

An interview with filmmaker William Greaves

by David Sterritt

David Sterritt, film professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art, is former film critic of *The Christian Science Monitor* and past chair of the New York Film Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics.

William Greaves is the producer, writer and director of *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*

DAVID STERRITT: This is a splendid piece of work. It's extraordinarily clear and compelling and dramatic in its presentation of an enormous amount of factual material and historical material, which can easily become non-compelling and non-dramatic.

WILLIAM GREAVES: Oh, that's a big problem for a documentary filmmaker.

DAVID STERRITT: But this is engrossing, beautifully put together, the variety of visual materials. I think it's one of the rare cases where a documentary -- or a nonfiction film, if you prefer -- manages to combine a really powerful presentation of material with an appealing and engrossing approach so that it's actually fun to watch. It's an entertaining movie, but at the same time, it's a very serious and informative movie.

WILLIAM GREAVES: That's what we were hoping to accomplish. We knew the viewer had to become involved viscerally as well as intellectually, in the content. However, in this case, the problem was compounded by the fact that we were doing a film about a scholar, a diplomat who thinks and speaks in abstract terms and film, needless to say, is a visual medium. Moreover, viewers are programmed -- conditioned -- to think of film in entertainment terms. So it was a real challenge.



William Greaves with
Sir Brian Urquhart

DAVID STERRITT: How did this project get started? Why *Ralph Bunche*?

WILLIAM GREAVES: In part it was sheer serendipity. I was jogging in Central Park one day and just happened to run into Lloyd Garrison, an old friend of mine who was working at the Ford Foundation. We stopped and chatted, and in the course of our conversation he said, "Do you know anything about Bunche?" I said, "Not as much as I should but I've always been very interested in him." And he said, "Well, if you are really interested,

you might want to pitch the idea of doing a film about him to Ford. They seem to be interested in him." Well, I also found out that Brian Urquhart had an office at the Foundation and he had just finished writing a biography of Ralph Bunche.

So I pitched the idea of doing a film based on Sir Brian's book. The Ford Foundation went for it and that's how it got started. But even though I'd always been intrigued by Bunche I didn't know very much about him. I mean he had been world-renown, but who was he really? How could a Black man, in pre-civil rights America, attain this level of prominence? And then somehow be forgotten. He was a mystery. He seemed to have functioned, in a sense, "behind the veil". As a diplomat and international civil servant at the UN, certainly, he became the consummate insider. He didn't always show his hand and, of course, that's what made him so effective. But how do you do a film about this kind of inscrutability, about a reality that is largely subtextual? What's going on between the lines? This really fascinated me about Bunche. And, as we got deeper and deeper into his story, we realized that he was moving with remarkable assurance in the direction that he wanted to go, apparently without anyone being aware of it.

DAVID STERRITT: Is there any particular phase of his life or career that was your entry point, that you thought was the most fascinating part for you? I mean, he was a scholar, he was a diplomat. His work with the United Nations was hugely important. Near the end of his life he was a civil rights activist and so forth. Obviously, they're all important, and obviously you deal with all those. Was there any one that was the entry point for you, that was the quintessential Ralph Bunche?

WILLIAM GREAVES: I suppose I'd have to say that it was the whole anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-fascist thrust of his life that was the trigger for me. It's true a lot of people struggle against these forces, but from the outside. They march, protest, sign petitions. All this is well and good. It helps to marshal public opinion, but public opinion usually doesn't have much impact on those who are inside the citadels of power. Sure, once in a while there's a French Revolution, or an American Revolution, but holding up placards and handing out leaflets rarely alters the course of world history or changes the biography of a country. Bunche took another approach. He understood how power worked and how self-interested it was, and found ways to negotiate that kind of terrain. He went inside the citadels of power. That I found fascinating, that he could have the audacity -- the chutzpah -- to move into this area and see what he could do to effect change, to nudge and prod things along a path of social, political and international progress. So that was very interesting to me.

Also, I have to admit, I connected with the fact that he was a high achiever both academically and in sports, and that he overcame so many barriers, racial, social and economic. He succeeded against the odds. You have to say he had a competitive personality and he seems to have gotten it from his family. Like Bunche, I was brought up in a family that valued competition and excellence, so I guess I identified with this aspect of his personality. As a kid in Harlem I loved sports, boxed at the Y, played basketball, competed in track and won medals in all three. Went to Stuyvesant High School, the most competitive high school in New York city, where I was in the top 10% of my class, and then went on to win featured roles in Broadway hits and in movies, auditioned for the Actors Studio

and was admitted as a member. Psychoanalytically speaking, I suppose it's a neurotic need to succeed. But there was a certain resonance between my background and Bunche's except, of course, he's Ralph Bunche, and I'm poor old Bill Greaves. [LAUGHTER]

DAVID STERRITT: Pretty important, too, just a different field.

WILLIAM GREAVES: Well, somehow this resonated with me. However, even though I admired his commitment to excellence, I was even more impressed with his concern for humanity. Bunche combined intellect and idealism with action. Very rare combination. He had a tremendous sense of responsibility and a need to be of service to others. I mean, it was a very strong thing with him, and my feeling was that a film about this kind of social consciousness might serve as a road map, a manual for other gifted and talented individuals to do more, not only for themselves but for society. The premise, of course, is that in working for others you're ultimately helping yourself which, I think, Bunche understood very clearly.



Shooting in Ralph Bunche Park

So it was my hope that the film could be -- I don't want to say educational -- but a motivator -- especially for young people, and if it achieves that, that would be just great. There are many, many talented young people out there but the big question is will they use their knowledge, intelligence, and creativity to help raise human consciousness and work for the improvement of the human race???

DAVID STERRITT: Something else that really fascinated me in the film -- and I'm just wondering about your observations on this, both as now, perhaps, our leading authority on Bunche, or one of our leading authorities on Bunche, and as a filmmaker who had to assemble the movie -- the fascinating interaction between the man -- who is Ralph Bunche, with his extraordinary talents and abilities and motivations -- and the huge historical forces that he's operating within. How do you go about capturing the interaction between the individual and this huge, complicated mid-century world situation, which is his field of operations?

WILLIAM GREAVES: Well, you put your finger on the crux of the problem. How do you get a symbiosis or a dialectic going between Bunche and the sprawling world scene? We wrestled with that a great deal, and the trick, of course, was to find the underlying connecting links. This was the bridge -- the glue -- that would connect the individual to the historical events and them to him. Of course, we had to stay focused on those events in which Bunche was involved, be it philosophically or politically or psychologically, or hopefully, all three. But even within this framework, we still had to let go of a lot of important stuff. For example, we don't deal with the atomic bomb, which affected not only Bunche's thinking but was a major factor in the post-war world. Time was a constraint, too, I should add.

Actually, when we started out doing the research, and we began to discover more and more about Bunche, it gradually dawned on us that we had underestimated this man's importance. Here's a story that's never been told and there's a huge

historical canvas, and it's very relevant for the 21st century. We realized this material deserved a more extensive, in-depth treatment. It cried out for a series treatment. In fact, we wondered how we could do justice to Bunche, even in a six hour series. But there were problems getting the completion funding for such a series so, in the end, we had to cut it to two hours in order to finish it and get it on television as a PBS prime time special. But for a long time we just kept trying to complete it as a series. We were lucky that the funders all stood by us as we wrestled with the material, trying to get it down to a shorter length, once we realized that we weren't going to get the funding to put it on television as a 6 part series. In the final analysis, the film was put through several completely different versions, a six hour rough cut, a four hour, and a three hour fine cut. But getting the story down to two hours was brutal. The interesting thing is that the film works very well at this length! Which proves, I guess, that there's probably a creative solution for every problem, if you work at it hard and long enough. And I have to admit that the two hour version gets to the essence of Bunche. Once in a while we get a complaint that a piece of the story is missing. But most audiences are amazed at the amount of information we did manage to convey. On the other hand, we know what was left on the cutting room floor and we are planning to finish the four hour version, assuming we can get the completion funds for it. It will tell the Bunche story in greater depth because it will include some very important material that doesn't appear in the current version at all. For example, it will not only include the atomic bomb but will show Bunche's role in the setting up of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which attempts to find peaceful, rather than destructive, uses for atomic energy. It will look at the Vietnam War, Bunche's role in the passage of Eleanor Roosevelt's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, his immense contribution to the Myrdal study of the ugliness of racism in America and its destructive impact on Black America which resulted in the landmark book *An American Dilemma*. I don't know if I've answered your --

DAVID STERRITT: You have. You certainly have. What do you think ultimately was Bunche's most important contribution? It's a little different from what I asked before about what was the entry point for you.



William Greaves at
the Department
of Special Collections, UCLA

WILLIAM GREAVES: Well, he is probably best known for his successful negotiation of four armistice agreements between Israel and her Arab neighbors, the thing that got him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. This was a milestone for the United Nations and, as a result, Bunche came to personify the spirit of the United Nations and the aspirations of all people for a peaceful world. In his Mount Tremblant, Quebec, speech he talked about the right of all people, irrespective of caste, class, religion or race, to "walk with dignity along the world's great boulevards." He came to be called "Mr. UN" because he worked consistently and effectively to empower the United Nations and advance its mission in the world. The most important contribution was probably the key role he played which helped to facilitate the peaceful transition of much of the colonized world into politically independent states.

As the Director of the UN Trusteeship Division, he set up the procedures that helped to make this possible and, even before that, he was instrumental in drafting the chapters of the UN Charter that laid out the basic principles of self-determination of all peoples. That document formed the legal groundwork for the decolonization of more than one third of the world. He is also considered to be the father of UN peacekeeping, because of the principles and techniques he pioneered in peacekeeping and in conflict resolution and peacemaking are still in use today by the United Nations and other international groups.

If I can add one more major contribution made by Bunche, it would be the fact that, in facilitating the emergence of the developing world as players in the international scene, and infusing some of the principles of the American Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence into the UN Charter, he helped to create a climate worldwide which was sympathetic to the American Civil Rights movement and permitted leaders like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer and others to function with a degree of impunity. This international pressure, with the eyes of the world focused on what was going on in America and its widespread racism, meant that Civil Rights could no longer be ignored by the federal government. America had to show the world, and especially the newly independent nations of the third world, that it was a reasonably democratic nation, one that they could deal with when they started talking trade with these nations. So this pressure certainly encouraged America to live up to its stated creed. I hope I've said enough.

DAVID STERRITT: To switch gears a bit, how does one go about planning, organizing a production like this-- not just in logistical terms -- but in conceptual terms -- "We're going to communicate so and so..., and at the end of this whole process we're going to have a film which conveys this information." How does one go about planning and organizing all this?

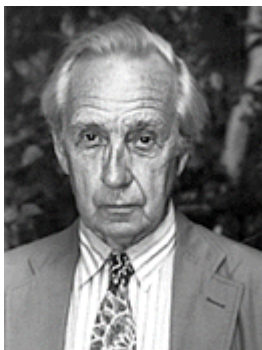
WILLIAM GREAVES: Well, it's a daunting task. One resigns oneself to very hard work. It's all uphill. From start to finish. The research alone was an immense job. Fortunately, Sir Brian Urquhart's new biography on Bunche was invaluable. I don't see how we could have handled such complex political, diplomatic and historical material without this extraordinarily well-documented book and, of course, access to Urquhart himself, who was our chief advisor on the project, for crucial advice. In addition, we had a great team of scholars who met with us in person and went over the script with a fine-tooth comb. But no matter how much work goes into the scripting phase, and this is especially true of a documentary, it's just a guide. I call it a bible. At best, we hoped to find a through line, a basic theme or premise for the film. Frankly, a documentary film is put together in the editing room. That's the real world. After all is said and done, what audiovisual materials do we actually have to work with? What archival footage, photos, newspaper clippings, maps did we find? How did the various interviews turn out? What's the photographic quality of these various elements? There's an infinite number of variables, permutations and combinations of images and sounds that you can use or not use. So you experiment and look for the most creative solutions. But in the final analysis, -- this is my personal experience -- having tried various alternatives and reflected on the results, agonized over them and lost a considerable amount of sleep trying to solve what in effect are a series of differential cinematic equations, one has to pull back, relax, take a deep breath, and just go with your intuition. You know what I mean? Forget the

intellectualizing -- does this montage go with that sequence, or do we cut from here to there? Put Eisenstein and his excellent theories of film montage aside. You have all the information you need stored in your brain. How do you feel about it? Where are the mountain peaks? What is really paramount here? Which shots affect you on a visceral level? For example, the shot of Bunche's grandmother, a very proper-looking lady, standing with her coat and hat on. Then we cut to the long shot of Bunche, a teenager holding a basketball, and he's annoyed about being discriminated against in a scholastic contest. You know, he's on the verge of quitting school and his friends are waiting for him on the basketball court. But his grandmother stands there and you know she wants him to go back to school. And she stops him in his tracks.



Filming Archival Materials

I mean, that's the metaphor that I'm using for this sequence. The right visual metaphor will help you understand what's happening on a subtextual level. So here is Bunche with this basketball, and there is Nana standing there -- this is Eisenstein here -- and intercutting between these images, the confrontation between the two of them is intense. That moment in the Bunche story of his grandmother stopping him from quitting school moved me tremendously, and I said, "If I can set up the action and the events that lead up to this encounter, it could be quite dramatic, powerful." We were able to arrange the sequences that immediately preceded it in such a way that you are really depressed that this talented kid is going to give up his studies, but then you see this determined, wise woman who stands in his path.



Sir Brian Urquhart was one of the first United Nations civil servants. A member of the UN Secretariat from 1945 until his retirement in 1986, he worked closely with Ralph Bunche and the first five Secretaries-General on peace and security matters, especially peacekeeping. In 1972, he succeeded Ralph Bunche as Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs. His books include *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, the biography on which the film is based. Sir Brian was Chief Advisor on the Ralph Bunche project.

This interview was published in the original Greaves website, which no longer exists because the current one replaced it. <http://www.williamgreaves.com>