

## STATE OF THE ARTS Entertainment and expression

# Third Eye

*Filmmaker Albert Maysles uses the camera like no one before him.*

BY CAROL SCHMUCKLER

**F**IFTY-SIX YEAR-old Edie Beale, in shorts and with a scarf wrapped tightly around her head, prances around the room, talking nonstop. Behind her Edith Beale, her mother, all fleshy arms and unkempt gray hair, sits in bed looking at old photos, arguing.

Suddenly Edie turns and walks toward the camera, talking directly to the unseen cameraman, bringing him a photograph to inspect. A quiet voice answers, and as the camera moves across the room to Edith, we, the viewers, catch a glimpse in the mirror of two men, one behind a camera and the other with an elaborate sound recorder over his shoulder. They are Albert and David Maysles, the most successful documentary filmmakers in the United States.

The camera moves on, and the two eccentrics resume their endless squabbling, completely un-self-conscious before the camera.

That moment in *Grey Gardens* typifies the Maysles' documentary style. Instead of scripting the story, they have put the camera in place and allowed the story to develop at its own pace. Sometimes absolutely nothing happens; people stare speechlessly at

each other or out into space as the camera simply waits. But later come excruciating moments of revelation, when people expose their most deeply protected feelings.

"It's impossible to make people forget you're there, so you try to make your presence enhance their ability to be themselves," says Albert Maysles, a 1952 graduate of SU's College of Arts and Sciences.

"The key is developing a real relationship with the people in our films right from the start. They aren't acting for the camera. They sense right from the start that it's okay for them to be themselves, that what we're after is life itself. We

were the only ones to get into Beales's house in 20 years. All our subjects recognize that our attitude is a loving one, that we aren't there to make fun of them."

Establishing that trust is what has made the work of Maysles and his brother David (who died in 1987) remarkable. Maysles films have an immediacy no one else has been able to duplicate, although many have tried.

**M**AYLES CALLS HIS work "direct cinema," a subjective form that explores and records first impressions directly. "I never go into a project with very much of an agenda.

There's no research, no script, no narrator. First I find a subject that interests me. The essential thing about our work is not making believe, but finding out."

It was the 1964 film *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* that first rocketed the Maysles to public attention. They trailed the Beatles during their first U.S. visit, the camera catching everything from hordes of hysterical teenaged fans to self-conscious moments in the hotel, as the four curiously sedate rockers watched themselves on television.

The Maysles' next three films—*Salesman*, *Gimme Shelter*, and *Grey Gardens*—firmly established their dominance in documentary filmmaking.

*Salesman* (1968) followed four door-to-door Bible salesmen—a revealing look at their lives of quiet desperation. Critics hailed *Salesman* as touching and brutally honest. Today Albert Maysles calls it both his most personal film and the purest expression of his particular style.

*Gimme Shelter* (1970) was a chilling account of a Rolling Stones tour across America, and culminated in the infamous fatal stabbing, seen on screen, at the Stones' Altamont concert.

The hypnotic *Grey Gardens* (1976) visited a reclusive mother and daughter, the aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who lived in a decaying East Hampton mansion, reliving past glories and blaming one another for lost opportunities. The film was both hilarious and horrifying.

These films demonstrate the Maysles' uncanny abili-



Documentary filmmakers Albert (left) and David Maysles

CAROL NORTH SCHMUCKLER, a frequent contributor to this magazine, holds SU degrees in English and advertising and is an M.F.A. candidate in film.

ty to focus on the individual. Conventional documentaries had always concentrated on groups and broad social movements, but Maysles and his brother changed all that. While they, too, were interested in important themes, they revealed those themes by making the individual the story. They sensed the drama in ordinary lives and used the camera in an intimate way—a way it had never been used before.

Maysles has made three films on environmental artist Christo: *Christo's Valley Curtain* (1974), *Running Fence* (1978), and *Islands* (1986). Viewers eavesdrop on the unorthodox artist as he cajoles bemused landowners and capably negotiates with local politicians in order to hang a quarter-mile-long orange curtain across a California valley, or stretch an 18-foot-high swath of fabric across 24 miles of California, or surround 11 Biscayne Bay islands with pink fabric that turns them into a glorious attraction.

**W**HILE THRUTHFULNESS is appropriate to documentaries, it would not seem to translate well to the advertising world. But (surprise!) Maysles has made "real people" commercials and industrial films for a blue-ribbon list of clients that includes Procter & Gamble, IBM, American Express, Ragu, Kal-Kan, Citibank, Chrysler, and General Motors.

His commercial work is as daring as his serious nonfiction films, and advertising agencies and nervous industrial clients have learned to trust his instincts.

In a Ragu TV spot, an Italian mother, tasting the sauce, spontaneously pronounced it "gorgeous"; no copywriter could have invented that one. In another, an enthusiastic dog eating Kal-Kan knocked his dish across the kitchen floor and down a step, then, not missing a mouthful, grabbed it with his teeth and pulled it right back up. Both commercials were unpremeditated expressions, although they were so "right" that many think they were scripted. Nope. "It was the dog's idea," Maysles says.

Maysles looks for the offbeat, the entertaining, the truthful. He's shown IBM chairman Thomas Watson Jr. chewing gum. For a



When the Beatles visited America in 1964, the Maysles (background) traveled by their sides.

Citibank film, he shot an irate customer closing her account. It was Maysles who discovered Lee Iacocca's flair for straight-from-the-shoulder talk.

Because of his searching, relentless filmmaker's eye, Albert Maysles has been accused of being exploitative. The intimate glimpses he gives into people's lives make viewers uneasy. But Maysles insists that what he's after is truth, and that no one in the world can tell the truth as well as the truth can tell itself.

"One kind of truth is in the raw material, the footage—it's immediate and no one has tampered with it. Then there's the other kind of truth that comes in extracting and juxtaposing the raw material into a more meaningful and coherent storytelling form."

Arthur LeGacy, who teaches film history at SU, thinks Maysles' work exposes something more.

"Maysles takes pain as the center of many of his pieces," LeGacy says. "He's more emotionally involved with human beings than others because he's not intimidated by suffering. That's actually very compassionate and very involved."

**W**HEN ALBERT MAYSLES studied psychology at SU, he had no idea of being a filmmaker. He taught at Boston University for a

while, and then took a camera to Russia to explore mental health care, without knowing anything about filmmaking.

"I was a good observer and I had no prejudices about what I'd find. I thought that instead of writing the story I'd discover there, I'd go a step further and let the camera record it for me."

His brother, David, was already working in film, and the two teamed in 1956 and filmed their motorcycle journey from Munich to Moscow. When they returned, David went back to Hollywood and Albert joined a documentary film unit at Time-Life to get more experience. Within a few years they'd formed their own company. Their first production was *Showman*, a controversial portrait of movie mogul Joseph E. Levine.

Developing proper equipment was important to Maysles' career. Cameras used then were bulky and obtrusive, and synchronous sound didn't exist. *Salesman* became possible only after he adapted the claw movement in a 16-millimeter Auricon camera to make it quieter, and actually changed the shape of the camera so it would balance better on his shoulder (Albert always acted as cameraman; his brother as sound recorder). Today he uses an Aaton camera from France, whose developers consulted with

Maysles when building it. He is always unobtrusive and uses very few, if any, lights.

Today Maysles Films is located in a penthouse on the west side of Manhattan, and the 14-person staff is constantly busy. In 1987 alone they created more than 30 commercials and 15 corporate industrials; and they were in post-production on from three to five documentaries at any one time.

Although Maysles feels the loss of his brother deeply, he's already very involved in new projects. Feature works in progress include a film on the Getty Museum; a look at black author James Baldwin; a film exploring the reversal of heart disease through changes in lifestyle; and *Pont Neuf*, Christo's first grand-scale urban project, the wrapping of the oldest bridge in Paris.

But the new work closest to his heart is *Fellow Passengers*, a film that will tell the stories of people who ride trains all over the world. They are intimate portraits of people arriving and leaving, coming together and parting. For Albert Maysles, it is the ultimate journey of discovery.