

Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos

by Alan Rosenthal

EXCERPT: Interview with Lilly Rivlin about her film *Gimme a Kiss*
(*Part Five: Special Cases / Chapter 20: Family Films*)

Personal memoirs are always difficult. After all, if there is honest revelation someone always gets hurt.

—Lilly Rivlin, commenting on *Gimme a Kiss*

Special Cases / FAMILY FILMS

DISCUSSION

I thought it might be helpful to hear the views of a few filmmakers regarding their approach and thoughts on the family film. What follows is a summary of some of our discussions. First I wrote to **Lilly Rivlin** and asked her to review a few of the problems of *Gimme a Kiss*.

GIMME A KISS

Gimme a Kiss looks at the life of Lilly Rivlin's father, an attractive man, full of energy, who swept his future wife off her feet on a Mediterranean cruise. Subsequently, his life was dotted with affairs. Though confessing eternal love for his wife, this was something that the father seems rarely to have demonstrated in practice. As the children say, "There was never any hugging or kissing." While the general life and relations of the parents is analyzed in the early part of the film, the last third is devoted to a hunt by Lilly to find the father's black mistress and a possible half-brother.

While family interviews and stills are used throughout the picture, the

spine is provided by Rivlin's filming of her parents. Both are in their late seventies and lie ill and weak in twin beds in a daughter's home. The father is a double amputee after having been stricken with diabetes. The mother has lost her power of speech. Lilly's talks with her father are then dotted throughout the film, as are scenes of the fiftieth wedding anniversary.

ROSENTHAL: When and how did you start making the film?

RIVLIN: I started filming and recording in 1985 at my parent's fiftieth anniversary. I even had a professional crew come in and shoot it. Did I know that I would make *Gimme a Kiss* in its present form? Of course not. But somewhere, in the back of my mind, I thought that I would use the material in some way, but I didn't know how. However, I have always seen myself as a storyteller of a sort, so somewhere there was the desire to tell a story.

I use the material from the fiftieth wedding throughout the film. My mind-set at the anniversary was how can we go through this charade, what a terrible marriage, and the interviews with my parents and siblings bear this out, i.e., the meaning of marriage, and did you ever think of divorce, etc.

ROSENTHAL: How did you tackle financing?

RIVLIN: I supported my own habit. For years. I just documented. The scenes of my parents in the last stage of their lives, in adjoining beds in my sister's home: some may wonder, how could she do it, or why? At least once a year, when my sister went on vacation, I relieved her from looking after my parents. There was very little else to do, and it is how I am in life. I document things that are intense for me. My parents' marriage has been intense for me. I think I did it because it was so difficult for me to be there, so painful for me to see them in that stage, especially my mother, so that being behind the camera gave me distance.

Finance came slowly. I was rejected by the National Foundation for Jewish culture because the film wasn't Jewish enough. Then a miracle, I got a small grant from HBO which allowed me to put a fifteen-minute preview piece together; then a friend gave a fund-raiser, which really encouraged me, and at the very end, when it was clear that I was well along in the project and would finish in a matter of months, I got a few more grants, more miracles.

ROSENTHAL: Why did you make the film? What did you hope to gain from it, and what did you think the audience would get out of it?

RIVLIN: I'm not sure why I made it. I think I needed to tell the story of my parents marriage, and also show how their marriage affected us, the children. There were so many bizarre aspects to my family life, especially toward the end, when I started seeing my parents as characters in a Beckett play. I mean there is my father, the womanizer, keeping my mother alive [Lilly's father feeds her mother], and she can't express herself in any way but ironically. In the end, she finally got what she always wanted—his total attention.

I know that my friends and many of those who see the film think it was therapeutic, but I think the therapy happened in the documenting, much before I put the story together in the editing room. My friends tell me that the experience of putting it together was painful, but I think it's like women who go through the pain of labor saying afterwards they forgot the pain. I feel the real pain was in the experience of it, of living this story out, but I wanted to do it because I thought it was universal, and that most of us come from dysfunctional families, and the myth of the happy ideal family is only that, a myth. I wanted the audience to be able to identify with this family. It was only when I filmed my sister in 1999, eight years after my parents died, and looked at the material, that I saw how much she suffered. I cried a lot then. I

like what Albert Maysles says about my film: “It’s a story about love, where it is and where it isn’t, and the filmmaker is very skillful in noticing love where it doesn’t appear to be.”

ROSENTHAL: What do you think about the ethics of exposing your family and their problems, as well as their love, in public?

RIVLIN: Yes, that’s difficult. I think one reason why it took so long to finish is that my parents had to die before I could deal with the film. It took eight years for me to be able to go back to the material [the filming of the parents in twin beds]. But then it wasn’t enough, because as I worked on it with Josh Waletzky, he told me I needed more material in addition to what I had shot. That’s when I went out and filmed my sister, brother, aunts, and Rosa, his mistress. And most important, I had to shape it, so even though it is a personal memoir, it is less a traditional documentary than any of my earlier ones. To me it is more like a novel because of its layers and subtexts.

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It’s an old question in documentary making, the relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects, so it is especially difficult when in some way I’m telling my own story and that of my siblings and parents.

Initially, when I first showed some of my material to HBO, Sheila Nevins warned me that it would look like I was exposing my family’s dirty linen, and that this would be frowned upon—that it wouldn’t look good. I said I was willing to risk it. I kept thinking that the story I had to tell had revelations similar to those in *Death of a Salesman* and that surely attempting to make art out of one’s reality was an acceptable form of expression. Look at all the reality TV on the air. I’m in tune with the Zeitgeist. Why is this happening? Because fiction can’t match reality. Reality is more horrific than fiction—for example, the Holocaust, or just read anything about genetic engineering.

ROSENTHAL: Tell me something about the difficulties of finding audience and distribution.

RIVLIN: It's terribly difficult. So far I have had a lot of rejections. *Point of View* turned it down, but all the people who really love it and appreciate it say "don't worry; it will find its audience." So far, it was shown at the Vancouver Underground Film Festival to an audience of mostly under thirties who would not stop asking questions and talking about their own families. Example of one question: "I came here because I read about your film and I'm a philanderer's daughter. Did you find that as a philanderer's daughter, you became a philanderer too?" How's that for direct?

The First Glance Film Festival will show it in March, at the Millennium in the East Village. Makor, the new hip Jewish cultural center on the Upper West Side, will show it, and it will be shown at the Jerusalem Film Festival. I'm generally getting a positive response, but it's depressing to see how difficult it is to find venues, so I can't get juice up to start the next one, and for an independent that's bad.

ROSENTHAL: How did your family react to the making of the film?

RIVLIN: I had no problems with my family as I was making it, except for my Aunt Hilda, and you see her reaction in the film. My family was used to me documenting their lives, first as a photographer/interviewer and then with a camera. Now that I've finished it, my sister doesn't really want to see it. My brother is ambivalent about it. And the aunts and cousins have yet to see it.

ROSENTHAL: Were you aware of doing any self-censorship in your filmmaking?

RIVLIN: As I was getting ready to edit, I remember sitting and saying to myself, "Lilly, if this is going to work, you have to be a vehicle for the film, you have to be whatever the film requires, and you have to be totally honest." I had a fantastic editor, Pola

Rapaport, who receives codirector's credit, and Pola helped me keep this vow to myself. Pola helped me to insert my voice in the film and to keep it from sounding self-serving, which really would have been the kiss of death.

Did I learn anything that I didn't know? After I finished the film and heard some of the reactions, I realized that to some people this was a love story. Neither of my siblings nor I felt that. We were too close. But I can finally understand why a viewer could feel this.

ROSENTHAL: It seems to me, and I may be wrong, that most of the makers of this kind of film are women. If that is true, why do you think that is so?

RIVLIN: I think the confessional or journal mode is more a woman's expression than that of a man, except in the case of the sensitive and/or male writer. Women speak about themselves more easily than men do, and I also think that the personal memoir demands reflection and honesty which for a variety of reasons, habit for one, and dissembling in their professional roles for another, is a way of life for men. By way of contrast, women speak more from their interior.

When I think of it now, this is a woman's film, and I hope it finds a place out there.