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Hot Docs 2019: Are we living in a golden age of documentary cinema?

BARRY HERTZ

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Filmmakers Brett Story, left, Phillip Pike, Andrew Moir and Phyllis Ellis, who all have films at this year's Hot Docs festival, participate in a roundtable discussion on documentary filmmaking.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

If industry buzz is to be believed, we are living in a golden age of documentary. Just look at the box-office receipts: Last year, five docs (including vertigo-inducing Oscar-

winner *Free Solo*) earned more than US\$12-million at the North American box office, an unprecedented hot streak. And away from the theatre, small-screen docs such as HBO's *Leaving Neverland* and Netflix's *Abducted in Plain Sight* impacted the cultural conversation as much as any superhero adventure. But in Canada, away from these easy headlines, a different true-story story is playing out.

Ahead of the [26th Hot Docs Film Festival](#), which kicks off April 25 in Toronto, *The Globe and Mail* gathered a diverse group of Canadian documentarians with films premiering at this year's fest – Phyllis Ellis (*Toxic Beauty*), Matt Gallagher (*Prey*), Andrew Moir (*Take Me to Prom*), Phillip Pike (*Our Dance of Revolution*), Rama Rau (*The Daughter Tree*) and Brett Story (*The Hottest August*) – to discuss opportunity, money and whether the new golden age is a reality, or as made-up as any blockbuster.

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Take Me to Prom, directed by Andrew Moir.

HOT DOCS

The narrative right now is that docs are, simply put, having a moment. This is thanks to the success of *Free Solo*, *Three Identical Strangers*, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* So: Are we living in a golden age of documentary?

Brett Story: I'd measure the golden age as: Are working artists making a living? Are people making and distributing documentaries able to have a livelihood? Do we see a

diverse array of work being produced? And I think the answer is: no. There are ever only four or five films which have breakout success, and they're great films but not illustrative of the different kind of amazing work that gets created under the mantle of documentary. And the more those films dominate the landscape, the more difficult it becomes for people making work outside a specific set of conventions.

Rama Rau: It's also a critic's term, a pop-culture term, "golden age." I have just been forced to move out of documentary and make a narrative film, because you can't make a living. The funding has absolutely dried up in Canada. We'd love to think that, oh good, Netflix is finally recognizing us as artists. But it's not happening in Canada. There are not enough outlets.

Phyllis Ellis: There's a handful of places for us to go, and only so many slots to fill. You can make a living if you have a film that you're finishing at the same time you have another in development, another that you're shooting. If I told people what I did in a day, they wouldn't believe me.

Matt Gallagher: The films I've gotten off the ground, with my wife as a producer, the two of us working out of our little company from our kitchen table, are small-budget TVO films. And we're lucky to get those commissions every year or two to get us through. You can make a living at it, but when I'm not directing, I'm shooting for other people. But that could change next year.

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The Daughter Tree, directed by Rama Rau.

HOT DOCS

If we don't measure success in box office, what about how many people are watching these movies? Do you have a firm sense of how many people are consuming your work?

Story: There's also a real disconnect between critical acclaim and festival success and how else your project can find an audience. I had a film [2016's *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*] that was nominated for a Canadian Screen Award for best documentary. It didn't get Canadian distribution, it didn't get a Canadian broadcaster and it played in no theatres. It screened all over the world at festivals and audiences rose to its challenge, but there's a kind of institutional risk-aversion in this moment, and Netflix is a big part of that. The more it monopolizes the market, the more it squeezes out all the other distributors and platforms. It's not that audiences don't want to see these films, it's that the means to get them to audiences are shrinking.

Rau: When you say "golden age," you can't just have that umbrella term. Hot Docs is a totally different market than broadcasters, and Netflix only comes in after you've made a film, whereas CBC and other broadcasters commission you. If you don't give me money, how do I make the film?

Gallagher: I'm getting depressed here.

Phillip Pike: I made my first film [2002's *Songs of Freedom*] as a labour of love. It took four or five years, and coming out of that I realized that I was not going to make money as a documentary filmmaker. When I embarked on my new film, I did so with the blinders off, knowing that I had to have other sources of income. The story was important to me, so I pushed through and now I've got about \$50,000 in personal debt I've taken on. But I'll be right back at it again, because for me it's the only thing to do.

Ellis: And I don't think that by having this conversation we're complaining about the fact that we have this great opportunity.

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Our Dance of Revolution, directed by Phillip Pike.

HOT DOCS

Did you all go into filmmaking with your eyes wide open as to what it would mean financially?

Andrew Moir: I didn't know what I was doing. I went to Hot Docs in 2011, and there was so much complaining all around me, and this was when all I had to worry about was my cheap rent. I thought, what was up with all these jaded people?

Story: I came into documentary because I love cinema and non-fiction cinema, but then you go to a film festival and you have a lot of conversations about how stressed out and tired and broke you are. It is very hard, but we have to be honest about how enduring the difficulty is over the years and how that translates to our attitudes about what we do and the choices we make. I teach at a university, and that's how I make a living. It's important to not get bogged down in the industry side of things and being bummed-out, because the work is exciting, but we have to be honest about how it affects us, too.

Gallagher: Do any of you do hired-gun stuff? I do two of those for every one film I do on my own. That's the only way I can survive.

Rau: Documentary in Canada is funded better than in the outside world. Go to other festivals, and filmmakers there are like, "Oh my God, you got Telefilm money?" But it's also all tied to broadcasters, it's wheels within wheels. I had no clue when I got into this. I just knew I wanted to make a film.

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Prey, directed by Matt Gallagher.

HOT DOCS

If not money, what gets you all out of bed in the morning, and behind the camera?

Pike: It's a real privilege to be a filmmaker. My first film, which was about gay life in Jamaica, I just bought a plane ticket and brought a camera and because I called myself a documentary filmmaker, people invited me into their homes and told me the intimate details of their life.

Gallagher: People are so excited to know that you're going to do more than a 6 o'clock news hit.

Story: For me, documentary is a creative form. It uses the language of cinema, and there's so much exciting opportunity there to not just engage with the world but restage the world for an audience. To question how we live and exist, and then use the language of images and sound and aesthetics to position and reframe a set of issues or questions.

Rau: You're not sitting in a cubicle all day; you're talking to people, and questioning things and shaking up the status quo.

Moir: I've worked in fiction, too, and what differentiates documentary and fiction filmmakers is that they're both sensitive kinds of people. But documentary filmmakers are sensitive to the world around them, as opposed to narrative directors, who are sensitive to themselves. Documentary filmmakers pay attention to what's happening. And we're whinier.

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The Hottest August, directed by Brett Story.

HOT DOCS

Do you talk about money enough, as a filmmaking community?

Gallagher: I don't think so, and we need to, because we want to keep the good filmmakers around.

Rau: We're losing people to the States and to narrative and to everything else.

Story: And we're losing diverse voices. Part of the risk that happens when you don't talk about money is that things appear as if it's just a meritocracy. You're like, oh, this person must be so great because they can make all their films, but you don't know that they have independent wealth. It's very discouraging for those who can't fund their film or make a living, who then think, "I must not be very good," and they drop out. That tends to affect filmmakers of colour and women filmmakers the most.

Gallagher: Alan Zweig, who is one of our better filmmakers in this country, I met him on the street a bit ago and he said if he doesn't get another film off the ground, he's going to be driving Uber.

Let's return to the question of diversity for a moment. Are you seeing real change out there?

Story: We have to complicate that question because it's not just who gets to make films, but who gets to make the films that become the symbols of this golden age. There's

getting to make your film, then getting it seen, then making money, then having an actual career. There's a more diverse spectrum of people who are getting to make films, but when you look at who is winning awards, who is selling films to Netflix, you see that diversity diminish.

Moir: It's important to think about what a diverse filmmaker may have to compromise to work for a broadcaster or funder, too. With Telefilm, films have to be in English or French.

How important is booking a Hot Docs premiere?

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Toxic Beauty, directed by Phyllis Ellis.

HOT DOCS

Moir: I came here with a student short, and it changed my life. I met all these people, financiers and distributors, and figured out what I was good at.

Rau: It makes or breaks your film as far as Canadian exposure goes.

Story: And part of the struggle is that it's because it's so important. It becomes difficult to launch it otherwise.

Ellis: Part of it, too, is that I can't wait to see everyone else's films.

Rau: It's our Christmas. We dress up, we come out, we party. And then we go back to our caves.

I want to end this with maybe an act of catharsis: What's the worst note you've ever received on your work?

Gallagher: I was pitching at the Hot Docs Forum for the first time, probably 15 years ago, and there's this huge table of broadcasters who have money internationally. Nick Fraser, who was the big guy at the BBC, said to me, "Your main character is as boring as lead," in front of everybody. I decided then that I was going to make the film no matter what, just to spite him. So, spite has driven a lot of my career.

Ellis: I was sitting with a broadcaster who said, "Could you be smarter?"

Rau: I wanted to make a film about my ancestral home in India, where we believe there are female spirits who guard it. I pitched it as an examination of the supernatural, and the broadcaster said, "Don't you have any white male ghosts?"

Story: I just want to say, oh my God, I feel we're such a complain-y bunch, but I do feel very inspired by other filmmakers. When I think of those who made me want to do this – Allan King, Studio D at the NFB. ... I just feel that a small corrective to our whining is that one of the joys of getting into a film festival like Hot Docs is being able to see what's being made, and expanding my ideas of what's possible.

Rau: Yes: The golden age of documentary is one week per year, during Hot Docs.

These interviews have been condensed and edited.

The 2019 Hot Docs Film Festival runs April 25 through May 5 in Toronto (hotdocs.ca).

MEET THE TRUTH-TELLERS

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Phyllis Ellis.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Phyllis Ellis, *Toxic Beauty*

The veteran filmmaker – and former Olympian who competed for Canada’s field hockey team in the ’84 Games – arrives at Hot Docs this year with *Toxic Beauty*. The film, which will have its world premiere in Toronto, explores the harmful practices of the beauty industry, focusing on a landmark suit brought against Johnson & Johnson.

(April 29, 12:45 p.m., Lightbox; May 2, 5:45 p.m., Scotiabank)

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Matt Gallagher.

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Matt Gallagher, *Prey*

Gallagher, who got his start directing episodes of the CBC teen-themed educational series *Street Cents*, has made docs on everything from the First World War to underground poker clubs. *Prey*, the director's latest production for TVO, explores the dark legacy of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church.

(April 26, 9 p.m., Lightbox; April 27, 1 p.m., Hot Docs Cinema; May 2, 1:30 p.m., Lightbox)

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Andrew Moir.

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Andrew Moir, *Take Me to Prom*

Moir specializes in short docs with “highly personal” points of view. *Uprooted*, his short film about an Ontario tobacco farmer, played *Hot Docs* in 2011 and kick-started his career. The director’s latest short, *Take Me to Prom*, explores queer identity as it relates to the so-called biggest night of a high-school student’s young life.

(May 1, 7 p.m., Lightbox; May 4, 10 a.m., Lightbox)

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Phillip Pike.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Phillip Pike, Our Dance of Revolution

The Jamaican-Canadian filmmaker was a human-rights lawyer in a previous life, before turning to his passion. Pike's work focuses on LGBTQ issues, with his latest feature, *Our Dance of Revolution*, exploring the history of Toronto's black queer community.

(April 29, 6:15 p.m., Lightbox; May 1, 2:45 p.m., Scotiabank; May 3, 12 p.m., Scotiabank)

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Rama Rau.

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Rama Rau, *The Daughter Tree*

Only three years after her film *League of Exotique Dancers* opened the 2016 Hot Docs Film Festival, Rau is back at the festival with *The Daughter Tree*. A look at gender and the patriarchy in India's Punjab region, the film feels at home within Rau's layered and unapologetic filmography.

(April 27, 6:30 p.m., Lightbox; April 30, 10:15 a.m., Lightbox; May 2, 9 p.m., Hart House Theatre)

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Brett Story.

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Brett Story, *The Hottest August*

A filmmaker (*The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*) and author (*Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America*), Story has made a strong impression both within Canada and abroad. A fellow at the 2016 Sundance Institute Art of Nonfiction program, and a 2018 Guggenheim Fellow in film and video, Story arrives at this year's Hot Docs with the Canadian premiere of *The Hottest August*, an experimental look at modern life under the shadow of climate change.

(April 29, 3:15 p.m., Lightbox; May 2, 6 p.m., Scotiabank; May 3, 12:30 p.m., Lightbox)