

BY Kathleen Cummins



TRIAL BY FIRE

A JOURNEY WITH RICHARD LEITERMAN

"There was a Canadian film shot by Richard Leiferman and directed by Douglas Leiferman called *One More River*. That was the film that persuaded me to go into documentaries. I saw it on television and was so stunned by the power of those images without any commentary that I said, 'What the hell am I doing in the theatre? This is really something far more powerful.' And I've never forgotten it. That was the film that meant the most to me."

— Roger Graef, one of England's leading television documentary filmmakers and director of *The Secret Policeman's Ball*, from Alan Rosenthal's *Documentary with a Conscience*.

"I had never been to the southern United States. I was completely naive and *One More River* was the first feature documentary I had shot. I experienced things that really started my mind thinking about the ills of the world, and perhaps why documentaries are so important to be made, and why they became a big part of my life." *R. Leiterman*

Richard Leiterman rescheduled our interview. He had to attend the funeral of a dear friend and colleague, the veteran Toronto producer and editor, Don Haig, who passed away in March. This made for an interesting parallel. Both men have made an indelible impression on the Canadian film scene through their excellent craft and risk-taking natures, but not as directors. In an international film culture dominated by the idea and word auteur, many forget that filmmaking is primarily a collaborative art. Even the filmmakers who work with the smallest of crews, like the American Frederick Wiseman, who functions as his own soundperson, has to depend upon the skills and artistry of others, as Wiseman did with Richard Leiterman, on his seminal, uncompromising documentary *High School* (1969).

In a 35-year career, Leiterman, who was born in 1935 in the small town of South Porcupine in northern Ontario, has collaborated with some of Canada's best filmmakers, including Allan King, Don Shebib, Donald Brittain, Gilles Carle and Claude Jutra. His filmography boasts some of this country's most respected documentaries and narrative features such as Shebib's *Goin' down the Road* (1970) and *Between Friends* (1973), William Fruet's *Wedding in White* (1972), Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore* (1976), Carle's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1983), Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* (1985), as well as King's *A Married Couple* (1969), *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1977) and *Silence of the North* (1981). Aside from his work with notable Canadian directors, Leiterman has also worked with and/or observed some very extraordinary Americans, such as Malcolm X in *One More River* (1963), Margaret Mead in *Margaret Mead's New Guinea Journal* (1968) and Norman Mailer in *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* (1968). Leiterman has also received numerous awards, including two Canadian Society of Cinematographers awards, two Genies (for *The Far Shore* and *Silence of the North*), three Emmy nominations, and a Yorkton Golden Sheaf Award. Most recently he was the recipient of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers' Kodak New Century Award for his outstanding contribution to the art of cinematography.

Now Leiterman has taken a mentorship role at Sheridan College, in Oakville, Ontario, in the Media Arts Program and the Sheridan Centre for Animation and Emerging Technologies, imparting his knowledge onto future filmmakers and technicians. The venture into teaching does not mean Leiterman is retiring from filmmaking. This summer he plans to shoot an independent feature. He is also in the process of developing a feature narrative he hopes to direct. Despite all the ups and downs of the Canadian film and television industry Leiterman has witnessed and experienced first-hand, he still wants to take the risk and make independent films. While talking with Leiterman about his work and travels, the themes of risk-taking kept resurfacing, as did the themes of collaboration and mentorship; themes that have navigated Leiterman and his lens across Canada and the world in the making of documentaries, feature narratives and television dramas.

Leiterman had originally been attracted to the idea of being a cameraman because it provided him the opportunity to do what he really loves to do, travel. Travelling throughout Europe during the 1960s, he knew he was getting a first-rate education. By exploring different cultures, as well as meeting new individuals and learning about their communities, Leiterman's eyes opened up to new ways of thinking and living. He began his professional career as a CBC news cameraman, but it was the opportunity to work with his older brother, Douglas, who was a producer on the groundbreaking CBC news magazine program *This Hour Has Seven Days*, that ushered Leiterman into the realm of filmmaking.

Douglas produced Beryl Fox's award-winning and powerful *One More River* for CBC's *Intertel* series, which was a report on the mood of the deep South nine years after the Supreme Court-ordered integration, as well as Fox's *Summer in Mississippi* (1965), made for *This Hour*. Both films were awakenings for Richard, professionally and politically. As he had hoped, his Bell and Howell camera did take him to exotic and unusual places, but it would also accompany him into worlds he could never have imagined to be real. The camera became more than a machine to record images of reality, it acted as Leiterman's own personal window onto the world, the good and the bad.

"I had never been to the southern United States. I was completely naive and *One More River* was the first feature documentary I had shot. I experienced things that really started my mind thinking about the ills of the world, and perhaps why documentaries are so important to be made, and why they became a big part of my life." On *One More River*, Leiterman learned that capturing relevant and significant footage would mean he would have to take some risks, even if those risks were at times political and ethical ones. Early on Leiterman felt uneasy about his role as a cameraperson filming vulnerable people in very tumultuous situations, undecided over whether he was exploring or exploiting. "I had an awful time, particularly at the funeral. Was it exploitation by going in and watching tears roll down their faces? Or was this what we had to show? I still have this twinge, shivers in my back. I still see those faces. And even in doing *One More River*, going into a small black community as a white person, I felt I was intruding on something that was so sacred to them, on something that was at least their own."

There would be other risk-taking opportunities, some of which would almost land Leiterman in jail. One such incident occurred while Leiterman was filming his reluctant subject, novelist and anti-war activist Norman Mailer, for the documentary profile series *Who Is?* Mailer, accompanied by the poet Robert Lowell and fellow anti-war activist Dr. Benjamin Spock, were participating in a march on the Pentagon to protest against the war in Vietnam. As an observer, Leiterman was there to document Mailer's participation, part of which included Mailer threatening to cross police lines. Anticipating Mailer's act, Leiterman did what any good camera person would do to get the ideal angle. He crossed the line first and waited. "I thought this is the only way to show them crossing. Mailer spotted me and said, 'Okay you guys, I'm going.' Off he went across the line, and I was there walking backwards as he did. The police tried to stop us. They asked us where we thought we were going, and Mailer said, 'I'm transgressing the police lines.' And they said, 'Well, you're not supposed to do this.' Meanwhile, I'm still shooting. I don't know how far we got, about a 100 yards, when the police finally collared Mailer and said, 'That's as far as you're going, Mr. Mailer. We don't care who you are.' I captured most of this on film. As they carted him off, they were going to cart me off too."

Leiterman didn't get arrested, but he was certainly willing to take that risk, because he knew it was such a symbolic act. Did Leiterman serve as a kind of catalyst or provocateur for Mailer's action? These sorts of questions are speculative; however, what is more significant is Leiterman's anticipation



of what Mailer might do, not what he had already done. Leiterman's instinct was to cross a demarcation because somehow the truth of Mailer's act would be best represented from the other side, the forbidden side, representing perhaps another side to Mailer, a complex and multi-faceted personality. The completed film was aptly entitled *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?*

Leiterman would later be confronted with other boundaries, although these would be less visibly apparent. While filming Allan King's *A Married Couple*, an emblematic documentary for the cinéma-vérité movement in Canada, Leiterman witnessed the breakdown of a marriage, an experience that became deeply personal for him. No longer was he a neutral observer or the naive student of life; instead, he found himself identifying with his subjects. "It was a bit upsetting. Due to my being out of town an awful lot on various assignments and various pictures, I did not have the ideal marriage, although it's going well and we have overcome a lot of differences. But to go and observe a married couple in some kind of difficulty - well, who needs that? I could just shoot in my own house."

*A Married Couple* is a raw, amusing and at times disturbing look into the strained marriage of an ordinary middle-class urban couple, Antoinette and Billy Edwards. During the shoot Leiterman again felt like an intruder of sorts, even though Billy and Antoinette had granted full access to Leiterman and the sound person, Christian Wangler. Although Leiterman and Wangler never interacted or communicated with the Edwards, Leiterman found the experience problematic, both emotionally and morally. This came to a head when Billy became physically abusive toward Antoinette on-camera. During an explosive fight, Leiterman and Wangler almost dropped their gear, disbanding their role as observers of truth. However, because the fight was





Allan King's *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

brief, they kept the camera rolling. It became the climax of the film, their marriage clearly beyond repair.

Despite the emotional rawness, it was a turning point for both Leiterman, as well as King, giving birth to a wonderful and trusting collaborative relationship. In fact, King trusted Leiterman so much that he had the confidence to rarely appear "on set," entrusting the film's "eyes" and "ears" to Leiterman and Wangler. In total they shot 70 hours of film in six weeks. "While making *A Married Couple*, King realized he could not be on the set or in the house while we were shooting because the Edwards were continually looking to him for some kind of direction. It was just the soundman and myself. Allan would watch the results the next day and phone me and say, 'Listen, I saw the footage and such and such is working or we need a little bit more of this along this angle and so on. I think we realized we were on to something. It was a very exciting time. I think anything new and right is exciting and I still think there still is a place for this kind of work.'"

Despite his unease, *A Married Couple* would prove to be extremely important for Leiterman, both professionally and personally, establishing him as one of Canada's most talented and sought after vérité cinematographers. The film won rave reviews and was invited to the Directors Fortnight at Cannes in 1970. This meaningful collaboration with King would play a key role in Leiterman's life and career. He has always referred to King as his mentor, someone who "took me in when I was very, very green," and he shot many of King's films, including *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a bittersweet coming-of-age story, and *Silence of the North*.

However, at the end of *A Married Couple* Leiterman was emotionally exhausted by vérité and he needed a reprieve. That would come with Shebib's *Goin' down the Road*. "Don

also came from a documentary background," Leiterman says, "and we were both trying things out when we did *Goin' down the Road*. Who knew if we really knew what we were doing? But, it worked beautifully because it was fresh, and we were fresh. We had no rules. We didn't know any rules. It was a trial by fire, the beginning of something different."

Working with a low budget and a minimal crew, Leiterman and Shebib had to be resourceful while making *Goin' down the Road*. The film's authentic look and feel can be partially attributed to Shebib's and Leiterman's documentary backgrounds. It was a reflection of the times, not unlike Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine*, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* or François Truffaut's *400 Blows*, representing not only a film aesthetic, but also a way of life. Shebib's and Leiterman's collaboration created one of the most successful Canadian films ever made in English Canada, commercially and critically. For Leiterman the experience introduced him to the realm of narrative, a world for which he felt he had an immediate affinity.

This affinity for drama would guide Leiterman farther from documentary and almost exclusively into dramatic feature films, offering him the opportunity to work on a number of important Canadian films such as Fruet's *Wedding in White*, Wieland's *The Far Shore*, Ralph Thomas's *Ticket to Heaven* (1981) and Wilson's *My American Cousin*. But it's perhaps the bleak horrific and expressionistic images from *Wedding in White* that are most memorable, locked away somewhere in the Canadian collective subconscious. It's a film that helped define a sub-genre in Canadian cinema, Canadian Gothic.

Fruet, who co-wrote *Goin' down the Road* with Shebib, gave Canadian audiences an emotionally intense and darkly disturbing look at 1940s Canada. Leiterman described it as a horror film of sorts "without the blood and guts." It was Fruet's first feature film, and also arguably his best film to date. To Leiterman, the experience was exhilarating. Here was the opportunity to work with light and shadows, performance and camera angles, as he had never done before. Although the film had a number of difficult challenges, such as union issues and confining locations, Leiterman felt he had arrived. Again, it was trial by fire, but this time he was confined within the murky walls of a bleak period set, not as an intruder or an observer, but as a painter of light.

"I said, 'I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to put lights up, I'm going to run them all through a dimmer, and then bring them down off the line voltage so that it's got more of a yellow ugliness about it.' And that's what we did. My electrician looked at me and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm taking the colour temperature down.' I was trying to create an atmosphere, an ambience of that confining house, which was an actual location only 14-feet wide. One would never even consider shooting in that situation now, but I was young and naive. I said to Bill Fruet, 'Well it's small. I understand you want it to be confining. Well it sure will be!'"

To truly appreciate Leiterman's expressiveness as a cinematographer is to understand his ability to transport himself into the heart of a film, which he did so beautifully on King's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. The film is a breathtaking and

poetic adaptation of W.O. Mitchell's novel, lauded internationally by critics and audiences for its lyrical images of the Depression-era Saskatchewan prairies. One critic even compared the film to John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*. That such a film could emerge from the same team who had given us the stark realism of *A Married Couple* was a testament to their commitment to taking risks and redefining themselves as filmmakers. "When Allan suggested doing *Who Has Seen the Wind*, I had already done two features with Don Shebib and one feature with Bill Fruet. I felt 'Oh gosh, I'm really getting on in this feature filmmaking.' I didn't mind it at all. I liked the idea that you actually had time to create an atmosphere. It was a terrific challenge to emulate realism."

By the time Leiterman shot *My American Cousin*, Sandy Wilson's debut feature, he already had a number of features behind him. This time he took the mentorship role, helping guide Wilson toward her vision. For Leiterman, the filming of *My American Cousin* was a joy, although he acknowledges that Wilson may have felt differently, feeling the intense pressure of making her first feature. The film seems a million miles away from *One More River* or *Wedding in White* or even *Who Has Seen the Wind*, with its lighthearted rendering of adolescence in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley. Leiterman understood this. "The images from that film are most certainly terrifically Canadian, and I think they are images, which when we look back on our own adolescence, are recognizable."

In the mid-1980s Leiterman's career took another shift, turning primarily toward television. When questioned about this transition, Leiterman was frank. He had to pay the bills. There were new young directors of photography and directors emerging onto the scene, and he was getting called less often to shoot independent features. When the American work came, such as Martin Sheen's *Cadence* in 1991, Leiterman took it. Since then, he has shot many television movies, as well as episodic series, most recently CTV's *Cold Squad*. "I guess, basically, I got invited to do some American pictures, both features and television, and then all of sudden I found that was all I was doing." However, Leiterman is not dismissive about the issue of Canadian talent getting lured into television. "Unfortunately, I've seen over the years the advent of episodic television and the decline of our independent feature filmmaking. The directors who were at the forefront of the Canadian film industry have had to go into directing television. King is directing episodic. Bill Fruet has directed episodic. Don Shebib, Anne Wheeler and I have all worked in episodic. I say 'Gosh, why has this happened?' Bruce McDonald, who has made a number of excellent Canadian movies, is now doing episodic. I just hope so dearly that he doesn't get comfortable doing that. That will deprive us, as movie audiences, of his talent."

When Leiterman started on his cinematic journey, his lens was focused on capturing the reality and truth in what he saw. He let us see with his eyes so that we could then reflect upon our own reality, our own truth. He knew how far back he should be or how much closer he could get or where to angle his camera or where the shadows would fall, and he was always willing, even determined, to travel out of the safety zone to get it right. If there are demarcations in the path, we can be sure Leiterman will understand the risks involved to cross over them, and if the shot or the story calls for it, he will cross them. It's his instinct. He keeps his camera rolling. We need him to keep rolling.

TAKE ONE

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R. Leiterman



Above: Sandy Wilson's *My American Boyfriend*; in grey shade William Fruet's *Wedding in White*.