



IRONBOUND FILMS: DANIEL A. MILLER, JEREMY NEWBERGER, SETH KRAMER

REVENGE OF THE NERDS Ironbound Films by Jay Blotcher

Filmmaker Daniel A. Miller is a crusader. His documentaries showcase injustices, from the Holocaust to the September 11 attacks. But he does not illuminate subjects with the punishing light of interrogation; instead, his examinations gently tease out the grey areas of morality, such as America's role in the Spanish-American War or the modern miracle of wiring this country for electricity. At the same time, you get a history lesson so thorough in its arcana that your temples might ache. But egghead Miller leavens his work with abundant heart, turning potentially dry filmic screeds into engaging portraits.

A self-professed nerd, the Cold Spring-based Miller is one-third of Ironbound Films. He'll be the first to admit that partners Seth Kramer and Jeremy Newberger share his obsessive, bookish affliction. (All three were raised with a New York Jewish suburban sensibility that inculcated them, they say, with a lingering sense of inferiority. It has only made them try harder to succeed.)

Miller, Kramer, and Newberger grabbed onto filmmaking as an escape from their conformist suburban surroundings, Miller said, and, not incidentally, as a "search for meaning in the world." Working together since 2003, when they co-founded Ironbound, the trio has built on individual reputations to establish industry presence for their production company. The result is that they are shortlisted for buzz-worthy gun-for-hire projects, in addition to a roster of self-generated work.

It is a wintry day in the Lower Valley. Here in the sweet but somnolent town of Garrison, the stately, red-brick Ironbound Films headquarters sits adjacent to the railroad station. The company partners have called it home for three years.

As a filmmakers' workspace, 35 Garrison Landing boasts a cinematic pedigree. Hollywood descended on this river town in 1968 and dressed it up as 1890s Yonkers for the movie musical *Hello Dolly!* The Ironbound company office was then an inn in its declining years, but director Gene Kelly transformed

it into the hay and feed store of stuffy Horace Vandergelder (Walter Matthau). The Dutch surname, in ornate scroll font, remains on the plate glass doors and windows. Furthermore, a Dolly musical number shot here serves as a heart-lifting leitmotif in last year's film *Wall-e*.

While they are nerds, Miller and company are not slackers; they have a ferocious work ethic. On both floors of their offices today, the trio and their staff are multitasking. In one room, Newberger, 35, digitizes footage for a PBS documentary about social entrepreneurship called *The New Recruits*. Around the corner, Kramer, 37, discusses a future project with interns. Downstairs, Miller, 36, reviews a stacked wall of videos: the entire run of a 1980s TV talk show hosted by coruscating chain-smoker Morton Downey Jr. This raw material will anchor a documentary titled *Evocateur*. Miller is selecting material for a "sizzle reel"—a compilation of scenes utilized as a fundraising tool. By mid-April, principal photography began.

This January week, the team is awaiting the PBS debut of its Sundance Film Festival hit *The Linguists*—a global pursuit of two men who rescue dying languages. (The film went on to win numerous festival awards, including, most recently, honors at the Native and Indigenous Film Festival in the Czech Republic.)

While hoping the February airing will attract more assignments, Daniel and his team remain busy. After a string of erudite projects, the team vowed their next gig project would be less scholarly and more mainstream. Hence, *Evocateur*, which Miller hopes will be "a marketable movie; one you could actually sell to people." Translation: a film that finds a home beyond PBS, where most of their works are usually seen. (Miller's long alliance with public broadcasting started in the mid '90s, when he worked at its flagship, Channel 13.)

Evocateur would be more visceral than most PBS fare, dissecting the story



LEFT: IN BOLIVIA, JEREMY NEWBERGER FILMS LINGUIST GREGORY ANDERSON AND DON FRANCISCO NINACONDIS, ONE OF 100 SURVIVING SPEAKERS OF KALLAWAYA. RIGHT: SETH KRAMER FILMS AND DANIEL A. MILLER RECORDS SOUND IN A SORA-SPEAKING VILLAGE IN INDIA.



of a Wappingers Falls teenager named Tawana Brawley. Downey's career intersected with the young girl's fabricated claims of a racist attack in 1987. Several years later, Miller notes, Downey would himself claim he was the victim of a hate crime perpetrated by neo-Nazis. Like Brawley, however, he had stage-managed the bogus assault. *Evocateur* is "a pop culture examination," Miller said, that promises to be "fun."

While "fun" might be the least suitable adjective for a foray into American racism, Miller makes it a point to inject some measure of humor, if not sly irony, into the most sober of his past works. The 1999 PBS presentation "Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War" is, as evidenced by its stodgy title, a chapter-and-verse explanation of the war that made Teddy Roosevelt a household name. While this two-hour tale of American colonialism unfurls in a Ken Burns copycat style (slavishly in vogue at the time), Miller has a trick up his sleeve: The soundtrack features numerous pro-war songs from the era, jingoistic ditties that refresh the wearied viewer. When helming 2002's "Electric Nation" for PBS, Miller also chronicles the public thrill of incandescent lighting in a sampling of popular sheet music of the day. Miller maintains boundaries; there is no room for levity in 1997's emotionally exhausting but never mawkish *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*.

Ironbound Films—named for a section of Newark, New Jersey—brings to projects the complementary talents of its principals. Newberger is a pioneer of web media. Kramer, who does most of the shooting, ably handles interaction with clients or film subjects. Miller, who is responsible for crafting the storylines, can indulge his scholarly instincts. (He graduated from Brown University with a degree in semiotics and originally wanted to be a film critic.) When Miller leaps into a new project, he analyzes the topic from a sociological, psychological, anthropological, historical, and, ultimately, musical point of view.

Pressed to identify a signature style that runs through their work, Miller identifies a Borscht Belt-meets-Yeshiva sensibility.

"Our style combines comedy with intellectualizing," Miller says. "We'll all be very brainy, but never at the expense of a laugh."

A left-leaning liberal, Miller avoids partisanship in telling his tales. "If [your documentary] is a polemic, it shows, probably, that you haven't done all your research," he says. "There's [another] side out there that you need to consider in some way."

For example, in the harrowing 2002 work *America Rebuilds: A Year at Ground Zero*, a 9/11 widow fights against reconstruction and lobbies for a memorial. While her goal was at odds with the film's narrative, Miller showcases the woman's passionate campaign. "She ended up being a very sympathetic character in the film," he says. The resulting 90-minute piece steers clear of cheap sentiment, making it more emotionally powerful. Co-produced and written by Kramer, *America Rebuilds* is the first in a triad of works about the destruction and recreation of the World Trade Center by Ironbound, which was named official film consultants for the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum.

Unlike previous projects that were research-heavy and crafted mostly in the editing room with stock footage, *The Linguists* (2007) was a form of liberation

for Miller and his colleagues. The Ironbound team followed a pair of intrepid young ethnolinguists—Drs. K. David Harrison and Gregory D. S. Anderson—on their journeys through Siberia, Peru, South Africa, India, and Oklahoma. The mission: to record dying languages from their last surviving speakers. (Language, like culture, falls victim to globalism, imperialism, and urban sprawl.) The viewer senses in the jerky, hand-held camera footage not only a frantic race against time but also the posterior-bruising nature of the men's backroad travels. "We wanted to make sure you were bumping around in the backseat with the guys," Miller says.

During the year of shooting their subjects, Miller admits he and his colleagues "were annoyed by them frequently." Ironbound considered Harrison "a control freak" and that Anderson was "very intense." At times, the explorers were undiplomatic and petulant toward the foreign speakers. While Miller retained these unflattering segments, against the pleas of Harrison and Anderson—*The Linguists* is not a hatchet job.

"We wouldn't spend so much time following these guys if we didn't like them and didn't believe in what they were doing," Miller says.

Following the Sundance screening, *The Linguists* became a festival favorite and was lauded by critics. Miller represented the film on "The Colbert Report." In February, he screened the film for United Nations officials in Paris as they strategized on ways of preserving moribund languages.

The Ironbound team warmed to field shoots; the group's current film, *The New Recruits*, required extensive travel. Its subject is "social entrepreneurial" projects—that is, businesses started in impoverished areas to benefit local people. These range from the installation of pay toilets to the starting of home businesses. While good intentions power these enterprises, profiteers can plague the process. The film follows several projects, some of which succeed and others that do not. In May, Miller, Kramer, and Newberger traveled to Pakistan to document a social entrepreneur's drip-irrigation company in Karachi. It was not a typical shoot. "Political riots were breaking out in the area while we were there," Miller says. "We were forced to have armed guards and an occasional police escort."

Miller's move to the Hudson Valley was decided when his wife became director of Putnam County Historical Society. It made sense, since Kramer lives in Red Hook and Newberger in Yorktown Heights. Inspiring scenery notwithstanding, Miller admits that working far from Manhattan can be a disadvantage. Therefore, Ironbound maintains an official policy: One of the men must venture into New York every week for a business lunch, thereby staying connected to colleagues and competitors.

After nearly two decades making documentaries, Daniel A. Miller says he remains unsure about how to measure his success.

"At this very moment I think professional success is an Academy Award or getting into Cannes," he says. "But I used to think professional success was getting into Sundance. My wife tells me I'll never be happy. Maybe she's right."

The Linguists is available free of charge at www.Babelgum.com. ●