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Go Behind the NYFF Scenes with Kent Jones, Its Passionate Chief

The first-year head talks about his early influences, the programming process, opening night and why he loves his job

September 27, 2013, [Craig Barboza](#)
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A few weeks ago, Kent Jones sat on a bench in Lincoln Center Plaza, a pair of black Ray-Bans masking his expressive eyes, and talked about his favorite subject: movies. Jones heads the venerable New York Film Festival, which kicks off today, Sept. 27, and he has had to watch stacks of them over the past few months. Asked exactly how many films, Jones laughs and says, "I'm not even sure I could take an educated guess. It's a big number — well over a thousand and more shorts."

Part of his job, a big part, is to pick the best works from the myriad of options and build a festival around them. This year's main slate at the NYFF has 35 films and, along with the usual international fare and Oscar magnets, it is heavy on comedies and movies by actors-turned-directors. Ben Stiller's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* will be the centerpiece gala selection. Jones has traveled the globe scouting for films people ought to see, schmoozed with directors and fielded distributor requests. But there are always a million and one things, big and small, left to do. Still he says he couldn't imagine doing anything else.

The easygoing Jones, who turns 56 next month, first joined the Lincoln Center Film Society (which presents the NYFF) in 1998. He brings an encyclopedic knowledge of the medium to his role as festival director and selection committee chair, as well as an acute artistic sensibility and extraordinary taste. His film criticism, collected in the 2007 book *Physical Evidence*, established Jones as one of the foremost thinkers and writers on cinema. He's someone who can praise the verisimilitude of Agnieszka Holland's Czech mini-series *Burning Bush* one minute and be reduced to childlike wonder the next while retelling the story of his brief encounter with French director Jean-Luc Godard in college. And like Godard, who had been a critic before embarking on a career as a filmmaker, Jones has also jumped behind the camera to make several documentaries with his longtime friend Martin Scorsese. Their latest was 2010's *A Letter to Elia*, which covered the life and art of Elia Kazan, the influential director of *On the Waterfront* and other classics.

In our interview Jones, a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow, talked about his passion for movies and his unusual career path. The following is an edited version of the conversation.

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Sofia Coppola, Kent Jones (Photo: Courtesy of Kent Jones)

You grew up in Berkshire County, Mass. Did you spend a lot of time in the local movie houses?

Yeah, there were a lot of them. Pittsfield itself was a manufacturing town but it also had five independent movie theaters up and down North Street — all of which are long gone — and a theater inside the Berkshire Museum, which showed older films during the summer.

Who had the greatest influence on your taste in movies?

I supposed it was a combination of factors, but my relationship with my father definitely had a lot to do with [the types of movies I was drawn to early on]. He was a World War II vet and, like many vets, he didn't talk about his experiences. He imparted them in other ways. So at a young age I recognized that movies about that period, like *The Best Years of Our Lives*, dovetailed with father's experience. My mother, on the other hand, was interested in newer films. She would take me with her to see *Nashville* and *California Split*. She loved Robert Altman. I remember seeing *A Woman Under the Influence* by John Cassavetes at the theater around the corner. Bergman's films would come dubbed into English. Truffaut. Fellini. My mom took me to a lot of films, and my dad gave me a way of thinking about them.

And at what point did you go from spectator to student?

When I was 12 I started looking at movie books, sometimes when I was sick and home from school. I remember getting a copy of *The American Cinema* by Andrew Sarris and that was a window [to understanding cinema]. Manny Farber's book *Negative Space* was yet another opening. Godard's criticism meant a lot to me when I was pretty young. Many coffee table books in those days offered pictorial histories of the movies, and there were two around the house that I loved: *The Movies* by Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer and *Immortals of the Screen*, edited by Ray Stuart. *The Movies* book fascinated me because you could see the shifts in imagery and focus and gesture and fashion by just leafing through it. Last year Bruce Goldstein [director of repertory programming at the Film Forum] and I had a long conversation about pre-video film culture, which included these illustrated screenplay books put together by a guy named Richard J. Anobile; the dialogue ran below a succession of frames taken from 16mm prints, I think. They were terrible but we loved them.

You actually wanted to be a filmmaker more than a critic, which is why you left McGill University in the late 1970s.

I had a very romantic notion of studying film with [*Rebel Without a Cause* director] Nick Ray, who was a teacher at N.Y.U. But Nick died before I had the chance to take his class and I eventually dropped out of school.

Where did you live?

I moved to a house in New Jersey with my girlfriend, which was a disastrous relationship. I ended up back in the city, sleeping on couches for months before I got a sublet on the corner of Canal and 6th. It was hot and noisy but a lot of fun because it was a loft.

What was your rent?

Maybe \$200 a month. I split it with somebody else. Then I was on 11th Street, between 4th and 3rd. After that, I moved to Brooklyn for 20 years.



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Where are you now?

I'm on the Upper West Side, and I pay more than \$200 a month. [Laughs]

Your film writing spans two decades. But before sharing your critical insights in print, you helped people pick out Betamax tapes as a video-store clerk.

I had a job at New Video, which was the first video store in Manhattan. It started in this hole in the ground on MacDougal, between West Houston and Bleecker. I think it's a falafel joint now or a tattoo parlor. You'd have to go down some stairs to enter. Everybody came there to rent videos, and not just from the neighborhood. You had people from uptown, SoHo, the Financial District. Robert Rauschenberg sent people to rent movies for him. Cindy Sherman. Julian Schnabel. David Byrne. Jerry Harrison from Talking Heads. Fred Schneider from the B-52s. It was very cool. They let me take home as many movies as I wanted on weekends. We had something called "Rent-a-Beta." You could rent these portable Betamax machines and hook them up to your TV. My friends and I would watch *Apocalypse Now* on a 16-inch black-and-white. Back in those days, that's what there was.

How did you come to work at the Lincoln Center Film Society?

Sometime in the 1980s I started thinking about the break in Hollywood, now well documented, between the post-*The Graduate*/*Easy Rider* movies and the [blockbuster age]. People often speak of *Star Wars* and then *Heaven's Gate* as the cut-offs. For me it was *Ghostbusters*, a very funny movie and massive hit that set a template people are still working from. I thought it would be great to put together a program called "Out of the '70s: An American New Wave" and around 1994 I mentioned it to Bruce, who is an old friend; the guy's probably forgotten more than I'll ever know about programming. Anyway, he liked the idea, but said it wasn't the right time so I checked in with him now and then and always got the same answer. Then, one day he called and said, okay, now it's the right time. That was one of many lessons I learned from Bruce: having an idea for a program is one thing. Where it's placed in the calendar — what month, what year — is just as important. The series did well. Afterwards, Richard Peña [program director for the film society] called me to see if I was interested in coming aboard. I started as an associate director of programming in 1998 and in 2002 I joined the selection committee.

This is your first year as festival chief. What's different now that you're calling the shots?

In practical terms I guess you could say I'm the one who sets the tone for the festival. That's a big difference. But I'm still in constant dialogue with the selection committee (Dennis Lim, Gavin Smith, Amy Taubin and Marian Masone), and we decided that this year the shape of the festival would be a little different. I wanted to take all the documentaries and group them in a coherent way. I put films built around projects in one group and films that are motion portraits in another. Portraiture is a big movement in documentary. Then there's a group of films on immigration: "How Democracy Works Now." These are films I love and wanted to see together as one. But the first thing I planned to do when I came back was a Godard retrospective, which starts in the second week so as not to overwhelm the rest of the festival.



New York Film Festival 2012 (Photo: Courtesy of Kent Jones)

Walk us through how you program a film festival.

There's no science to it. We see as many films as we can and make a decision about how good they are

relative to everything else. We go to festivals in Cannes, Berlin and Rotterdam; there's a very good one in Buenos Aires that sometimes turns up things that are unexpected. We find what's out there and we know the people to go to for films we may not have heard of. We look at a lot of films together in July and August, see what was submitted directly to the festival, and make a judgment call.

Are you always looking for that perfect mix of titles?

As a programmer, I [like to have] a selection of films that are in some kind of dialogue with each other, where they're telling a story or reflecting on things you can't quantify or put into words until later. You're following this thread without maybe really knowing what that thread is. The point is that cinema is a beautiful and fragile thing, an adventure, and if the audience has a sense of participating in that adventure that's great.

This year the adventure begins with *Captain Phillips*, a real-life thriller about a U.S. cargo ship hijacked by Somali pirates in 2009. The film stars Tom Hanks. Why did you decide to go with this film as the opening night selection?

Captain Phillips is a film we saw relatively early and even after looking at other movies it was the one that really stayed in my head. It's a nail-biter — and it really is, down to the last minute. We know how the story turned out, but like all good films that operate on the principle of suspense you [can't turn away]. Then there's the film's director, Paul Greengrass, and the way he has perfected the real-life thriller. He's done *Bloody Sunday*, *Omagh*, *Green Zone* and *United 93*. Then he took the form in another direction with the *Bourne* films, giving them the texture of those non-fiction narratives, and now he's returning to the form again with *Captain Phillips*. When you look at the trailer it could appear to be a different kind of movie. But those four actors who play the pirates are just as present and vivid and important as Tom Hanks's character. They're one to one. So I found that enormously impressive. I think it's a really excellent film.

What do you love most about being a film programmer?

I like people *reacting*. Whether they love a film or hate it doesn't matter — just that they react. I like getting a conversation going.

The NYFF has been a showcase for international auteurs and fresh new voices. Over the years you've gotten to know both, and even collaborated with a few. Is that one of the job's perks?

Sure. Some of the filmmakers are close friends. I actually co-wrote a film called *Jimmy P.* that's in this year's festival. [Jones had to recuse himself from judging the film.] It's directed by Arnaud Desplechin, whose work I first saw here, actually.

You also worked with Martin Scorsese on three documentaries. How did you meet?

We met more than 20 years ago purely by chance. I was very lucky. I had a friend whose girlfriend's roommate was working in Marty's office and she said I think they might need help with the video archive and that was literally how it happened.

Do you two have plans to collaborate on another project?

Yeah, we started a second part to [*My Voyage to Italy*], his documentary on Italian cinema.

I hear you're also hard at work on a book about films that tell the story of 20th century America. How do you manage the life/work balance?

I'm used to shifting from one thing to another. For me, work and life are pretty intertwined and by that I don't mean to say I'm a workaholic. I'm just lucky enough to do what I love.

4

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