The International Journal of Film and Video Production Techniques

August 1985 Vol. 66 No. 8

American Cinematographer

Features

28 Motion Control Optical Printing
A versatile process for creating unusual effects

36 Ivano and Valentino: A Unique Partnership
Cameraman and super-star in Old Hollywood

40 The Best of Ivano
High-lights of a remarkable career

44 Hero: a Strange World of Misfits
Desert photography under trying conditions

50 Cinematographer John Hora on Explorers
Fantasy and reality merge

58 Aerial and Other Action for Explorers
Cooperman and camera take to the air

62 Nine and One-Half Weeks, a Love Story
Natural, available light is the key

68 The Whirlwind World of William Greaves
Documentarian on film

Departments

73 Aerial Photography
Birds Over Hollywood

77 Production
American Cancer Society's 'Smoking Fetus'

81 Camera
Louma Crane and William Friedkin

91 Projection
Disney Automatic Projection System

95 Lighting
Frank Stanley Teaches Overseas

101 Camera
Skycam on Stage

10 Letters
14 The Bookshelf
18 New Products
106 Classified Ads
111 From the Clubhouse
112 Ad Index

On Our Cover:
This composite from *Explorers* is courtesy Industrial Light and Magic.

The Whirlwind World of William Greaves

by Rohama Lee

William (Bill) Greaves, of New York City and the world. has worked during the course of his 32 years as a filmmaker, on close to 300 documentaries (200 of which he produced). He has also writer/producer/director credits for feature films *The Marijuana Affair*, for *Symbiopscychotaxplasm: Take One*, an avant-garde production awaiting release, and for *Ali, the Fighter* starring Muhammed Ali and Joe Frazier in "the fight of the century" at Madison Square Gardens. His most recent feature credit is that of executive producer for Universal Pictures' box office hit *Bustin' Loose* with Richard Pryor and Cecily Tyson. But it is as one of the most outstanding of the early documentary filmmakers, and one of the few remaining independents still in business after 21 years, that Bill Greaves is unique.

There is an increasing involvement with the dramatic film on Greaves' calendar nowadays. Originally he elected to excel in the documentary because of the opportunities it presents for the expression of human concern and social conscience, which he possesses in large measure. His expertise is in dramatizing reality without distorting it. The character of his work has made him a repeater with a wide variety of sponsors in both industry and for government agencies. Among these is The National Park Service for which he has just completed *Frederick Douglass: An American Life*, his second production for the NPS within the past three years.

A prime mandate of the National Park Service is to identify and restore the home and workplace of significant personages in American history. *Frederick Douglass: An American Life* was designed to acquaint visitors to Cedar Hill, the Douglass home in Anacostia (Washington, D.C.) with the life of "an historic black American". (The Douglass home originally in Rochester, N.Y., was destroyed by arsonists when Douglass was away on a lecture tour.)

Still a significant factor in vital concerns of today, this most dynamic black American of the 19th century was born a slave on a Maryland plantation in February of 1818. At the age of 20 he escaped to the Free State of Massachusetts, and was discovered there by the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison who pressed him into the service of the abolitionist cause. Intellectually gifted, Douglass became one of the major orators of his century. An especially appealing scene in Greaves' film is of Douglass as a child being taught by his master's wife to read. The lesson is interrupted by the boy's owner who forbids his wife sternly not to teach Frederick or *any* slave to read. Growing up, Frederick literally "stole" his education from the young whites around the plantation, by listening and remembering.

The film reveals Douglass, self-taught, as he developed and subsequently became an editor and publisher of his own anti-slavery newspaper. He was also an active champion of the broad social and civil libertarian issues of the time. They included, even transcended, slavery. His last public appearance, on the day of his death (February 20, 1895) was as the speaker at an important women's right-to-suffrage meeting.

It is on that day the film story begins – and ends.

More than just supplying the facts of a long and eventful life, the film about Douglass had to embrace scholarship and yet have dramatic reality. As Greaves puts it: "This film had to be a theatrical event, a kind of psychological hook to bring visitors to Douglass' Cedar Hill home in Washington into the life of the man, causing them to form a close relationship with him." The problem was, how to do so without violating the rigid specifications of historical research provided by the National Park Service.

"In the making of a feature film", Greaves explained, "almost anything can be done to dramatize the subject matter under treatment, even if the subject is a character in history. But the docudrama requires the exercise of restraints and constraints not experienced in conventional feature film making. The whole area of creativity is taxed, often even encumbered, by scholarship. What was called for here was dramatic reality. The problem was to get it without violating National Park Service guidelines."

In the initial approach to the script, Greaves and his co-author Lou Potter decided (as is not unusual in dealing with personages and events of the past) to use graphics and memorabilia along with live action. It became progressively apparent, however, that the force of the live performances weakened the impact of the still pictures, and vice-versa. Even though many of these had rarely if ever been seen before and were of great interest, they were finally omitted in favor of uninterrupted live action, dramatically presented. Furthermore, a start was made with narration and autobiographical material, but this too was ripped out along with the graphics, in favor of dialogue – 90 percent on the part of all the characters featured.

In wrestling with the problem of a proper format for the script, Greaves and Potter – working closely with Tim Radford, executive producer for the National Park Service – decided on the flashback technique as most suitable. Using a stream-of-consciousness style, it highlights and accentuates the incidents and events that distinguished Douglass' vital role in American history.

The park service had specified a 30-minute length, but Greaves in his own research uncovered such a wealth of interesting material, his first cut of the film came to almost an hour. He was then faced with the challenge of having to cut the footage down in the editing process, without losing credibility or dramatic continuity. Greaves personally edits, or closely supervises the editing, of all his films. On this one he worked with Alonzo Speight, a talented filmmaker from Boston, recently settled in New York.

As an assist in editing any and all of his productions, it is Greaves' custom to call in, at various checkpoints in the production process, a small audience of hard-nosed, sophisticated film people "to let them tear my film apart. I prefer to get my lumps", says Greaves, "before the film is released, not after. It's sort of like using a computer to give me feedback and correction." This practice is the result of his background in documentary, and also of his early, intensive training at the Actors Studio in New York. He explains: "The nit-picking process and constant analysis – of the film in the one instance and the actor in the other – purifies the work and assures authenticity."

A unique difficulty in the making of the Douglass film was that so much of it had to be shot within the Douglass home and in locations intimately connected with the Douglass story – no studio or "made" locations. The home had been beautifully and meticulously restored. Greaves tells how zealously it was guarded against any possibility of harm.

"Official Restorationists actually dogged our steps. They alone are permitted to touch or move any objects in Cedar Hill – they wore white gloves to avoid increasing the incidence of moisture on the furniture, or aging from any other source. The furnishings were also dependent for continued existence on scientifically determined temperature and humidity controls. Our lights had to be immediately turned off after each take – and each take had to be kept to a minimum.

"The Restorationists also tried always to maintain a climate not corrosive to fabrics or organic materials. Even the window panes had to be specially treated, to screen out destructive sunlight. The purpose of these precautions was to maintain the 19th century into the 20th and as far beyond as possible. It's unquestionably a laudatory purpose, but it presented all kinds of problems for filmmaking.

"A production crew coming into an environment of such obstacles and restrictions is under a great deal of pressure which prevents handling the set in the usual professional way." Further, according to Greaves, "it's a no-nonsense situation. The historic home and its contents are more important to the Restorationists, in the long run, than the film. The key to the making of film was 'don't tamper with the facts, or with the accoutrements'. It was like filmmaking inside a soap bubble."

Thanks to long experience in production, Greaves was able to get together an experienced crew for this special situation. It consisted of 35, in all: two co-producers (Dwight Williams and Louise Archambault Greaves); a production and location man-

Greaves and cast on location at Richmondtown Restoration.* Opposite page, left to right: *Hugh Morgan portrays Frederick Douglass, Greaves, and Charles Reid as Abraham Lincoln.

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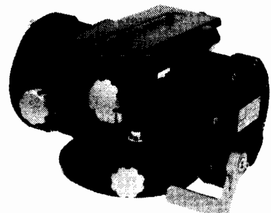

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ager; an art director (who enhanced the set of historic Richmond Town on Staten Island); three casting directors; a cast of 65 including extras; two makeup artists, and a costumer.

As director of photography Greaves chose Juliana Wang because of her experience with documentary and, more particularly, because of her unique creative artistry that assured him of a compelling theatrical realism. (Juliana Wang, freelance cinematographer, has shot a number of documentaries for CBS-TV News. Her *Bitter Sweet Survival* and *To Be Ourselves*, have been shown on PBS.)

The shooting was done with a double-fog filter which diffused and "antiqued" the image. As he sometimes does, Greaves operated the camera for occasional scenes (notably one where a tall operator was called for – Greaves is a hefty six-footer). But he credits Juliana with capturing the rich tones of the 19th century sets, and photographing dark skins to best advantage. The quality of her camera work was further enhanced by her skillful positioning of white and dark-skinned actors in relation to available light – as in the outdoor meeting of Douglass and John Brown.

A film like this one, according to Greaves, should cost over $400,000. For *Frederick Douglass: An American Life*, the budget was much less, "though it was one of the largest the National Park Service has ever given. On the other hand", Bill adds, "it was one of the smallest you could work with to get a full-costume drama on film."

Because it could not include high-demand, large-sum professional actors, Greaves had to rely for the most part, and even for the star part, on talented unknowns or little-knowns. Having started as an actor himself on both stage and screen, and having studied with such theatrical personages as Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan, he was able to secure high level performances from his cast.

"Hugh Morgan wandered into my office one day, looking for work as a voice-over narrator – he's an established radio announcer with WQXR, the *New York Times*' station. But he had no acting experience of any consequence. I picked him on a hunch – he looked like Frederick Douglass, had the bearing, the attitude, the eyes. And he screen-tested well. I gave him just two weeks of intensive acting technique training. He took it amazingly well and came through." Greaves worked similarly with Lee Moore, another radio announcer who convincingly plays the part of John Brown.

William Greaves' own story is a saga.

One of seven children of a cab driver and sometimes-minister, Bill's early youth was spent on 135th Street in Harlem. At the age of four he began drawing pictures and was good at it – he says he's going to pick up that talent one day when he has time (if ever, in his whirlwind career). At 14 he won a scholarship to the prestigious Little Red Schoolhouse in Greenwich Village. When, in due course, he entered City College in New York, he elected engineering, but dropped out to enter the world of theater as a dancer with the renowned Pearl Primus Dance Troupe. He then "got hung up on acting" at the American Negro Theater; won a John Golden Audition; and arrived on Broadway in 1946 in *Finian's Rainbow* with Ella Logan and David Wayne.

After two years of *Finian*, he played opposite Ruby Dee in a special "all-Negro" performance of *John Loves Mary*. In 1949 he was featured on Broadway simultaneously in a play (*Lost in the Stars*, Maxwell Anderson/Kurt Weill), and two movies: Louis de Rochemont's *Lost Boundaries* starring Mel Ferrer; and *Miracle in Harlem*, a Jack Goldberg/Herald Pictures production. It is interesting that *Miracle in Harlem*, recently discovered in an abandoned warehouse in Tyler, Texas, was shown in the Southern Methodist University Film/Video Archives Special Exhibition which invited Greaves to Tyler to introduce the film and the era of its making. It is also interesting that, during his acting period, Bill Greaves wrote over 100 songs, one of which – *African Lullaby*, in Swahili, was recorded by Eartha Kitt and is an archival item.

It was anger that motivated Greaves to want to make films rather than act in them. Always interested in social problems and deeply into black history, he became infuriated by "the socially degrading stereotypes of black people that white film producers threw up onto the American screen." He applied for a scholarship in cinema being offered by the John Hay Whitney Foundation. Despite his vast experience and obvious talents – and though he presented letters from Academy Award winner Louis de Rochemont, from filmmaker Elia Kazan and director Rouben Mamoulian – he was turned down. Greaves' explanation is without rancor or resentment:

"The cinema was different at the time – the times themselves were different – there was less willingness to accept the idea of a Black person in the communications media."

His reaction to the turndown was to apply to The National Film Board of Canada, preeminent in the Documentary, and with a track record of accepting apprentices from all over the world. After three months as an apprentice, Bill was made a member of NFBC's regular staff and, in the 1950's, spent eight years with the Board as unit chief editor, writer and director.

In both Toronto and Montreal, the Canadian Drama Studio put on theater productions under Greaves' direction, and also did some television production. Bill recalls this period as one of the most creative and enjoyable in his professional life. Eventually he left the film board to devote full time to these theater activities – until the recession. He then accepted the invitation of the International Civil Aviation Organization (a specialized agency, in Canada, of the United Nations), and became its public information officer in charge of film and television. When an opportunity presented itself to be on the film and television staff of the United Nations in New York, he closed down his activities in Canada and returned to the U.S. to take on the U.N. assignment offered him.

Documentary cast and crew on location at Knole Estate.

The U.N. had decided to do an hour-long television special with Alistair Cooke, on the flight of an airliner around the world, and the international cooperation necessary for its safety. Bill Greaves was the most qualified prospect, as a filmmaker with a knowledge of aviation matters. The assignment took him twice around the world on a Qantas (Australian) airliner, doing research on the first trip, and filming with Alistair Cooke on the second go-round.

"We touched down on the airports of 11 countries," Greaves recalls. "It was an incredible experience. I for one was extremely impressed with the high quality of responsibility and intelligence of the people running the world's aviation system." The resultant film, *Cleared For Takeoff*, is being preserved in the U.N. library.

It was somewhere in the early Sixties that pioneer woman filmmaker Shirley Clarke saw and was enthusiastic about *Emergency Ward*, an early *cinémà vérité* production by Greaves for The National Film Board of Canada, shot in a Montreal hospital. Shirley brought Bill's film to the attention of George Stevens, Jr., then head of the Film and TV Section of the U.S. Information Agency. Stevens offered Greaves the opportunity to do a film on individual freedom of expression in America. At that point (in 1964) Greaves left the U.N. and set up his own company, which he had long wanted to do.

Within the next eight to ten years, William Greaves Productions made four films for the USIA. One of these in particular was, for Bill, "the most incredible experience of my whole life, so far!"

This assignment called originally for just a news short on the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in 1966 in Dakar, Senegal. For the assignment the USIA supplied what was a requisite amount of footage – all black/white, no color. When Bill got to Dakar he found there an amazing representation of black creative genius – more than 200 writers, artists and performers from around the world, including such outstanding Afro-Americans as Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, Alvin Ally and his dancers. Greaves also found that France and Russia, among other countries represented, had sent full crews and color film for extensive coverage.

Realizing that the USIA had improperly evaluated the significance of the event, Greaves barraged Washington with demands for more raw stock. His

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urging resulted in fuller cooperation – except that no provision for color film – or a crew – was made. He had only himself, a French cameraman hired at the festival, and his Sengalese chauffeur whom he crash-trained to be a sound recordist. The film was shot in the alloted black-and-white; but Greaves tinted it sepia, enhancing its production. For many years it was the most popular USIA film in Africa and eventually, the Senegalese government selected it as the official film of the festival.

In addition to making USIA films, other government agencies and a variety of sponsors enlisted the aid of William Greaves Productions. Among these was National Educational Television for which Greaves co-produced and directed *Still A Brother*. NET's management was so pleased with this 90-minute public affairs special that it invited him to become part of its new and unique network series, *Black Journal*.

During the two years he was both co-host and executive producer, *Black Journal* was nominated twice for an Emmy, and won one in 1970. At the end of two years – and 80 film segments produced by Greaves and his crew – he had to replace himself and return to his own business. He did so with the satisfying realization that *Black Journal* was even then the prototype for local black programs that sprang up throughout the country and opened the way for large numbers of black filmmakers to develop skills entitling them to become established workers in, and full-fledged members of, the media and communications industry.

In the beginning of its existence as an independent production company, the government was the chief source of contracts for the William Greaves Productions company. In the process of making films – first for government agencies and subsequently for other sponsors, William Greaves Productions has consistently turned out an average of four, sometimes five pictures each year for the past 15 years. Among its many winners have been *In The Company of Men* made for Newsweek magazine (8 awards), and *Voice of La Raza* with Anthony Quinn, for the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (3 nominations, 4 film festival awards).

For Exxon, in 1974, Greaves' company made *From These Roots*, narrated by Brock Peters. This film added 22 national and international awards to the still growing collection in the William Greaves Production office. *Space For Women* (1982) with Ricardo Montalban narrating, encouraged women to pursue careers in space and space science. So far, it has won eight awards for NASA and its producer.

Booker T. Washington: The Life and Legacy, commissioned in 1982 by The National Park Service (Gill Noble, narrator) has taken 10 film festival awards to date – and it was on the strength of its successful handling of a controversial turn-of-the-century period that The National Park Service returned to Greaves for the making of *Frederick Douglass: An American Life* – recently and enthusiastically reviewed at a gala gathering of Washington notables.

With respect to his efforts on behalf of blacks and other minorities, he recognizes the changing times and looks forward to the day when "the whole protest dimension will not be necessary. At this stage of the game", he says, "I've come to terms with the fact that no one filmmaker can change the social or political climate by himself or herself. But you *can* cultivate and foster certain lines of thinking. If you at least do that, you will be making a satisfactory contribution to human progress through the media, and particularly through the tremendous power of the screen – theatrical, nontheatrical, cable, television, whatever . . ." △

Rohama Lee is a free lance writer based in New York.

Birds Over Hollywood

by Bob Morgan

Scarcely an hour passes in prime time television without seeing a helicopter in an action show. Even more often, the helicopter is used as a camera platform.

As far as television drama is concerned, helicopters first came on the scene with the *Whirlybirds* series in the early '50s. But it was not until a decade later that the chopper really started to come of age in film production, in both features and television.

This most popular symbol of adventure films was still in its infancy at the time of *Whirlybirds* – the first helicopter having been certified for commercial usage just a few years before in 1947. Aerial cinematography goes much further back than *Whirlybirds*, however, having come into its own in the 1920s.

Television's famous "Airwolf."

At first, cameras were hand-held in open cockpit aricraft and hand-cranked. By the time of *Wings* (1927), someone (possibly cinematographer Harry Perry, ASC) had the idea of mounting the camera on the machine gun ring of a surplus World War I fighter plane. Such motion picture flight pioneers as pilots Paul Mantz, Frank Clarke, Frank Tallman, Dick Grace, Al Wilson, Leo Tomick and Col. Roscoe Turner lent their expertise to the making of more sophisticated aerial scenes. Some top cameramen became celebrated for their superb aerial cinematography, among them Perry, Thomas Tutwiler, ASC, Elmer G. Dyer, ASC, Charles Marshall, and Glen Kershner, ASC.

The early talkie era brought forth such fine flying yarns as *Hell's Angels* (still the most elaborate of all such films), *Hell Divers, Ace of Aces, The Eagle and the Hawk, The Dawn Patrol* and *The Lost Squadron*. Eventually, however, there was a period of stagnation of aerial photography. Because of wartime restrictions, most of the aircraft films made during World War II were done with studio mockups and model shots.

As stunts became more important, another problem was the lack of maneuverability in winged aircraft, as well as the fact that extremely low speed flight and hovering were impossible. Shots from the air of action taking place on the ground just didn't seem to work.

By the '50s, the advent of television and the shrinkage of audiences attending theaters on a regular basis forced major producers to recognize the technical innovators who were coming up with exciting new systems which would revolutionize the contemporary art of filmmaking. The producers hoped these innovations would return mass audiences to the theaters. Cinemascope, Cinerama, stereo and high fidelity sound became commonplace in high-budget pictures, many of which quite naturally fell into the category of spectacles.

The advances in electronics (many as a result of government research that had been conducted as part of the war effort) in particular made the magnetic recording of sound possible. Magnetic recording reduced the size and weight of sound recording equipment and made recording sound in flight possible.

Into this atmosphere of change and technological progress came the first airborne camera platform that was truly steady and suitable for aerial photography. That platform was the helicopter, the most maneuverable of all aircraft.

Among the leaders of the helicopter age in film was a former Marine Corps pilot, David Jones. Jones came to California following his discharge from the service and brought his own helicopter with him.

"I came tripping into town in 1960," he says. "By pure luck that coincided with the transition period when cameras were first beginning to

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Journal Title: American cinematographer

Volume: 66 **Issue:** 8
Month/Year: ? 1985 **Pages:** 68-72.

Article Author: Lee, Rohama

Article Title: "The Whirlwind World of William Greaves,"

Imprint: [Hollywood, Calif.], [ASC Holding Corp.]

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