

Bay Area Docs Shine II

by David L. Brown

The Bay Area's documentary film-making community is powerfully represented in this year's POV season on PBS, as the prestigious Emmy Award-winning series airs three superb social issue documentaries and one of the finest biographical music docs ever made – all from Bay Area documentarians.

This month we cover *Freedom Machines* (encore presentation September 9) from Jamie Stobie and Janet Cole. Next month we will cover *Soldiers of Conscience* (airing October 16) from Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan. Last month we covered Robert Elfstrom's 1969 vérité classic, *Johnny Cash: the Man, His World, His Music*; and *The Judge and the General* from Elizabeth Farnsworth and Patricio Lanfranco.

What is freedom?

Freedom Machines, produced and directed by Jamie Stobie, executive-produced by Janet Cole and photographed by Bob Elfstrom, takes a new look at disability through the lens of technology and the personal experiences of some remarkable people. The message of this powerful, well-crafted film is to "leave your misconceptions and low expectations behind" and question accepted ideas of what 'disability' actually means.

It's a message that resonates for Susana Sweeny-Martini, born with a



Susana Sweeny-Martini stars in Freedom Machines, which takes a look at disability and some remarkable people.

disability, who is completing her college education with the aid of a power wheelchair and voice-over software; for Floyd Stewart, paralyzed in mid-life by a car accident, who uses 'enabling' tools to teach other disabled people to lead independent lives; and for Shoshana Brand, who has blossomed as a small business owner with the aid of a programmable keyboard.

Beautifully edited by Ken Schneider, the film conveys empowerment and hope in these stories, but also tells of broken promises and wasted human potential. Despite the promise of innovative new technologies and landmark legislation like the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, most of America's 55 million people with disabilities will be kept from liberating technologies by a crucial lack of

funding, information and political will.

Latoya Nesmith is a bright 17-year-old who dreams of becoming an interpreter at the United Nations, determined to get the best education she can. She completes her assignments using a keyboard that mitigates her limited dexterity. Yet, the lack of assistive technology in her public school seems to be an insurmountable obstacle. "What happens is that every time it comes to ordering high-tech equipment, they ask for another evaluation," says her mother, Felicia Smalls. "This has been going on for the last four years: it doesn't matter what school district."

The documentary shows that the lack of accessible tools has thrust many parents into the role of advocate – a

role that has become a lifelong mission for Jacquelyn Brand, Shoshana's mother. As the founder of the non-profit Alliance for Technology Access, Brand urges all parents of children with disabilities to make their voices count. "We have to stand up and demand that our children be provided with the crucial, life-changing tools because nobody else will do it for us. We're just asking for the same thing that all parents want for their children: the opportunity to lead independent and happy adult lives."

Peter Dinklage, star of the acclaimed film *The Station Agent*, narrated *Freedom Machines*, which takes a timely and dramatic look at technology's enabling wonders and at the contradictions in social policy and the attitudes that prevent their full employment by all those who need or can benefit from these new technologies. One of the film's sobering statistics is that fewer than 25% of people with disabilities who could be helped by assistive technology have access to it.

In contrast to the contemporary situation, this fine documentary envisions a genuinely inclusive community, one that benefits from each of its unique members contributing at his or her full capacity.

To kill or not to kill?

Soldiers of Conscience, produced and directed by Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan, and narrated by Peter Coyote, is another powerful, well-crafted film that depicts personal transformation. It weaves the stories of eight US soldiers – four sincere war-fighters and four sincere conscientious objectors – who face the most difficult decision of their lives: to kill or not to kill. Made with official permission of the US Army, the film allows a variety of soldiers to speak intimately about killing and what it means to them, a subject that is rarely explored in documentaries.

From West Point grads to drill sergeants, from Abu Ghraib interrogators

to low-ranking reservists-mechanics, the soldiers break the taboo of talking about the subject of killing. The filmmakers ask: When is it right to kill? Is war inevitable? What is your duty to your nation? To God? To your fellow soldiers? To your conscience?

Within the film's first five minutes, a US Army sergeant describes 'the demons' that haunt him ever since he killed a 10-year-old grenade-throwing Iraqi boy. At Ft. Jackson, we see and hear the bloodcurdling chant of "kill, kill, kill without mercy!" as new recruits are trained to overcome their aversion to killing. At a Penn State ROTC class, we learn the startling US Army statistic from WWII: among US soldiers who were under fire in combat, with their own lives at risk, 75% chose not to try to kill the enemy.

Beautifully shot in high definition by Kevin O'Brien, and well-edited by Weimberg and Josh Peterson, *Soldiers of Conscience* follows the emotional and spiritual transformation of four soldiers as they decide not to kill and to become conscientious objectors. Two go to prison: Camilo Mejia, the first combat veteran to come back from Iraq and publicly refuse to return; and Kevin Benderman, a 10-year veteran Army sergeant from Tennessee. The other two, guided by their faith, receive honorable discharges: Joshua Casteel, an Evangelical Christian; and Aidan Delgado, a Buddhist.

The majority perspective on war is voiced by combat veterans – Major Peter Kilner and three Fort Jackson drill sergeants. Major Kilner, a West Point professor of ethics and former 82nd Airborne infantry commander, combines his real-world military leadership experience with graduate training in philosophy to articulate the need for the strong to protect the weak, the moral justification of war, and the appropriate use of lethal force.

Soldiers of Conscience is remarkably balanced, fair and respectful to all viewpoints about this controversial

subject. The graphic Iraqi war footage is more disturbing than most of the US media coverage and would seem to represent an anti-war perspective. This would hardly be surprising for a Bay Area doc. What is surprising and impressive is the respect Weimberg and Ryan afford to both sides, not in the least betraying the trust that permitted the film – with US Army cooperation – to be made. The film seems to argue that most soldiers have a conscience. Why is it that some lose their conscience temporarily in places like Abu Ghraib and My Lai?

These exemplary documentaries remind me, once again, how proud I am to be an active member of the Bay Area documentary community. Tune in to PBS for POV: www.kqed.org.

Producer/director David L. Brown's recent work includes *Surfing for Life*, *Seniors for Peace*, *The Bridge So Far – A Suspense Story*, *Amazing: The Rebuilding of the MacArthur Maze*, and *Of Wind and Waves: The Life of Woody Brown*.

David L. Brown is a three-time Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker who lives in Brisbane. He teaches Documentary Filmmaking at City College of San Francisco. See www.DLBfilms.com or email Docmaker1@aol.com.