

The Baltimore Sun

January 18, 2000

Getting the picture

Baltimore cinematographer Richard Chisolm, at work on a Hopkins documentary, finds moments of truth and insight in a shadow or a sideways glance.

By Stephanie Shapiro

Sun Staff

It was one of those youthful miscalculations that most adults would rather forget. Richard Chisolm and his Catonsville High School buddies were cruising in his mother's car on the Spring Grove Hospital center campus. With his brother's hand-me-down Super 8 camera, Chisolm filmed the psychiatric patients, their odd gaits, bent heads, friendly waves. At the exit, the boys were stopped, their film confiscated and destroyed. Such antics were strictly forbidden.

Twenty-five years later, here's Chisolm once again, in another car, camera in hand. Now he's 42, a field producer for ABC's ambitious, six-part documentary on Johns Hopkins Hospital scheduled to air this spring. He and a sound man are traveling with Dr. Annelle Primm, director of the community psychiatry program at Johns Hopkins Hospital. She and a caseworker are on their way to see a patient, a young woman battling severe depression who has moved into her own apartment. Chisolm, in the front seat, tapes Primm with a tiny, state-of-the-art video camera as she drives. Baltimore's shattered east side flickers behind her. "What is the general crux of this visit?" Chisolm asks.

"To congratulate her," Primm says; the move is a big milestone. More crucial, she adds, to emphasize how important it is to take her medication.

Just getting to this point in the production process has required a certain amount of professional and personal agility. After a brief, introductory chat with Primm, Chisolm prevailed upon her to have him, the sound guy and their equipment in her car, and to chat naturally on camera with the caseworker about their client's progress. It's a delicate balancing act: intruding while not being intrusive, manipulating conversation to make it sound real, making judgment calls while in the service of a major television network.

This time, though, Chisolm's footage will not be confiscated; it may well be seen by millions of viewers.

Since that misguided Spring Grove lark, Chisolm, a lifelong Baltimorean and 1982 graduate of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has traveled the world as a cinematographer. He's been to war-torn Zimbabwe and El Salvador for American Red Cross documentaries. He's filmed homeless street children in Guatemala for a PBS series and flown over Alaska with avalanche detonators. Closer to home, Chisolm has filmed documentaries about screen painters, Baltimore's signature folk artists; about "Homicide: Life on the Street"; and about a Severna Park man who owns a fleet of Edsels.

In 1998, Chisolm won an Emmy Award for his work on a "National Geographic" special about two photographers who travel the country taking pictures of endangered animal and plant species. Last year, he was nominated for but didn't win another Emmy for "Avalanche: The White Death," also produced by National Geographic Television.

Along the way, Chisolm has accumulated a lengthy roster of "talking heads" he has filmed during

interviews: politicians, celebrities and cultural icons ranging from Iggy Pop to the pope.

'Opportunistic' approach

Credits alone don't define what Chisolm does or what sets his work apart. It's not simply a matter of holding the camera steady in precarious situations or finding the action. It's a complex, shifting equation of subtle choices based on what's available: light, motion, subject matter, and whether to zoom for a close-up or step back for a wide shot. A good cinematographer is also keen to make the most of unanticipated images; a sidelong glance, perhaps, or a tense, private conversation.

Chisolm says his is an "opportunistic" approach. He peers through the lens as if he were watching television or a movie and constantly asks himself, "Is this an interesting shot?" If not, he moves on, seeking shadows, natural light, angles and shots that often require him to accordion his rangy frame into impossibly awkward spaces.

Imagine the sensibilities of a still photographer; apply them to an art form that flashes by at 24 frames a second. These sensibilities make the difference between stock footage and what Kristin Fellows, vice president of Journey Films Inc., calls visual poetry. Fellows is co-producer of "American Byzantine," a documentary premiering this spring that explores the relationship between art and religion and its consummation at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. She worked closely with Chisolm on the project, both at the Shrine in Washington and in Italy's Carrara mountains.

"My favorite part of his work is his eye for the story in the details," Fellows says. "Richard becomes one with what he's shooting. I have seen him lying down, on the altar at the Shrine during a huge Mass, an Easter Mass. He wanted to backlight this incense coming out of the censer. Just having this beautiful silver orb moving through the air slowly with smoke coming out of it. The incense, you almost get a whiff of it," Fellows says. "It hits your senses more than just your eyes." In the same way that an author extracts the relevant strands of a story, Chisolm is "able to isolate those moments, those details and capture it with a camera, so that people don't need to sort through all of the cacophony of images later," Fellows says. "He's the sorting mechanism."

Getting good shots is also a "function of time and trust," says Chisolm, who lives in Roland Park with his wife, Meg, a psychiatrist, and son, Jasper. In Guatemala, for example, he couldn't just whip out his camera and shoot homeless street children. For one thing, he had to crouch down on their level. He spent hours sitting with the kids in doorways, on bridges, and roaming Guatemala City's teeming streets. Eventually, the kids stopped giggling and mugging for the camera and permitted Chisolm to record their daily, and not always lawful, struggle to survive.

When the walls fall down and people stop asking, "You didn't get that, did you?," Chisolm hits his stride. Nor does he shy away from bringing the camera forward into the action, however painful or intimate. "Richard has a sense of comfort and confidence to bring the camera in as a full participant in the event before him," says Martin Doblmeier, president of Journey Films. Viewers "may not see that unfolding consciously, but subconsciously they're becoming a participant in the event and feeling very comfortable," he says.

Shooting people, even wiggly little ones, is never as tough as shooting wildlife, Chisolm says. He's spent weeks in tents waiting for gazelles to mate. Besides, he notes, you can't make eye contact with a gazelle.

And Chisolm is the kind of guy who likes to make eye contact. He prefers to work on documentaries about humans -- the more human, the better. While a general fascination with "real life" has spawned an explosion in nonfiction film and video productions, most of the work, on the "spectrum between pretty and real," leans toward pretty, Chisolm says.

"Pretty" in the sense that light, image and color are manipulated by the producer to the point where a situation is often distorted beyond its basic facts. The "more we can stand to get to 'real,' the closer we are to documentary," Chisolm says. Most producers "are scared to death to give up control" and allow a piece to unfold of its own accord.

Chisolm, in pursuing his own projects, has run into obstacles thrown up by HBO, the Learning Channel, Discovery Channel, and other broadcasters who prefer their programs to fit pre-conceived

narrative templates. Somehow, no matter what natural disaster, historic event or wildlife environment is addressed, the stories all sound the same, Chisolm says. No one wants to derail the advertising gravy train, he says.

Avoiding the cliches

One of Chisolm's own pet projects was defeated by the penchant for formula. Several years ago, he followed 15 Vietnam War veterans as they visited their old battleground and discovered a beautiful country. The project never got funding, he says, because there was no "blood, no helicopters, no Nixon speeches, no Oliver Stone cliches."

When he can, Chisolm works around these story-telling conventions. On the job for National Geographic Television and other production companies, he takes "the formula and pull it as far as I can toward cinema verite." The "little tips of icebergs of reality" are the best one can hope for. For those reasons, Chisolm almost didn't take the Hopkins job. "They had to convince me it was a documentary series," he says. It turned out to be a great opportunity for Chisolm, who is the field producer for segments on Hopkins' department of psychiatry and the medical school.

Right now, Chisolm is also awaiting funding for a history of the founding of the Sheppard Pratt Hospital, a project with Historic Towson. The fund-raising short he directed won a prize, but the money has yet to materialize.

And then there's Chisolm's dream project: To write, produce, direct and film a documentary on bamboo, the fast-growing, versatile plant used around the world as a building material, art object, food and natural habitat.

Chisolm, an avid gardener, already has the title: "Amazing Grass."

Originally published Jan 18 2000

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