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Arts

Probing Old Wounds

Filmmaker Nina Seavey Chronicles the Polio Epidemic

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The set is dark, save for the light that is shining down on a chair where a man will soon sit to tell the story of his polio. Right now the overhead light is misbehaving, bouncing, throwing shadows over a portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a little girl.

Off to the side, filmmaker Nina Gilden Seavey is frowning, an expression that occupies a semi-permanent position on her round face. She asks questions in rapid succession -- a sharp and permanent trait. Seavey steps behind the camera and asks for the light to be shifted. Should the camera catch more of the dog on Roosevelt's lap, should the light bring the dark blanket more into focus, should it emphasize the broad shoulders of a man who was an icon of the story Seavey is trying to tell?

In minutes, everything is balanced and set. Seavey pads around in flat black shoes and listens patiently to her cameraman, Allen Moore. Still, there is an air of apprehension -- the blanket of anxiety that she loves, the anticipation that something will go wrong at the worst possible minute. Yet being on the set puts Seavey in her comfort zone, as does for the sizable troop of other Washington documentary filmmakers. They are people who make explanatory movies, swift pageants of facts and larger-than-life events and personalities. These are the films that show up at film festivals, art galleries, at noon at the National Archives, on cable and on public television. There is a special need for them, for the way they

refresh our memories.

The documentarian's work is the product of details, the kind that take detective work and a creative eye. Capturing those elements can drive you crazy, especially with the usually lean means of a docufilmmaker. To bring facts to life -- a deed more often unacknowledged than lauded -- takes a dual focus of being faithful to the historic material and using creative techniques to pull the audience into what is usually familiar.

"It's a tough, unforgiving business," Seavey says. "If you are weak or are perceived as weak, you are sunk. You have to be compassionate and have heart for your work but have an iron will for the business."

Seavey, 39, is a case study of how to get success and satisfaction out of a perilous occupation. In recent years the Washington area has become a hotbed for award-winning documentary filmmakers. Paul Wagner, who is frequently Seavey's partner, won an Academy Award for "The Stone Carvers," his tribute to the masons who worked on the Washington National Cathedral. Charles Guggenheim has walked away with many tributes and lent Seavey a rare editing table she needed in her cur-

rent project. Michelle Parkerson has explored the lives of songstress Betty Carter, the vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock and poet Audrey Lorde. David Petersen was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrait of the waitresses at Sherrill's Restaurant & Bakery on Capitol Hill, and Thomas C. Goodwin and Gerardine Wurzburg won one in 1993 for "Educating Peter," which looked at the immersion of a Down syndrome student in a mainstream classroom. Washington filmmakers both cooperate and compete in a time when the few awards in their field open the door to a shrinking pool of financial backing.

For three years Seavey has been planning a film on polio, an idea she developed slowly, after a brainstorming session about looking at epidemic diseases and subsequent research on polio done by some of the students in her film classes. Four months of principal photography is completed. Just ahead is an estimated



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Washington filmmaker Nina Seavey and cameraman Allen Moore work on "A Paralyzing Fear," her documentary on polio.

D.C. Documentarian

28 weeks of editing. Her goal in this project is to retrieve the nuances of what she calls "the polio memory" from people who caught the disease in the 1950s and have lived ever since with useless limbs. Underlying her deepening interest in the subject have been the parallels between the fear polio evoked and the treatment of AIDS patients today.

The film, headed to the Public Broadcasting Service later this year, has the blessing of the March of Dimes, which for the first time has made the films in its archives available to an outsider. "A Paralyzing Fear" has a budget of \$875,000, her biggest project so far, and it is being underwritten largely by \$750,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

With the unusual luxury of having the money to do what she envisioned, Seavey has been free to dig and experiment. She's crossed the country to listen to nurses who remember young children crying for their parents in the age of quarantine and Sunday-only visits. She's asked people to re-create the sight of mothers collecting dimes from house to house and the sound of a classmate's brace on the wooden floor. She hooked up her microphone to the collar of the iron lung of Marilyn Rogers in Minnesota and they both cried as the woman looked at Seavey through a mirror and told her story for the first time. And this day in a studio, as she interviews several subjects, the room feels like Seavey's poetic wish to suspend time.

No Mean Feat

Part of her energy comes from her love of detail, and part of her success



BY LUCIAN PERKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Carol Boyer holds a photo of her used in a polio poster.

comes from her pesky determination not to let a detail go unexplored. With each project, filmmakers have to prove themselves.

Seavey has been preparing herself for the last 15 years to make documentaries a full-time professional pursuit. She lives in Takoma Park with her husband, Ormond, a literature professor at George Washington University, and their three children, Aaron, 10, Eleanor, 8, and Caleb, 6. Before she was captivated by family and filmmaking, she was on the payroll at the Department of Defense and a military adviser to former congresswoman Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.).

When her children started coming along, she took temporary jobs as a teacher, treatment writer and seg-

ment producer for WETA-TV's "The Lawmakers" and "Jack Anderson Confidential."

Though she had a degree in history from Washington University in St. Louis, she worked on a master's in history at George Washington and began to meld her two interests. "I wanted to understand history and bring it in an honest way to the screen," Seavey says. She started working on a few video projects for the Smithsonian Institution in the late 1980s and then joined forces with Wagner.

"Her natural instincts are really those of a politician," Wagner says. "She asks what is going to work with the public. Then she understands what it takes to get it produced and what will make it doable."

In a methodical, albeit typically Washington, way, Seavey is trying to institutionalize her techniques and philosophy about making documen-

taries. Part of her year is spent directing the Center for History in the Media at George Washington, which she nudged the history department to set up in 1990. The program, which has trained 75 students, is the only university seminar in the country that concentrates on the production of historic documentaries. It has grown from a five-week summer course to a full semester.

In the course, filmmakers, teachers, museum curators and film preservationists soak up techniques from Washington's professional filmmakers. "It is an idea whose time has come," says Wagner, referring to the explosion of interest in history from cable companies and the public. "It's good to have a place to think about, talk about and practice these ideas.

Faces Painful Truths

In the midst of that it is important to have someone thinking about the ethical obligations of the documentary filmmaker, the demands of the field and the demands of history."

In the sessions, an idea of Seavey's will be explored or a talent will emerge from the class who becomes part of her professional team. It was in the 1994 session that her students took on polio as a topic of visual and social merit, and their enthusiasm convinced her the subject could be a full-length documentary.

"I decided, 'Let me throw myself into it. If I can teach it, I can live with it,'" Seavey says, sitting in her university office. She allows her brown curling hair to drape her face and neck like a scarf, and has the squint behind her glasses of a person who reads too much and too late at night. "The teacher in me and the

filmmaker in me said this is a film that has heart and has intelligence." In the creation of a documentary there is little extravagance. The large budgets that the ubiquitous Ken Burns gets for his historic explorations are exceptions, Seavey says. She points out archly that there usually is little money to spare, there are few stars to stand around and repeat lines until an actor and director, and perhaps a co-star, are satisfied, and few opportunities to build up and tear down a set. Of course there are egos, temper tantrums, Sturm und Drang about vision and voice. But the real luxuries are the fine details.

For example, on the polio project Seavey and Wagner started with the selection of the film stock. After testing several kinds, she settled on a newer product from Kodak. "The colors are softer, it gives you rich blacks, clear whites and pastel looks.

It has such a different feel to it, that Merchant-Ivory rich, lush look."

Other evidence of her inexhaustible curiosity about details is the approach she and Wagner took to her last film, "The Battle of the Alamo." The project was underwritten by the Discovery Channel, which aired it last year. Undeterred by this pre-photography event, the filmmakers went beyond making a simple history lesson or travelogue. Actors played the historical characters; candlelight flickered on the set, making the Texas night ominous. And the film had that evocative

detail that Seavey loves -- in one scene William Travis, the leader of the Alamo defenders, gives his ring to a baby. Seavey was able to borrow the actual ring from the Alamo museum. The film crew even made its own history, Seavey says, becoming the first ever allowed to shoot inside the Alamo. (Every other project has used a nearby replica built originally by John Wayne for "The Alamo.")

The more she researched the subject of polio, the more resonance she found in the history of the epidemic. Today the disease has been effectively wiped out in the United States, but other areas of the world are plagued by it. Seavey plans to film a mass inoculation in India this week and weave today's crisis into her story.

"I thought about a people film, the question of how does society respond to an epidemic disease. The story of polio is redeeming because we are free from it."

Once the funding was obtained, Seavey knew she could make a 90-minute movie. The respectable budget enabled her to shoot directly on film, not tape. Using film gives Seavey's crew the quality that qualifies the movie for film festivals and major award competitions.

"I didn't want us to feel, as you so frequently do in a documentary, that there is an archival motion picture -- slash -- an archival photograph -- slash -- a current interview. It felt 'done' to me," says Seavey, her body almost twisted in a knot as she sits at the edge of her office chair. She wanted the often elusive image of feeling. "I wanted a look of memory, a suspended animation that is neither in or out of time." And she didn't want a black-and-white film, but she knew the memories she was trying to unlock were often in black-and-white.

"Polio existed in this era of black-and-white, black-and-white newsreels. You would go to the movie theater and there would be these incredible characters -- Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Durante -- who would talk to you about giving your dimes to polio. And certainly



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Hugh Gallagher prepares to discuss his experiences with polio for "A Paralyzing Fear."

the FDR era existed in black-and-white. It [the film] had to have a very black-and-white feel to it."

The past was in the people's stories but also locked up in the archives of the March of Dimes. For 30 years, the organization had stored 12,000 films and 5,000 photographs in a warehouse in Fort Lee, N.J. Part of Seavey's agreement was to transfer the 291 boxes of films and other materials to Takoma Park, where her staff of three took three months to catalogue them.

"Usually you are scrambling for sources. Here I am scrambling to figure out how I am going to make sense of the quantity of the material. We have come into this richness," says Seavey, who had to find 16mm and 35mm Moviolas to determine what "is usable, where are the gems, what is the junk." She found some heart-stopping moments. "At one point I was looking at a newsreel from 1952 and there was a family where seven of the nine children had gotten it. We found that family."

During some of the interviews, which Seavey conducts from beside the camera, she was moved to tears. She began to ask basic questions. "What is isolation all about? In so many ways the theme of the film is this theme of what happens when epidemics strike. It is all about the isolation of the victims and it is all about the need for society to control the fear of those epidemics."

The 'Polio Place'

In a downtown studio, Seavey is bent into the camera, the black box making an awkward arc with her own short frame. "This is a tough image," she is saying to Allen Moore, the cameraman this day, as they adjust the photo of FDR and the child. She steps back, barely making a sound. Adjusting the lens, Moore says finally, "FDR looks good." They agree.

A production assistant sits in a chair, a stand-in to test the lighting for the next person Seavey will interview. "Come south," she says, taking off her glasses and beckoning the assistant to move closer to the camera.

Then the older man she is about to



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Documentarian Nina Seavey with the March of Dimes film library.

interview is ready. But before she can start, Seavey notices a small hole in his jacket; she disguises it with a dark marker. Then she asks the man, in his mid-sixties, to think back to the day when, at 19, he discovered he had polio. He talks about walking who later was a foreign policy adviser to Lyndon Johnson and wrote "FDR's Splendid Deception," has given Seavey what she is looking for. He has taken her, and everyone else in the room, back to the core feeling of her film, back to the "polio place."

Though the voices will dominate the finished product, other emotional touchstones will also drive the story. Days later she shoots the Mount Vernon High School band, whose members are moving and playing just like one of the polio subjects did before he dropped out of the parade and never walked again. In the processing lab she looks at the film, shot at 50 frames a second, then six frames a second. The technicians manipulate it, elongate it and create with it a motif for memory on the screen. "That is the beauty of film. You can get to another level of

engagement, awareness. You don't want it to be literal because then it's a hokey reenactment. We put the memory back," says Seavey.

Besides PBS, the film is also headed to venues on the independent- and small-film circuit, such as the Sundance Festival. Every filmmaker wants his work to be seen. And most want some sort of visceral reaction. As a witness to the AIDS years, Seavey wants

to make people think about the brush fires that can sweep humanity, and about both the awful and loving responses to disaster. "I think the film will allow people to reconnect with that fear, that awful space when Americans literally feared each other. They wouldn't go to the pools. Sometimes they wouldn't go to the school. They would avoid summer camp. They would keep their children home."

She wants the memory and the details all to blend into a story first, then a lesson.

"That is why I work in film. That is why I teach it. It is the immersion," she says. "It is that thing we get to, the suspension of disbelief where you enter into that place and time. If I am successful as a filmmaker you will be in that polio era. . . . It shouldn't hit you over your head, it should hit you in your heart."

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