

An Interview with Film Maker Mary Jane Doherty



Tawnya D. Smith and Mary Jane Doherty

*Editor's note: During the NIME 6 conference, I (Tawnya) had the pleasure of interviewing Mary Jane Doherty, Associate Professor of Film in the College of Communication at Boston University. The original interview followed the showing of her short film, *Let the River Run*, a portrait of the children of the Boston Children's Chorus (BCC). The BCC is a community-based chorus that aspires to transcend social barriers through music making. As one of the NIME6 conference conveners, I learned of the film through a recommendation from the late Susan Conkling who had served on the board of the BCC, and knew of Mary Jane's work with the chorus. I am grateful that Susan introduced us to Mary Jane and her film.*

*Mary Jane is known for her innovative narrative documentary style through a number of films including *Gravity* (1985), a film about experimental astrophysics, and *Secundaria* (2013) and *Primaria* (2016), films about the Cuban ballet system. She is a master teacher who has been nominated for several awards by her students at Boston University. In 2017, she won the City of Boston Artist Fellowship in its inaugural year.*

*The film, *Let the River Run*, follows several children who are members of the Boston Children's Chorus. Mary Jane captures their experiences at home, in rehearsal, in interviews, and in performance as a way to invite the viewer into the children's lived sonic world. The children are the teachers in this story; from them we learn the fundamentals of pitch and rhythm, what shoes to wear, how sound travels in and out of our brains. But they also teach us the most by what they do not say. And this is the deeper idea of the film—that the essence of singing with others*

T. D. Smith
College of Fine Arts, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA
e-mail: tdsmith7@bu.edu

M. J. Doherty (✉)
College of Communication, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA
e-mail: maryjane@bu.edu

is a feeling that cannot be explained in words. One has to listen to the music with them, feel what it is like to sit among them as they make a glorious sound together.

The interview that follows is a re-creation of the initial conference interview, which was not recorded. While I posed the same questions to Mary Jane during this second interview, her responses are naturally unique to this interview. Together, we have curated the transcript of the interview for clarity and length, but have attempted to maintain the content as well as Mary Jane's voice. This interview is included in this volume so that both Mary Jane's film and the following discussion of her creative process may offer narrative researchers insights for considering narrative beyond the printed page. Mary Jane also shares her approach for building positive relationships with those she is filming, which is an important consideration when working with those whose voices have been marginalized or are seldom heard.

1 Early Career Discovery

T: Please share with us the story of your early career in the film program at MIT.

MJ: The MIT Film/Video Program back in the 1980s was designed for advanced filmmakers ready to push the boundaries of the form. I got in somewhat by accident (I should've read the fine print) and it was clear from the get go that I was out of my league. At first I floundered about, making crummy films, hoping no one would notice.

But two things happened at MIT that basically launched my career. First, I discovered that sound matters as much as, if not more than, picture. I discovered this when I interwove a dynamic sound track into an otherwise incoherent story. The film suddenly came to life.

The second thing I discovered was how to film real people and then send their story to an audience. This happened while making my thesis film, *Gravity*, about experimental astrophysicists. Ricky Leacock, the Director of the MIT Film/Video Program and a seminal documentarian, loved it. In Ricky's letter of support he wrote, "this might very well be the most important film to come out of our program." But, at the time, I was too naïve to realize that my approach was unorthodox. It was not until a couple decades later that I realized it's OK to work on instinct; in fact, it might even be essential to telling stories about real people.

T: Would you tell us a little bit more about that movie and what it was that you were shooting?

MJ: The astrophysicists?

T: Yes.

MJ: So, there were four graduate students in an experimental astrophysics lab at MIT. I immersed myself in their lab life for 5 months and only figured out the story once I had shot all of the footage. The scary part of editing was realizing

that I had to be in the movie itself since the scientists often looked at me or talked to me while filming. I decided to play the role of the lay person, be the audience's guide, as someone brand new to the world of experimental astrophysics. So, I included myself in the film as a cow. I don't know why I chose a cow, but the cow asks odd questions which helps the movie roll along. Plus I used cartoons. At the film's first screening the physicists all laughed, but they also said the science is sound. The lab director in the film, Rainer Weiss, said it was the craziest thing he'd ever seen. But he loved the movie. Then miraculously, 30 years later, Rainer became world famous, winning the 2017 Nobel prize in Physics. And Lyman Page, one of the four graduate students in the film, won the 2018 Breakthrough prize, worth three million dollars – considered as prestigious as the Nobel Prize. Now *Gravity* has become a somewhat famous film among the physics world once word got out that I have footage from so long ago.

T: Wonderful.

MJ: But, I only figured out how to explain my filming approach once I started teaching. Back then, on some gut level, I used the rhythm of people's dialogue in relation to the other natural sounds of the moment; what we in the film business call "sync." These are the tiny scrapings and sparkles of everyday background sound, the aural *pauses* that tell the audience in an intimate—and non-cerebral way that they are there, *in* the movie. The difference between an eighth rest and a quarter rest, as you know in music, is profound. A tiny moment of silence changes the shape, changes the very storytelling nature of the music. That's exactly what filmmakers do when creating the soundtrack. And if you listen to the soundtrack of *Gravity*, you'll see it works like a piece of music in terms of rhythm, even pitch. And certainly in terms of dynamics, which for filmmakers is by far the most important sound element.

T: I believe you are bringing forth an important message to music education researchers who have typically focused upon narrative writing. Your work calls us to reconsider our own musical language as a part of our storytelling.

MJ: It's as much a case of filmmakers recognizing that the elements of music are what we need to incorporate in our storytelling.

T: Perhaps, but narrative music educators have been writing in an academic way, stories of students or music learners of different ages and in doing so we are not engaging with our musical art at all. We brought you to the conference because one of the aims of the conference was to consider ways to convey narratives beyond the printed page. In our field, we seek to understand through stories that are deeply emotionally and intuitively powerful because they are built upon types of knowledge that have been marginalized—those beyond the intellectual. However, if we continue to publish these stories only in written form for academic audiences, our stories may not reach those who might benefit. I wonder if our work is making the kind of impact it could if we were to consider our stories as film or as orchestrated, spoken word that accounts for cadence and the way the narrative is delivered.

2 Teaching Narrative Film Making

T: Thank you for sharing the background about your first films and your time at MIT; it's very helpful. Now you are on the faculty at Boston University, and you teach a course on narrative documentary. How do you define narrative documentary?

MJ: Well, right off the bat, it is a terrible name. I stole it from 1960's pioneers of new journalism (*Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, John McPhee*), a form where the journalist becomes part of the story itself.

T: Ok.

MJ: So, it's like fiction in a sense, even though the stories are real. The journalists are not trying to pretend that they're not there. They *are* there and naturally they're subjective. And in fact, it's the relationship between the journalist and the people she's filming – this is the trustworthy connection that the audience picks up on. But it's a fine line. For a while my critics would say, "oh you make personal documentaries" and I would say "oh no," it has nothing to do with me; it has to do with them. I fall in love with my subjects and they fall in love with me, and we're partners. That's the reason that the audience falls in love with them.

T: Ah. I see.

MJ: So, it's a triangle.

T: Got it.

MJ: So, I don't know what the name of the course should be, but it shouldn't be narrative documentary. It's really nonfiction filmmaking that feels like fiction in terms of attaching the audience to the characters emotionally.

T: Mmm.

MJ: So, you might not learn anything from the film, or if you do, that understanding comes later. You have to ask yourself, when you walk away from a fiction film, you'll notice there are no interviews, there's very little voiceover, the story just unfolds. Why does this not happen in nonfiction?

T: Ha, ha. I don't know!

MJ: Yeah. I didn't either, and that was the great thing about my time at MIT. I didn't have any idea about what I was doing. It just felt right, and so I carried on. But, I also know that this relationship thing is critical. You can't reach a person, an audience, until you—yourself—have created a relationship with your subjects first.

T: Beautiful. So, is building relationships with those you are filming one of the central things that you convey to your students in the course, as they are learning to film documentary?

MJ: Well, yes. I just say that in order to reach the audience you need two things: One is to care about the people you film, and the second is to have your technical skills so refined that you can *relay* your care to the audience. This conveyance happens only to the degree that you know how to film precisely.

T: Right.

MJ: So, this is the reason that John McPhee is my go-to guy. He is 88 right now, but he had a 50–60-year career with the *New Yorker* and is quite a famous literary journalist. When I first read his work I was sitting on a dock waiting for the ferry to Block Island. The ferry came and the ferry went – that’s how immersed I was. It’s not just how he managed to plunge himself into another person’s world, it’s that his writing was so precise, so clean, and beautifully structured. So, you cannot just fall in love with people, you have to have developed your technique enough to allow this conveyance to happen. For example, If a horizon line is off by a degree or two, what does the audience see? They see a slanted picture. So you have to go out and shoot it again. But this is difficult since we can’t ask our subjects to re-do something that *we* messed up.

T: Right.

MJ: Also, in theory, every single film should look different because you let your subjects and your relationship with the subjects determine your filming style.

T: Mmm. So, it’s much more in the moment and almost improvisational?

MJ: Well, it’s a ... I call it a dance. So, for example, in a film I am making now about a group of fishing widows in Nova Scotia, the boat is heaving and rolling, gears are winding, the ropes are spinning, there are the incredible sounds of the lobsters flopping all over. The fisherwomen’s skills ... this becomes the story. It’s not the words in their interviews so much, it’s what they *do*.

T: Interesting.

MJ: On the other hand, my scientists loved to talk. And in their case I do include their interviews. So, you just have to be careful not to bias your film necessarily towards what people say. Maybe their personality comes through more by what they do.

T: Is there anything more you’d like to say about the course that you teach?

MJ: Just that it takes at least 3 months for my students to understand. In the beginning my students mostly stare at me, “What are you talking about?” Most of us think of documentary as something educational. And it takes awhile to undo that definition. But by the end of the semester, honest to God, Tawnya, there is sort of a glow in their eyes. Oh my. [laughs] So, it’s one of my most successful classes, but it’s also the one that is, strangely, the hardest to teach. I rely on the language of form and content, and for some students this concept doesn’t mean anything. Everyone immersed in the arts, as you know, balances form with content. It’s our

fundamental alphabet. It's our do, re, mi. You know? But many of my students are new to the language of the arts.

3 The Filming of *Let the River Run*

T: Let's discuss your film, *Let the River Run*. What drew you to the Boston Children's Chorus (BCC) project?

MJ: Well, I knew from making my films of the Cuban ballet system (*Secundaria*, 2013 and *Primaria*, 2016) that music had to be a part of the story. It was the same with the BCC: I wouldn't have to worry about adding music; it would be built in to the story. And, if you have music in your story, you have a chance to reach people emotionally. I also knew I had to do a local story that I could follow without sneaking in illegally to a strange country.

T & MJ: [both laugh]

MJ: I'm telling you the truth. Cuba travelling really got to me after a while. But also, it was the children. Children learning music has mattered to me ever since I started doing research on sound. And, then the final reason is that Ben Hires, the manager of BCC, had written an email many years ago as an open call to BU professors; "Is anyone interested in doing something about us?" At the time, I said no, but I held on to his email and then followed up 5 years later. I walked in and said "I want to hang out with you. Make a story. But I don't know what the story is and I don't know how long it will take." He said, "no problem."

You know, I've considered filming other music organizations in the Boston area. With one group, they made me write a formal proposal, we had four or five meetings back and forth, yada yada yada, and then finally they said "No, we're not interested. What do you mean you don't have a story?" and I said, "Well how could I have a story if I haven't filmed it yet?" But the BCC people, were so quick; they understood right off of the bat that if you want the audience to know what it feels like to be a kid in a choir, you just have to hang out there. You can't just ask a student, "So how does it feel to be in student in the choir?" That's not how it works.

T: Right. So how long did you hang out with the kids in the chorus?

MJ: Two years.

T: Two years. Like once a week?

MJ: And, one European tour trip.

T: Wow.

MJ: Yeah.

T: So, you clocked quite a few hours to shoot the film?

MJ: Yup. 44 different scenes. And, I realized about three quarters of the way into the third year of filming that a story wasn't going to happen. It's just as important to realize when *not* to keep shooting as it is when to shoot; that is what I learned.

T: So, what do you mean by there was not a story?

MJ: Well, in the Cuba film, for example, the person I started filming in the beginning undergoes this dramatic event, her surprising defection, after 3 years of filming her. Suddenly I have a natural narrative arc, a story. If you don't have an engine or something that *changes*, then you're left with a portrait. And it's hard to sustain a portrait for a feature film's length of time. So, that is what I meant by "nothing happened." There were a few students that I followed in the BCC. One little girl's story was dramatic, but it would have been another movie entirely. She had two fathers, which is not that unusual, except for that eventually I learned that one of her fathers was actually her brother.

T: Oh, wow.

MJ: Had I followed this, it would have become a giant complicated story and would have had nothing to do with music. I knew I couldn't stop and make that film, so I had to do something that focused on the children of the Boston Children's Chorus.

T: Right. Wow.

MJ: So, nothing really dramatic happened at the BCC. They just kept going.

T: Right. They kept growing up.

MJ: They were growing up, and there were teeny moments ... but not enough to hang a whole engine of a feature length story on.

T: What I saw when watching the film was something very similar to what I lived as an educator who spent time with children over a period of several years. I watched them grow and change, become better skilled, and have a stronger understanding of what they want to express musically. These changes happen in little micro moments over time, and I felt like you captured that very well. I see how the film is not a story in the sense of being a drama with some sort of turning point, cataclysmic event, or an "aha" moment or something like that.

4 Editing Film with Sound

T: Talk a little bit about your editing process. Clearly the soundtrack is important. Would you say your editing process really has to do more with sound than it does with the visual?

MJ: Yes, yes! So just to clarify, in the midst of filming, you can tell right away if something is working or not; you can sense that the story will assemble itself. By that I mean the cut points, the edits, will be invisible to the audience – as they are in a *fiction* film. So, then later when I am editing, I cut the sound first, and only later polish the picture. I close my eyes and listen to the scene; if it *feels* right then I go back and adjust the picture to make sure that the scene also *looks* right.

T: Wow.

MJ: Also, I edit from ‘the inside out.’ I make one big movie based on little movies. And each little movie is made of individual shots, and each shot has a beginning, a middle and an end. So, I approach each scene asking the question: What are the least number of shots I can use to tell the most story? You know like with sculpting you can either chip away at your material, or you can build up from zero. I prefer to build up from nothing because time is our most important storytelling element. So, if you start with nothing, you force each shot to earn its way in to the story. You’re building in *efficiency* this way. If you go the other way, where you accept all your shots and then chip away at your them, it forces you to watch your footage endlessly. By the time you have watched it more than three times, you have intellectualized your film and lost the ability to know whether it will reach the audience or not.

T: Ahh. Interesting.

MJ: I’m telling you, Tawnya, there are two ways to do it, it’s just one way is faster. But editing is a personal task and you can easily find a counter argument. You just sort of get attached to your theory and run with it.

T: Could it be that you have different aims?

MJ: No, at the end of the day both ways generally look the same.

T: Really?

MJ: Yeah. I’m just saying that the alternative way – the subtractive way – is slower because you have to continually freshen your senses so you see what works. If you watch something too much, it’s too easy to intellectualize it.

T: I see.

MJ: What matters to me is watching my footage the very first time; I’ll either lean forward with interest or not. You *feel* something and you don’t care why; you just feel it’s right. And you have to realize that the audience then will probably also feel this.

T: [laughs] How many hours do you shoot on average?

MJ: I shoot ... well, see, that’s the other thing I meant to say earlier on with editing. I shoot very little footage. And that’s important, because the only way you can edit efficiently is if you don’t have to wade through a bunch of unusable stuff. Some think, “If I shoot seven hundred hours, seven thousand gigabytes, there

will be something good somewhere.” And my response is, you could shoot ten million hours and still not have one single shot. All that footage shows is that you are not committed to your story; you don’t know what you are shooting.

T: Mmmm.

MJ: I’m sounding very preachy and didactic, Tawnya.

T: Well, I think considering the issue of how much film to shoot is similar to how much data to collect for researchers. In our field, there are different views about how long or how extensively one must interview someone in order to learn their story. Some people are really critical of shorter-term relationships but perhaps it is the quality of relationship that is most important?

MJ: It depends on who you are. I mean we are all different people, so I mean ... what’s the guy who made *The Fog of War*? ... Errol Morris? Some people like Errol will spend 5 days interviewing, or Ken Burns will spend 7–8 days with their interviewees until they sort of break them down. I spend 25 min. The kid interviews for the BCC movie took 20 min because I didn’t need or want to break them down. That’s because I already cared about them, and they cared about me. When having a conversation with a person you love, do you spend 7 days breaking them down and wearing them out in order to get some kind of truth? No, you care about them and you show that by listening to them.

T: Right. And that has to do with the relationship that you establish prior.

MJ: Yes. Yeah, it does. And you establish it right away. People would ask me how long it took before the Cuban kids got used to me, and I said, “Oh, I don’t know, about 11 minutes.” I start filming right away. I think that if you stand there with your camera in the shadows waiting for them to get used to you, you are inherently sending a negative signal that you shouldn’t be there. It goes back to human nature again, again, and again. Would you go to a party and stand in the shadows and wait? No, you engage. Introduce yourself. Explain things. Fall in love. I mean I keep resorting to that phrase but I don’t know how else to say it.

5 Reflections on the Boston Children’s Chorus and the Mysteries of Sound

T: Is there anything else that you would like to share about the movie, about the making of the film, or your experience with the Boston Children’s Chorus?

MJ: Well, I think as an organization they are special. Not because they have this two-part agenda which is music training and social ... hmmm ... they have a social mission that is equally important. It’s that the program self-selects for some of the most engaging people I have ever met. And that makes sense to me.

I mean, it's not a coincidence these conductors are people who care so deeply about not just the kids singing, but about what happens to them.

This film was one of the most profound filming experiences I have had, even if the film itself didn't come out as a story. What I mean is, you have to love the process because the process was far more important than the outcome. And then it also triggered for me a central mystery: How can a group of individually crummy voices sound so beautiful together? Really, if you listen to each kid sing, I don't mean crummy in the critical sense, we are all pretty crummy singers, but when they're in choir and they all come together ... tell me how can that turn into one beautiful sound! Don't you think that is a mystery?

T: Yes. I mean there are certainly music educators who would cite a whole list of techniques that they use to make that happen or attempt to make that happen. But, it's something beyond that.

MJ: It happens with every choir. I film them when they are in rehearsal and I'm so close, right on top of them. You can hear their wobbly voice but when you back off it sounds like one glorious sound. The sound waves are recombining and floating together and make a package that works. The sound waves add up to beauty instead of crumminess, now I think that's a miracle!

T: Yes.

MJ: I'm thrilled about filming the kids because it affirms once again that sound is powerful *because* it's inexplicable.

T: In the film you captured that by the way you zoomed in so we could hear the individuals and then the chorus.

MJ: I hoped that came through, because that matters.

T: Yes, it was lovely. That is something a music teacher might be do while walking through the room and working with students. Zooming in and listening to how one student is doing then backing off and listening to another; that's something that an audience would never understand except for through your film. I enjoyed that very much.

For more information on the work of Mary Jane Doherty, please visit her websites:

<https://www.maryjanedoherty.com>

<http://www.bu.edu/com/profile/mary-jane-doherty/>

Let the River Run trailer: <https://vimeo.com/249234596>

Secundaria trailer: <https://vimeo.com/78354687>

Primaria trailer: <https://vimeo.com/152828979>

Gravity trailer: <https://vimeo.com/273734488>