

# the accidental documentarist

ANNE MAKEPEACE OF LAKEVILLE, CT

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The film world has evolved, and happily so. Musicals, dramas, and action movies remain a huge draw. Documentaries, originally relegated to the education section, have become mainstream, drawing large audiences eager to explore new terrain. The entertainment value of this genre has grown exponentially and is now firmly entrenched in the cultural canon.

For Lakeville resident Anne Makepeace, the road to documentaries was somewhat circuitous. Although nature documentaries were viewed with her mother at a young age, the idea of a career in the field did not take root until later in life.

## The road to documentaries

After graduating from Stanford, Makepeace began teaching English. One of the assignments for her class was a certain writing exercise – the composition of scripts. Initially, students filmed, handing the camera to their teacher when they wanted to be in a scene. A particularly memorable movie, *The Spy Who Gloved Me*, (yes, the word “gloved” is intentional, the title being coined by eighth graders) was filmed at California’s Great America theme park. Recording on Super 8 film, Makepeace became enamored with the medium. Teaching was put on hold as she returned to Stanford, enrolling in film school.

*Moonchild*, her first professional film, was created as her thesis project. It is a scripted dramatic film that revolves around Chris Carlson, a former member of the Moonie cult (led by Sun Myung Moon). The “thesis” went on to garner several awards including the National Educational Film Festival’s Paramount Award for Best Feature Film. It sold well, in international and domestic markets.

Based on this success, Makepeace strove to continue on the feature film track in Hollywood. When this market proved hard to crack, her then husband suggested switching gears. Today, this highly accomplished documentarist recalls the transition: “After years of total frustration, eventually, I made my first documentary out of desperation.”

In the search for a subject, Makepeace reflected on one close to heart – her family. *Baby, It’s You*, was born from the concurrent journeys of her own couple and those of her relatives (boomers all) as they sought to create families in their forties. This “eccentric and good-hearted” cast of characters formed the basis of the creation that premiered at



Sundance, screened at the 2000 Whitney Biennial, and appeared on PBS in 1998.

## Finding her niche

Her first foray into documentaries revealed an innate passion for the genre. “It showed me reality is so much more complex, astonishing, than anything I could make up,” Makepeace says.

Looking back, it was Satyajit Ray’s Apu trilogy of documentary-like dramas that really opened her eyes to the possibilities. Other influences that continue to resonate are the works of the Maysles Brothers, masters of cinema verité, and her favorite film: *Dersu Uzala* by Kurosawa. More recently, it is the work of filmmakers like Steve James that speak to her, in particular his *Hoop Dreams* and *The Interrupters*.

The phone buzzes, bringing her focus to pressing concerns regarding a current project. News of the next shooting session for *Tribal Justice*, (working title) is eagerly awaited. This project was brought to her attention by Ruth Cowan, a political scientist in Manhattan. Cowan reached out, seeking the name of a Native American filmmaker to explore the subject cinematographically. Names were forwarded and conversations commenced. Cowan circled back to Makepeace, informing her



Above top: Cameraman Barney Broomfield (left) and director Anne Makepeace on the Yurok Reservation. Photo by Lori Nesbitt. Above: Director Anne Makepeace at Telluride Mountain Film Festival. Photo by Beth Wald.

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that she was the best woman for the job.

**What's in a name?**

At this point, the question of the origin of her last name becomes pertinent, or not. In Anne's case, Makepeace does not harbor any Native American roots. It is, instead, a reflection of her "Yankee, Puritan, and Hawthornian family." Makepeace is her maiden name, descended from William Makepeace Thackeray's mother's line.

Wearing a striking indigenous pendant, (acquired in a courthouse hallway during production), Makepeace describes the beginning of frequent flights to California to meet the two dynamic judges who are the linchpins in her upcoming film: Abby Abinanti, Chief Judge of the Yurok tribe in the northern part of the state, and Claudette White, Chief Judge of the Quechan tribe in the south.

Contemporary tribal courts operate in a manner similar to their predecessors wherein aggrieved parties consult a trusted elder. Twenty-first century tribal judges also meet with their fellow members in a comfortable setting, conducting meetings across a table from the accused, not removed on a podium. The aim of tribal justice is to eschew incarceration whenever possible by putting in place restorative measures to help individuals and families. Jurisdiction over tribal members is shared by state and tribal courts.

In the working sample of the film, Abinanti checks on the status of Taos Proctor, a man who spent his boyhood in juvenile hall and was incarcerated at San Quentin at 19 for drug abuse. Abinanti points out that he is currently in both court systems, the tribal court wellness system and the state criminal system. She listens patiently to his description of his progress in rehabilitation, under the direction of the wellness system.

In a discussion of the modus operandus of the film, Makepeace becomes particularly animated. The tribal justice model is currently gaining popularity and acceptance as a preferred method of justice, that which seeks to restore instead of imprison. "These are human stories that resonate with much larger social issues," she says. The film will air



Above top: Director Anne Makepeace with Wangechi Mutu in her Brooklyn studio. Photo by Lexi Abrams-Bourke. Above: Yurok Chief Judge Abby Abinanti with Taos Proctor, an offender she is trying to save from life in prison. Photo by Barney Broomfield. Below left: Judge Claudette White and Makepeace at Quechan Indian Days. Photo by Barney Broomfield.

on PBS, reaching a wide audience. Makepeace also envisions its usage in conferences, academia and libraries as well as a widespread release on digital platform and DVD.

**The next project in the works**

Another work in progress is *A Necessary Madness: The Art of Wangechi Mutu*. Makepeace's participation was sought for this project by Muse, a company she had worked with previously on her documentary *Robert Capa in Love and War*, a film commissioned by PBS for the American Masters series and awarded a National Prime Time Emmy.

Preparing for her initial meeting with Mutu, Makepeace planned to present the name of the person she had identified as being best suited for the role of producer. Instead, she signed on. "I fell in love, she's so soulful, deep, and beautiful." Segments have already been filmed with the internationally acclaimed artist at her Brooklyn studio, the Brooklyn Museum – during the installation of her show – and in her native Nairobi. In Kenya, Mutu

visited relatives and her illustrious mentor, paleontologist Richard Leakey.

**The lost language of the Wampanoag**

In October, Makepeace attended a screening on Long Island of her work, *We Still Live Here*. This story of the revival of the lost language of the Wampanoag of Southeastern Massachusetts was heard by over 50 people from the Shinnecock Indian Nation. The next day she met with tribal members, toured their lands, and became intrigued with their story. Filming in Southampton is under consideration.

In between international and stateside travel, the filmmaker treasures her home in Lakeville, shared with husband Charles R. Church, columnist for the *Lakeville Journal* and human rights lawyer. She expressed the sentiment of being "embraced" by the community: "After 35 years away from New England (in California), moving back here I have found my true home." •

For further information: [www.makepeaceproductions.com](http://www.makepeaceproductions.com).