

# SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL

A film by  
Marilyn Levine & Ross McElwee

96 minutes, color & b/w, 2007



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## **SYNOPSIS:**

In 1986, Ross McElwee (*SHERMAN'S MARCH*) and Marilyn Levine first shot footage on the 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall's erection, when the imposing structure was still very much intact as the world's outstanding symbol of the Communist hardline. They thought they were making a documentary on the community of tourists, soldiers, and West Berliners who lived in the seemingly eternal presence of the graffiti emblazoned eyesore.

But in 1989, as the original film neared completion, the Wall came down, and McElwee and Levine were in Berlin again, this time to capture the radically different atmosphere of the reunified city. Humor, never absent in McElwee's work, informs the perspective of *SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL*: the filmmakers are less objective reporters than participants in an attitude adjusting process which, in their cases, harkens back to myths and fears that made up the Cold War lore of their childhoods in the classrooms of 1950s America.

## **FILMMAKERS' NOTES:**

In February, 1986 my girlfriend Marilyn Levine and I went to Berlin for the first time. I had been invited to screen *Sherman's March* at the Berlin Film Festival and we found ourselves seeing as many films as we could, meeting other filmmakers, and going to some great parties. The nightlife in Berlin was as electric as we'd always heard it was, and we were having a wonderful time. But after a week, we suddenly wanted to see some of the city itself. The festival provided us with a car and driver, and someone suggested we be sure to see the Berlin Wall. The Wall had been erected in 1961, during our childhoods, and was the seminal Cold War monument of the era - a flashpoint between the US and Russia which made the possibility of nuclear Armageddon very real to everyone alive then.

I hadn't thought much about the Wall since we had been in Berlin - I'd been so dazzled and distracted by the film festival - but when we first saw it snaking across the snow-covered cityscape, so startling with its bright spray-painted graffiti, we were quite amazed by it. What must it be like to live next to this thing, as many people obviously did? It had become the elephant in the room that everyone wanted to ignore. And the elephant had been there for almost a quarter century. In fact, the 25th anniversary of its construction was coming up in August. Would anything happen on the anniversary? So many people had died trying to scale the wall -- shot to death by communist East German guards as they attempted to escape to West Berlin. Would there be protests? Or would life just continue as it had for the last twenty-five years.

It seemed that an interesting film might be made by choosing a single neighborhood along the wall and filming there for a month prior to the anniversary. We felt a little

uneasy about tackling a film in a culture where we did not speak the language, but in choosing Checkpoint Charlie as a locus, with its American servicemen and tourists, we felt a little more at home. The checkpoint was an intersection not only of East and West Berlin, but of German and American culture. I scrounged up enough grant money to return to Berlin the following June and Marilyn and I filmed every day for six weeks at the Checkpoint Charlie area of the wall.

We returned to the US after the August anniversary and began editing. Many other events soon crowded into our personal lives - namely, our decision to marry, the death of my father, the birth of our first child, my beginning another film and teaching responsibilities. We had no real deadline to finish the Wall film, and since the Wall obviously wasn't going anywhere, we worked on our film off and on over the next two years. As one of the people we filmed at Checkpoint Charlie said, "I saw the wall go up twenty-five years ago, and I have no doubt that it will still be here twenty-five years from now." This was certainly what most of the world felt about the Berlin Wall and the nuclear stand-off between Russia and America.

But as Soviet Premiere Gorbachev began to relax the strictures of Communism, and as protests began to mount in East Germany, Marilyn and I realized we needed to finish our film because the wall had suddenly become topical again. We picture-locked three days before the wall was suddenly breached by protestors. I called the negative conformer and instructed him not to cut the negative. We got onto a plane with our 10 month old son and my mother-in-law as babysitter and took off for Berlin, where we filmed the elation and the anxiousness that attended the fall of the Wall.

Our friends back in Boston became fond of telling a joke about us:

Question: Who are the only three people in the world who are sad that the wall has come down?

Answer: East German communist party boss Erich Honecker, Ross, and Marilyn.

But actually, we were thrilled to have the chance to film this momentous event and to incorporate it as an unexpected "Part 2" to the film we thought we had been making.

- Ross McElwee

## **FILMMAKERS' BIOGRAPHY**

MARILYN LEVINE AND ROSS MCELWEE are the co-directors of **Something To Do With the Wall**. Levine came to filmmaking through her work as a journalist at the Charlotte News. Ross McElwee studied filmmaking at MIT, making several short films before completing his landmark release, SHERMAN'S MARCH, which won the Grand Prize at Sundance in 1986. Levine and McElwee's collaboration on SOMETHING TO

DO WITH THE WALL began with filming the 25th anniversary of the construction of the Wall in 1986, and continued when the filmmakers returned to Berlin to cover the unexpected fall of the wall in 1989. Levine later completed a short autobiographical documentary, LIFE, DEATH, AND BASEBALL (1993). McElwee went on to make a series of well-regarded autobiographical documentaries, the most recent of which, IN PARAGUAY, made its premiere at the Venice Film Festival in 2008.

## **SELECTED FILMS BY ROSS MCELWEE:**

### **BRIGHT LEAVES**

105 minutes, Color, 2004

McElwee family legend has it that the Hollywood melodrama "Bright Leaf" starring Gary Cooper as a 19th century tobacco grower, is based on filmmaker Ross McElwee's great-grandfather, who created the Bull Durham brand. Using this legacy as a jumping off point, McElwee reaches back to his roots in this wry, witty rumination on American History, the tobacco business, and the myth of cinema.

"Reflective, wise, often hilarious movie...leaves you feeling invigorated by the boundless curiosity, humor and high spirits of its creator."-Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

### **SHERMAN'S MARCH**

155 minutes, color, 1986

Chosen by the Library of Congress as a "historically significant American motion picture," *Sherman's March*, one of the first high grossing documentaries ever, is "an autobiographic quest for true romance: filmmaker Ross McElwee, camera in hand and eros on his mind after an old girlfriend deserts him, trains his lens with phallic resolve on every accessible women he meets along the original route of General Sherman's Civil War March." (Pat Graham, *Chicago Reader's Circle*)

"A wonderfully goofy movie!"- Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*

### **ROSS MCELWEE DVD BOX**

578 minutes (total), color

This collection includes six films by Ross McElwee: BACKYARD, CHARLEEN, BRIGHT LEAVES, SHERMAN'S MARCH, SIX O'CLOCK NEWS, TIME INDEFINITE, as well as interviews, followups, outtakes and more.

"An American humorist in a tradition from Mark Twain through Garrison Keillor."

-New York Times

"One of those rare filmmakers for whom the word visionary is appropriate."

- The Boston Globe

## REVIEWS:

"Reporting of a most pertinent and genially eccentric order. It is not only about history but, more important, it's also about those uncomfortable moments when we realize just how little of it we control or understand." - *Vincent Canby, New York Times*

"\*\*\*\*\*[5 Stars - Must Have] spin[s] an exquisite web that holds one enchanted." - *Andrew A. Aros, Video Rating Guide for Libraries*

" A charming group portrait that takes on an almost fictional narrative flair ... extends far beyond the limits of ordinary documentary." - *Boston Globe*

"A fascinating piece of history... A 'must see' for all history buffs." - *Nick S. Thorndike, Library Journal*

"A meditation on the absurd vagaries of history." - *Museum of Modern Art*

"Marvelous!" - *Raleigh News and Observer*

### *Longer reviews:*

"Another blithe chapter in Mr. McElwee's continuing and extremely uncertain relationship with history, [SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL] is reporting of a most pertinent and genially eccentric order. It is not only about history but, more important, it's also about those uncomfortable moments when we realize just how little of it we control or understand." - *Vincent Canby, New York Times*

"\*\*\*\*\*[5 Stars - Must Have] SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL obviously belongs in both public and school libraries. Though this is a very personal and individualized program, it does reach out and draw the viewer, spinning an exquisite web that holds one enchanted." - *Andrew A. Aros, Video Rating Guide for Libraries*

" A charming group portrait that takes on an almost fictional narrative flair ....An example of the political made personal, SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL extends far beyond the limits of ordinary documentary." - *Boston Globe*

"A fascinating piece of history, this video would supplement a college or university collection strong in history... A 'must see' for all history buffs." - *Nick S. Thorndike, Library Journal*

"Returning in 1989, the filmmakers interviewed many of the same people they had met in 1986, recording their amazed joy and consternation at the Wall's sudden, unexpected collapse. Recommended." - *Landers Film & Video Reviews*

"A meditation on the absurd vagaries of history: Growing up in 1950s America, McElwee and Marilyn Levine were brought up on a steady diet of Cold War paranoia. So

were the West Germans they began filming in 1986. But as the Berlin Wall came down three years later and hard-line Communism collapsed with it, the filmmakers and their subjects were suddenly faced with a new world order.” -*Museum of Modern Art*

Marvelous! What sets this movie apart is the way the film makers play their cast - a great ensemble that they literally found in the streets. The people give the film a strong heartbeat, a sense of humor and life and anger. - *Raleigh News and Observer*