

FILMMAKER

Fall 2012: Click here to read interviews with David O. Russell and Bradley Cooper, Marion Cotillard, Ava DuVernay and more...

Filmmaking Columns Festivals & Events Interviews Watch Latest Issue Search



DOC NYC Previewed by Artistic Director Thom Powers



DOC NYC executive directors Raphaella Neihausen and artistic director Thom Powers at the festival's 2011 opening night.

by [Scott Macaulay](#)
in [Festivals & Events](#), [Interviews](#)
on Nov 7, 2012

With their [Stranger than Fiction](#) series at New York City's IFC Center, Thom Powers and Raphaella Neihausen have been curating, programming and advocating for documentary film going on eight years now. Their Tuesday-night events are typically packed, drawing audiences with not only great films but human interaction — Q&A's with directors, collaborators, and even the film's subjects. Three years ago, when Powers and Neihausen wondered why there wasn't a major, all-doc festival in New York, they realized that the challenge of launching one was a natural fit for them. The resulting DOC NYC is now in its third year (November 8 – 15), with a new, second theater and its largest program yet (115 events, 61 films and 22 panels and classes). Opening night November 8 features Bartholomew Cubbins' *Artifact*, about Jared Leto's band 30 Seconds to Mars and its legal battle with label EMI (Leto will be in attendance) and *Venus and Serena*, Michelle Major and Maiken Baird's look at the Williams sisters.

Elsewhere in the program are quite a few music docs; the New York premiere of Charles Atlas's *Turning*, presented by its subject, Antony Hegarty; 25 New Face Treva Wurmfeld's *Shepard and Dark*; Midnight Docs, including Mark Mori's *Bettie Page Reveals All!*; a Family Docs section, including Judd Erlich's *Magic Camp*, about Tannen's Magic Camp, complete with post-screening magic show; and Sundance

Institute Presents, a 10th Anniversary celebration of the Sundance Documentary Program. Really, there's too much here to synopsise, so check out the schedule [at their site](#).

Below I talk to DOC NYC Artistic Director Powers about the festival's beginnings, his start as a curator, and this year's hidden gems.

FILMMAKER: So Thom, this is the third year of [DOC NYC](#). Before we talk about some of the films in the program, why don't you take us back to the first year and tell us why you thought New York needed a new documentary film festival?

POWERS: We started our Stranger Than Fiction Series in 2005 at IFC Center. That's a weekly series, more or less, that runs on Tuesday nights in different seasons. We've been doing it for several years and have had a really great response to it. And we weren't the only ones to notice that New York was lacking a

FILMMAKER: What are some films in the schedule, maybe some of the lesser known ones, you would specifically point out to our audience?

POWERS: One is a film I also showed at the Toronto Film Festival called *Far Out Isn't Far Enough: The Tomi Ungerer Story*. It's about the illustrator Tomi Ungerer, who is not a household name, although he may be familiar to some. In the 1950s he was a well known children's book illustrator. In fact, Maurice Sendak gives Tomi credit for opening the door to that whole generation of children's book illustrators. But he also had side careers drawing protest posters during the 1960s. He drew the poster for D.A. Pennebaker's film *Monterey Pop*. And, he had a kind of third career drawing books of erotica. In the early '70s, the American Library Association caught on that this children's book illustrator was also this pornographer, and effectively banned his children's books, bringing an end to that career and causing him to leave the United States. That film is just a terrific, terrific profile. And then there's another film, a smaller film, called *Musicwood*, which is about all the wood that goes into an acoustic guitar. It was a real learning experience for me to discover that seven different types of trees have to be harvested to build a quality acoustic guitar. And some of those woods are very endangered. So, in this film you see these great guitar makers try to save their access to these trees. And along the way, you get to hear from fantastic virtuoso guitar players.

FILMMAKER: Finally, how did you get into documentaries? What made documentary programming your field of interest?

POWERS: Prior to working in film, I worked in comic book publishing, for Robert Crumb's publisher, Fantagraphics Books. I guess that's partly why I have such an affinity for Tomi Ungerer's film. I did that for several years, but I was always interested in filmmaking. I moved to New York in 1994 and started working at a small production company that did mainly documentaries. And at that time, I wasn't sure. Documentaries held a strong interest to me, and I was also a little bit interested in fiction films. But my experiences working on independent fiction films in the mid-'90s were not as satisfying as the experiences I had making documentaries. I mean, I felt when I was working on a documentary I had an engagement with the real world. Working on a fiction film was more of an engagement with the made-up world. Documentary was just more satisfying to me. So, I spent 10 years making films for HBO and PBS and other places. And then, I was a little burned out on that and looking to do something different. That's when I started the Stranger Than Fiction series at IFC Center the first year IFC Center opened in 2005. And, you know, as soon as I started curating documentaries I felt like I was much more at home than I ever had been making films. Making films was inherently more of a struggle, but I also felt less natural aptitude for it than I do in the kind of peculiar world of curating. It's kind of hard to explain exactly what that [curatorial] work is, except I think it does require a personality that likes bringing together work with audiences.