

DOCUMENTARIES

This year's IFFBoston showcases the best in new nonfiction films

By **Peter Keough** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 21, 2022, 11:57 a.m.



In "We Feed People," José Andrés stirs a pot of food in San Juan, Puerto Rico. WCK PHOTOGRAPHER/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Long regarded as one of the most exciting film events in New England, the Independent Film Festival Boston (April 27-May 4) has lately established itself as a showcase for the best recent documentaries.

Many of the major themes in cinema are executed in these films in masterful and

inventive styles, though often in a minor key. Those themes and variations include entrepreneurial capitalism as practiced in illegal abortion clinics and Pez-dispenser pirating; racial and gender justice as seen in a hostage standoff and a high school debating society; and help for the needy and dispossessed as exemplified by trailer parks and catastrophe catering.

As usual, the festival also presents the recent work by outstanding local filmmakers, such as Bestor Cram and Lucia Small.

Listed alphabetically, here's a sampling of nonfiction standouts on this year's program.

BONNIE BLUE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JAMES COTTON

A bracing complement to Jim Farrell's Buddy Guy tribute, "The Torch" (2019), Cram's engrossing, toe-tapping documentary about James Cotton, like Guy, another Chicago bluesman, is a warts-and-all portrait of the legendary musician from his beginnings as a 9-year-old orphan on the Bonnie Blue plantation, in Mississippi, to his triumph as one of the greatest blues harmonica players. An acolyte of Sonny Boy Williamson II, Howlin' Wolf, and Muddy Waters, Cotton was able to make the transition from Delta blues to rock 'n' roll. He brought his musical fusion, propelled by powerful harp playing and vocals, to a new audience with the James Cotton Blues Band.

But his success and a life of touring brought on the usual temptations. Cotton seemed doomed to addiction, but a bond with a tony Napa Valley equestrian – from, as one interviewee puts it, across "a huge cultural chasm" – saved his life, put him back on his feet, and allowed him to resume his career. Cotton, who died, at 81, in 2017, recorded 28 albums, received five Grammy nominations, winning one in 1996. Cram includes a generous sample of electrifying Cotton performances that testify to those honors. *May 2, Somerville Theatre, 7:30 p.m.*

A DECENT HOME

Sara Terry's thought-provoking and cogent investigation takes its title from the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which pledged "a decent home" to every American family. Mobile homes were included in that definition, an option which despite popular disparagement offers a lower-class family ownership of an inexpensive, hospitable place to live in a supportive community. The catch is that the lots on which these residences are located is owned by a landlord, and in recent years investors have bought up the properties, jacked up the rent, evicted the tenants when they could not pay, and then sold the land to developers for big profits. As for those who once lived there – they're out of luck.

Terry visits several households in different parts of the country who are facing that prospect. These working-class folks have struggled long and hard to attain their bit of security, some working up to three jobs to make ends meet. None of that matters to investors interested only in the bottom line. In one appalling sequence, Terry sits in on a bloodcurdling course in which prospective real estate moguls are taught that the welfare of a tenant is of no concern when it comes to squeezing out cash.

A trailer community in Colorado presents an especially egregious case. There a nonprofit offered to pay the new owner of the land over \$20 million. He declined, expecting to make up to ten times that much selling it to a developer. It is little consolation to the evicted tenants that the ruthless would-be profiteer is still waiting for that deal. *May 1, Somerville, 4 p.m.*



"Girl Talk." SMALL ANGST PRODUCTIONS

GIRL TALK

Local filmmaker Lucia Small's funny, moving, and slyly incisive look at five female members of the Newton South debate team offers a microcosm of how women encountering patriarchal prejudice can fight back. The film has its world premiere at the festival.

Intermittently listing the grim statistics testifying to the sexism endemic in the debate-team establishment (40 percent of high school debaters are girls, but only 10 percent win) and coyly including asides to some of the arcane terminology ("spreading": speaking so fast that the opponent cannot rebut all the arguments presented), Small candidly follows the team over the course of five years. The young debaters triumph, lose, toil, rebound, deal with slights and injustices, and luckily enjoy the total support of their parents and school.

Clips of the team watching a Clinton-Trump debate on TV and then later the returns of the 2016 election underscore the real world manifestations of the obstacles they ardently overcome. A coach ruefully comments that eventually reforms will correct the gender inequities in the high school debate organization but if that happens it will only prepare the debaters for "a world that doesn't exist." But a litany of the names of

former female high school debaters who went on to world success – including Oprah Winfrey, Sonia Sotomayor, and, yes, Hillary Clinton – suggests that such sentiments might be overly pessimistic. *May 1, Somerville, 1 p.m.*



"Hold Your Fire." IFC FILMS

HOLD YOUR FIRE

Ironically, Shu'aib Raheem and his four Muslim accomplices did not want to steal the shotguns from the sporting goods store in Brooklyn in order to kill police. Instead they needed them to protect themselves from the Nation of Islam, which had threatened the men because they belonged to a Muslim sect that the Nation deemed to be infidels. They were nonetheless seen by the authorities as revolutionaries and potential cop killers when the robbery was botched and degenerated into a hostage stand-off involving hundreds of heavily armed officers. In this suspenseful, often surprising account of the 1973 siege, director Stefan Forbes combines archival footage from the event with recollections from participants – perpetrators, police, and victims – in a compelling narrative woven from multiple points of view.

Raheem and his cohorts, one of whom was critically wounded, were at first willing to surrender but were not given an opportunity by zealous officers. The latter, interviewed today, argue the necessity of their hard-bitten tactics and express in some

cases an unacknowledged racism. Luckily, they were advised by New York Police Department psychologist Harvey Schlossberg, who had pioneered negotiation techniques that eschewed brute force for empathy and manipulation. He proves the hero of the story, as does the store owner, whose resourcefulness and humanity helped prevent a much worse tragedy. *May 2, Brattle, 6:45 p.m.*



"The Janes." HBO

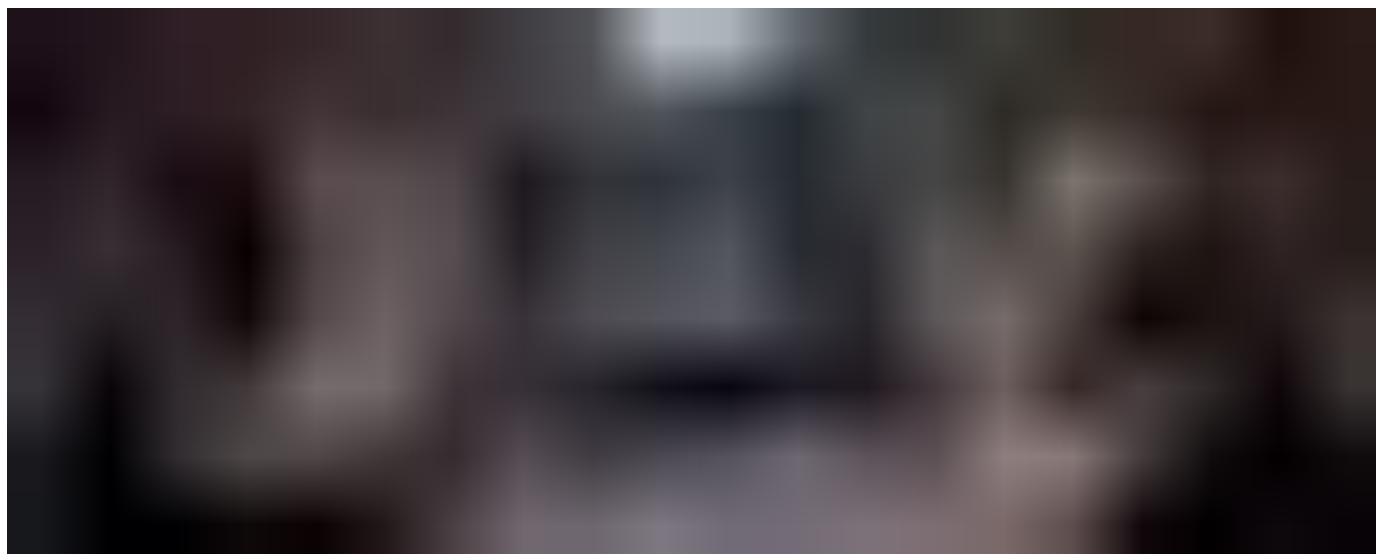
THE JANES

As the prospects for Roe v. Wade dim, Emma Pildes and Tia Lessin's documentary reminds us of what happens when abortion is criminalized, showing the oppressive cruelty of such laws and the misogynist hypocrisy of those who impose them. It also celebrates the ingenuity and determination of a group of women who decided to help the victims of this cruelty.

The group sprang up in the '60s Chicago, where the antiwar and racial-justice movements had already taken hold. Young activist women who had participated in these causes recognized – some from personal experience -- the need to help desperate women with unwanted pregnancies who had to risk their lives and freedom by resorting to mob-run back-alley abortionists. So a band of politically engaged students and others decided to run their own DIY criminal operation, offering counseling and safe abortions to women who had few other options. They circulated a phone number to call where clients would ask for “Jane” to make arrangements.

One of their most skilled and compassionate abortionist was a hunky guy named “Mike” who, interviewed today, seems a jovial type who doesn’t much resemble a doctor. In fact, he wasn’t, and the women of the Janes decided if Mike can perform the procedure then so could they. Several took lessons from him and became skilled abortionists themselves.

The group operated for a while with seeming impunity, but in 1972 were busted. Fortunately, they hired a shrewd lawyer, who managed to delay their trial until January 1973, when the Supreme Court issued its expected ruling in Roe v. Wade. Charges were dropped, the Janes ended their practice, and now we wait to see if such services might be needed again in the future. *May 3, WBUR’s CitySpace, 7 p.m.*



"The Pez Outlaw." SIDESTILT FILMS

THE PEZ OUTLAW

Like many Americans, Steve Glew, the subject of Amy Bandlien Storkel and Bryan Storkel's rollicking, capricious, and thoughtful documentary, struggled to turn his passions into cash. A depressive with obsessive-compulsive disorder, resembling in dress and bearded slovenliness one of the siblings in Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's "Brother's Keeper" (1992), he sought relief from his anxiety, depression, and poverty by collecting cereal boxes. Thousands of them, neatly unfolded and stacked but apparently worthless. Then he discovered, as one of his friends puts it, how to "play the coupon system." He would order hundreds of the odd toys and other freebies pitched on the cartons, take them to collectibles conventions, and make a bundle selling them. Then the cereal companies caught on and passed a rule: only one coupon per household.

But in the 1990s, at one of those conventions, Glew found a new love: Pez dispensers. He discovered that an obscure factory in Slovenia designed and manufactured versions of these totemic gewgaws that were not distributed in the United States. He bought bags of them and started selling them for increasingly outrageous prices to the deep-pocketed market of collectors. Glew got bolder, took on the sobriquet "The Pez Outlaw," and, as inevitably happens, the established forces of corporate capitalism took notice. Scott McWhinnie, CEO of the US office of Pez ("the Pezident" as he fancies himself) vowed to take down the Pez Outlaw.

Tongue in cheek, inventive (the use of whimsical re-enactments comes close to getting cloying but a madcap spirit prevails), the Storkels' film relates a fundamental American tragicomedy about the limits of free enterprise and the determination of an eccentric genius. *April 29, Somerville, 7:15 p.m.*



"We Feed People." CLARA WETZEL/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/CLARA WETZEL

WE FEED PEOPLE

Earlier this month Russian missiles destroyed the Kharkiv, Ukraine, outpost of the World Central Kitchen – the food-relief nongovernment organization set up by celebrity chef José Andrés for those going hungry in disaster areas. Four volunteers were injured, but in a tweet Andrés reported they would be OK and the service would be up and running again. According to WKC, it is one of 30 kitchens in cities across that country that serve over 300,000 meals a day.

All in a day's work. Ron Howard's documentary about Andrés and his outfit opens with the chef delivering food to people in Wilmington, N.C., stranded by Hurricane Florence, in 2018. The truck capsizes in a flooded road; and Andres and his helpers are rescued, though the food is lost.

How did this culinary legend and owner of a score or so restaurants end up chasing

catastrophes in the Bahamas, Madagascar, the Navajo nation, Puerto Rico, and anywhere a hot meal might mean the difference between hope and despair? In 2010 he could not look away from images of the devastation in Haiti after the earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands. He took the next flight there and saw a need to feed people and figured out a way to do it on the spot.

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emergencies. He has extended that skill to some of the worst disasters of the past dozen years. He's no saint. It's startling to watch him snap at a volunteer or see him break down during a particularly grueling operation. But for the countless hungry souls he has brought solace to, he seems like an angel. *April 28, Somerville, 7 p.m.*

Go to iffboston.org.

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