

What's Up With 'Docs'?

A past DGA documentary award winner surveys the field

By Todd Longwell

Chuck Braverman wasn't getting his hopes up. Although he'd been honored with the DGA Award for Best Feature Documentary for "High School Boot Camp" in 2001, and nominated again for last year's "Rocky and Rolanda," he figured his latest work, "Bottom of the Ninth," would be pushed aside by this year's rich crop of high-profile documentaries, which included "Bowling for Columbine," "The Kid Stays in the Picture" and "Daughter from Danang." But when the nominations were announced on Feb. 13, "Bottom" was at top of the list, and the others were nowhere to be found.

"I don't think that most people get it," says Braverman of his film.



"But I'm glad the DGA does."

"Ninth" follows the Patriots, a minor-league baseball team from Englewood, N.J., during five months of the 2001 season, from spring training in Florida in May to a surprising championship-series appearance in October. Working as his own cameraman and interviewer, Braverman shot digitally using Sony PD150 and Canon XL1S cameras. His wife, Marilyn Lennon Braverman, worked sound, and the older of his two sons — Alex, a senior at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts — helped out occasionally as second cameraman.

"It's really about the Peter Pan syndrome," observes the 58-year-old filmmaker, who has won Emmys for his documentaries, Clios for his commercials and Cable Ace Awards for his cable productions. "These are not kids; these are not 18-year-olds who are trying to break in. A lot of them have been playing in the minor leagues for eight or 10 years, and now they're either in their late 20s or early 30s. They're making, at the high end, \$3,000 a month. One of the guys had been in the minors for

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12 years and was a very good player, but it was becoming obvious that he'd never be in the majors. I said to him one day, 'Why are you here?' and he said, 'I've got a choice: Go to an office from 9-5 or play baseball. It's a real easy choice for me.'

In a way, Braverman's recent string of documentaries — or "docs," as he calls them — marks a return to the fields of his youth. Braverman received his first break in 1967, when he and fellow USC student George Lucas were hired to shoot several behind-the-scenes shorts about the making of the 1969 feature "MacKenna's Gold."

The following year, Braverman was an apprentice news cameraman at CBS when, at a social function, his mother ran into Tommy Smothers — then co-host with brother Dick of CBS' edgy "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" — and finagled a meeting for Chuck. Smothers needed a three-minute opening for a show and commissioned Braverman to fill it with a short film that would recount U.S. history. Shot in 16mm, one frame at a time — using a homemade animation stand, a collection of artwork and photos and set to drummer Sandy Nelson's instrumental "You Name It" — the short aired the Sunday before the 1968 presidential election.

"They got one of the highest positive responses they ever got for the show, and it literally launched my career," Braverman says of the short (titled "American Time Capsule"), which is still shown in schools.

By the early 1980s, Braverman had built a production company with 25 full-time employees that, boasting such series as "What's Up, America?" and the stand-up comedy showcase "The Big Laff Off," was Showtime's largest supplier of original programming. But in 1983 came a fateful meeting with an executive from that cable network.

"We had lunch, and he canceled my two series," Braverman says. "It was a very pleasant lunch, except for the canceling part."

Braverman slowly dissolved his company and for the next decade concentrated on narrative filmmaking, directing movies-of-the-week and episodes of such primetime series as "St. Elsewhere," "Northern Exposure" and "Beverly Hills, 90210." But when a mid-'90s stint as a "new technologies" executive ended, he found himself at a career crossroads.

"One of my closest friends said: 'Why don't you do documentaries? That's what you do really well,'" Braverman says.

Braverman then turned his camera on Florida's Eagle Academy, a residential educational facility that attempts to turn troubled teens around with military-style training; the result was "Boot Camp," which aired as a two-hour Discovery Channel special. He also helmed

2000's "Curtain Call," a docu about the Actors' Fund assisted-living facility in Englewood, N.J., that earned Braverman an Oscar nomination for best documentary short.

Few documentaries receive much in the way of theatrical distribution, so television is the primary outlet for filmmakers like Braverman. Through his Santa Monica-based Braverman Prods., he is producing several documentaries for Discovery Channel — including "Prison Doctors," "Love Behind Bars" and "When Planes Go Down" — as well as projects for A&E and History Channel.

"In theory, the market is much, much better than it was 20 years ago, when there was only ABC, NBC and CBS," Braverman says. "There are 15-20 potential buyers now — Discovery, A&E, Trio, Lifetime, etc. But the prices that some of them are paying are very low, especially in acquisitions."

Even if the average documentary budget is, he says, equivalent to the cost of "crafts services for a couple of days on a (major studio) movie," he finds his work fulfilling.

"When I was directing episodic shows, I would show up five, six days before the start (and) get on the train that was already going down the tracks," Braverman says. "Now, I'm making a bunch of films every year. I'm getting into the mix; I'm hiring the announcer to do the voice-over. ... I'm really involved in the filmmaking process. Even though I still have aspirations to make theatrical films — this is the best job in the whole world." ■