, but when it works it is perfect! When I see something like that, I am filled with admiration but I also feel a little sad too because the moment is transient.

P. L. – And then there's an aspect of the film that is worth close consideration because, I believe, no one had dared to show it before: giving so much space to the administration. Not the simple management and handling of logistics but the administration that is all-important for the dancers, like parents for children, providing them with care and discipline. I should like to know what you think of that.

F. W. – In a way, I see that as very French. And it reflects something of contemporary French life, as well as the social history of France. France truly is a hierarchically organized country, a land of castes. If you compare this film with my film on the American Ballet Theatre, you see the differences between the issues of hierarchy in France and in America and that's something that interests me. I found the same thing at the Comédie Française, the way in which it is run, the power struggles there...

The other thing is that a dance company of 150 dancers must have a strong foundation. The practical aspects of the administration of a major institution interest me. Also, it is important to note that the administrator is a woman and that women have central roles in the administration of the company. There is implicit in the material an interesting comparison between the way the Comédie Française is run, and the decision making process at the Ballet Company. At the Comédie Française power is shared between the administrator and the company. There are many clans and they are often at war with each other. At the Ballet Company the administrator has full powers. She is not a dictator but she's the one who makes the final decisions. It is an interesting comparison between two great French cultural institutions... For a foreigner, this difference is sometimes very funny.

*Pierre Legendre, emeritus professor of law, is the author of a work on dance entitled *La passion d'être un autre*, and around fifteen works on the anthropological bases of western societies. He is also the writer of three documentaries directed by Gérald Caillat.*

Agnès Letestu and Mathieu Ganiou