

HERMAN'S HOUSE

A film by

Angad Singh Bhalla

81 minutes, Canada/USA, 5.1 Surround or 2.0 Stereo,
Blu-Ray, HDCAM, ProRes, DVD available for exhibition



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Full Synopsis

The injustice of solitary confinement and the transformative power of art are explored in *Herman's House*, a feature documentary that follows the unlikely friendship between a New York-born artist and one of America's most famous inmates as they collaborate on an acclaimed art project.

In 1972, New Orleans native Herman Joshua Wallace (b. 1941) was serving a 25-year sentence for bank robbery when he was accused of murdering an Angola Prison guard and thrown into solitary confinement. Many believed him wrongfully convicted. Appeals were made but Herman remained in jail and—to increasingly widespread outrage—in solitary.

Years passed with one day much like the next. Then in 2001 Herman received a perspective-shifting letter from a Jackie Sumell, a young art student, who posed the provocative question:

“What kind of house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?”

Thus began an inspired creative dialogue, unfolding over hundreds of letters and phone calls and yielding a multi-faceted collaborative project that includes the exhibition “The House That Herman Built.” The revelatory art installation—featuring a full-scale wooden model of Herman's cell and detailed plans of his dream home—has brought thousands of gallery visitors around the world face-to-face with the harsh realities of the American prison system.

But as *Herman's House* reveals, the exhibition is just the first step. Their journey takes a more unpredictable turn when Herman asks Jackie to make his dream a reality. As her own finances dwindle, Jackie begins to doubt if she can meet the challenge of finding land and building a real house. Meanwhile, Herman waits to find out if the Louisiana courts will hear his latest appeal. Along the way we meet self-confessed “stick-up kid” Michael Musser, who credits Herman for helping him turn his life around while in solitary; Herman's sister Vickie, a loyal and tireless supporter despite her own emotional burden; and former long-term solitary inmate and fellow Black Panther activist Robert King who, along with Herman and Albert Woodfox, was one of the so-called Angola 3 that became a cause celebre in the 2000s.

“I'm not a lawyer and I'm not rich and I'm not powerful, but I'm an artist,” Jackie says. “And I knew the only way I could get (Herman) out of prison was to get him to dream.”

There are 2.2 million people in jail in the U.S. More than 80,000 of those are in solitary confinement. Herman Wallace has been there longer than anyone. With compassion and meaningful artistry, *Herman's House* takes us inside the lives and imaginations of two unforgettable characters--forging a friendship and building a dream in the struggle to end the “cruel and unusual punishment” of long-term solitary confinement.

About the art exhibit “The House That Herman Built”*

On Thursday February 8th 2001, Robert King Wilkerson walked out of Angola Prison after having served 29 years in solitary confinement for a murder he did not commit. After decades of fierce legal battles the courts finally sent him home. Shortly after his release, he came through San Francisco on a speaking tour and addressed a small audience. This is where Jackie Sumell was introduced to the Angola 3.

King was memorably soft-spoken, and offered no sign of injury, or anger, or resentment. He simply told his story and the stories of Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace, the other two men who, through their solidarity, struggle and history comprise the Angola 3. Angola, or the Louisiana State Penitentiary, is an 18,000-acre former slave-breeding plantation so named for the place in Africa where the original plantation owners believed the most profitable slaves came from. Inside the slave-plantation-turned prison, the Angola 3 risked their lives to end prisoner rape, facilitate race relations and improve abhorrent conditions. Woodfox, and Wallace remain in solitary confinement to date.

After speaking for just under an hour about these experiences, recently released Robert King offered to answer questions. The entire room was silent, made wordless by what had just been conveyed. Not knowing what to say but feeling that something needed to be said, Jackie blurted out, "What can I do?" His answer was equally simple. "Write my comrades."

Thus began her correspondence with two incredible men.

Why Herman and not Albert?

Solitary confinement at Angola, or closed cell restriction (CCR) consists of a minimum 23 hours a day in a 6-foot-by-9-foot cell (2 meter x 3 meter), 7 days a week. When Jackie began writing Herman, he was in Camp J, what Angola calls the 'Dungeon'. It is the most punitive area of the prison, much more severe than CCR. It is the place where prisoners go to suffer. When the current warden, Burl Cain, of Angola describes Camp J he states, "even a Death Row inmate will find the spartan quarters he once 'enjoyed' on Death Row plush compared to Camp J." Herman was kept in the Dungeon for twenty three consecutive months. Each time he was due to return to solitary prison officials found another absurd reason to keep him in. Imagine, relief would mean returning to solitary confinement.

After about eight months of organizing on behalf of Herman and Albert, as a graduate student Stanford University, Miss Sumell began to see Hermans condition deteriorate rapidly as a result of Camp J, as an attempt to offer some relief she asked,

"What kind of a house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?"

What was intended as only a reprieve to the harsh conditions of Angola Prison's Camp J gave birth to the THE HOUSE THAT HERMAN BUILT an extraordinary and ongoing journey. Since 2003, through extensive letter writing, phone calls, and nearly a hundred of visits to the prison, Jackie has been giving voice and visibility to Herman's imagination.

The exhibition continues to serve as a place for people to access Herman Wallace's story and a means to cultivate awareness. Already shown over 20 times in 7 different countries it is scheduled for further exhibitions. Proudly, THTHB has inspired hundreds of people to get involved with the campaign to free Herman Wallace, although many more are as needed as they are welcome. The community around THTHB is illustrated by an incredible network of architects, designers, builders, artists, friends, activists and others. Expressly, Scott M B Gustafson, principal of MAISON ORION, is developing the construction documents and specifications to translate Herman's drawings into working blueprints. Dan Hatch Studios have done several 3D renderings, ADPSR (Architects, Designers, and Planners for Social Responsibility) are sustainability consultants, several schools have made the project part of their curriculum, and notably, independent filmmaker Angad Singh Bhalla is producing a documentary "Hermans House" that has already garnished several awards and accolades.

After nearly 4 decades of solitary confinement in Louisiana, Herman is constructing a home. It is through a community of support and interest that we are building Herman's House. Through this website you are encouraged to get involved. We are ,after all, all alone together. Herman, Albert, and Robert, like so many other prisoners, suffer greatly at the hands of a corrupt system that institutionalizes racism. Their resolution is an inspiring testament to the human spirit. They are incredible men to whom and from whom we all have much to learn. Befriending Herman Wallace has been one of the most significant experiences of Miss Sumell's life. She no longer write prisoner #76759: she writes a friend, a comrade, a confidant. She writes a person. That change is revolutionary.

*Description from <http://www.hermanshouse.org/history.php>

Film Subject Bios

Herman Wallace*

Herman Wallace was born in the 12th Ward, New Orleans LA on October 13th 1941. He was first imprisoned in Angola Penitentiary in 1960, but released two years later. In 1971 he established the Angola Chapter of the Black Panther Party with Ronald Ailsworth, Albert Woodfox, and Gerald Bryant after receiving permission from the Panther central office in Oakland. The Panthers risked their lives to end prisoner rape, facilitate race relations and improve inhumane conditions in the slave-plantation-turned-prison.

In 1974 Wallace received a life sentence without possibility of parole for the murder of a prison guard named Brent Miller. The sentence was based on false testimony. The state withheld evidence from the jury in 1974 which may have exonerated Wallace (and Woodfox) from the crime. That evidence was the fact that the state's only eye witness, Hezekiah Brown was paid for his testimony by Angola officials. Wallace's conviction is now up for review in the 19th Circuit Court of Appeals. Several notable officials and organizations have demanded Wallace's release. These include Amnesty International, Dame Anita Roddick, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Former US Attorney Ramsey Clark, and freed political prisoner Geronimo ji-Jaga Pratt. More recently, Congressman John Conyers, the chairman of the Judicial Committee, visited Herman and Albert in prison and insisted that they be released.

Herman Wallace's writings have been notably published in several publications and journals. As an activist he has focused his efforts on educating other prisoners, and has become a reputable jail house lawyer. Recently, Linda Carmichael has written a play about his life in solitary confinement. A song documenting his struggle produced by Dave Stewart (Eurythmics) was released in in 2006. Herman Wallace has been kept in solitary confinement at Angola since 1972. Albert Woodfox, Robert King and Herman Wallace are collectively known as the Angola 3.

*Bio for Herman Wallace from <http://www.hermanshouse.org/about.php>

Jackie Sumell

Born 1973 in Brooklyn, Jackie Sumell is a multidisciplinary artist inspired most by the lives of everyday people. Her work speaks to both traditional artist communities and those historically marginalized from the political process. Her work was a center piece for the 2008 New Orleans Biennial, Prospect 1, the 2010 St Etienne Design Biennial, and Nancy Solomon's Westobou Festival 2012.

Sumell's work has been exhibited extensively throughout the US and Europe, including in The Luggage Store Gallery, Artist's Space NY, deYoung Museum, Royal College of Art and Dublin County Museum. She has been the recipient of several residencies and awards including Akademie Schloss Solitude, InContext-3 (Ireland), and the [CCA] Udjadowski Castle residency in

Warsaw Poland. Sumell published two artist books, *A=AGHT* (2008) and *The House That Herman Built* (2006/2008) which documents the extraordinary collaboration with long-term solitary confinement prisoner and Black Panther, Herman Wallace. Their collaboration was featured by the New York Times, Art Forum, Newsweek, Citizen K, Domus, TDR and most recently as the cover of Afterimage Journal.

She received a B.S. from the College of Charleston, and M.F.A. from Stanford University. Ms Sumell currently resides in New Orleans Louisiana where she continues to work on Herman's House, and several other advocacy based projects. She is 2013 Soros Fellow.

Filmmaker Bios

Angad Singh Bhalla - Writer/Director/DOP

Angad uses film to highlight voices we rarely hear. After spending months with Indian villagers who had been resisting an alumina project backed by the Canadian company Alcan, he produced his first independent project *U.A.I.L. Go Back*. It was used widely as an organizing tool and helped pressure Alcan to end its involvement in the project. Passionate about using media as a tool for social change Angad has since produced videos for groups including the Service Employees International Union, Human Rights Watch and The Center for Constitutional Rights. His award-winning short on the lives of Indian street artists, *Writings on the Wall*, was broadcast on PBS, Canada's Bravo!, and Al Jazeera English. While completing his debut feature documentary *Herman's House*, he worked as a community organizer for immigrant rights and as an editor on several broadcast documentaries. He is currently in production with the National Film Board of Canada on the related interactive documentary *Inside Herman's House*.

Lisa Valencia-Svensson – Producer

Lisa Valencia-Svensson is a Toronto-based documentary film producer. She has been working at Storyline Entertainment since 2007. She has a number of documentary projects in progress, including *Herman's House*, which has received funding from the Ford Foundation and Sundance Institute, the interactive documentary *Inside Herman's House* now in production with the National Film Board of Canada, and the documentary feature *Shadow Girl*. She has a background in finance, community media, and research work. She produces films which explore political issues and socially relevant themes, and encourage audiences to view their world through a constructively critical lens.

Ed Barreveld - Executive Producer

Ed Barreveld has been making films since 1986 when he joined the Ontario Studio of Oscar-winning National Film Board of Canada. He has been an independent producer since 1996, focusing on point of view, auteur-driven documentaries. Since 2004, Barreveld has been the sole principal of Storyline Entertainment, the company he co-founded in 2000 for the company's inaugural release of the award winning documentary *Aftermath: The Remnants of War*. Barreveld's films have been broadcast globally, have shown at major international festivals such as Hot Docs, IDFA, and Toronto International Film Festival and have garnered many awards, including Gemini Awards for *Shipbreakers* (2005) and *Tiger Spirit* (2009). In 2010 Barreveld produced *Resilience: Stories of Single Black Mothers* (Executive Producer), *The Real M*A*S*H* and *The Market* (IDFA 2010). Barreveld is based in Toronto, Canada.

Loring McAlpin - Executive Producer

Loring is an artist and media producer based in New York City. A founding member of the AIDS Activist art collective Gran Fury, has created public art projects and individual gallery shows, exhibiting in the United States and Europe. Work with Gran Fury included producing radio and television spots for The American Center in Paris, and Creative Time in New York, as well as with major museums in America and in Europe. Transitioning from the art world into documentary and film, he was the associate producer on Ira Sachs' first feature *The Delta*. Oral history work has included work with the ACT UP Oral History Project (where many years ago he formed ACT UP NYC's Prison Issues subcommittee) as well as radio documentaries with Kate Bland for Just Radio/BBC Radio 2.

Ricardo Acosta - Editor

Ricardo Acosta immigrated to Canada from his native Cuba in 1993. Before coming to Toronto, he studied and worked at the world renowned Cuban Film Institute in Havana. He has edited both documentary and dramatic films which have been shown around the world. His outstanding work has contributed to the making of several award-winning and award-nominated films including: *Shooting Indians*, *A Journey With Jeffrey Thomas* directed by Ali Kazimi, *Unbound* directed by Claudia Morgado, *Spirits of Havana* produced by the NFB, *The Take* directed by Naomi Klein, *Avi Lewis*, *Runaway Groom* directed by Ali Kazimi and *Tiger Spirit* directed by Min Sook Lee. He has twice been chosen to participate as a fellow in Sundance Institute Labs. He just completed editing the film *Herman's House*.

Iris Ng - DOP

Iris Ng is a graduate of Film and Video Production at York University with a background in still photography, visual art and music. She began her cinematography career by shooting her first independent feature film while studying at York and has since worked on narrative, experimental, and documentary films which have taken her to China, Egypt, Europe, and across North America. Her artistic background has been an asset to her collaborations with established artists as well as award-winning film directors including Min Sook Lee, Giselle Portenier, and Sarah Polley. Her recent credits with Storyline include *My Toxic Baby*, *Resilience: Stories of Single Black Mothers*, and *The Market*.

Ken Myhr - Composer

Ken's musical life began listening to his father play jazz stride piano and sing barbershop. After a few lessons he taught himself to play electric guitar and spent his early life making a lot of noise whenever and wherever possible. This led to performing on concert stages worldwide from The Royal Albert Hall to the David Letterman Show. More recently he has created scores

for over 90 films including *Love, Hate & Propoganda* (CBC), *Geologic Journey* (The Nature of Things), *My Toxic Baby* (Storyline), *Diamond Road* (Kensington), earning a Golden Sheaf Award and multiple Gemini Nominations in the process. For more info go to <http://www.kenmyhr.com>.

Nicolas Brault - Animation

Born in Montréal in 1975, Nicolas Brault holds a degree in graphic design from the Université du Québec à Montréal. After making two student films using a graphics tablet (*L'œil*, 1999, and *Vermine*, 2000), he won the 2000 edition of the National Film Board of Canada's Cinéaste recherché(e) competition, which enabled him to direct the film *Antagonia*. *Antagonia* was screened at the Clermont-Ferrand film festival and at CINAMINA in Portugal, where it picked up an award. Brault then turned his attention to Inuit culture with his short *Îlot* (2003), as well to African oral traditions, with *Hungu* (2008). In his most recent film, *Le cirque* (2010), a Folimage-ONF co-production, Brault touches on memories surrounding the death of his mother. After collaborating on several projects combining animation and live action, he is currently developing a film that unites bodily motion and pixilation.

Tom Hillman - Stop Motion Animation

Tom Hillman serves as Director of Ghost Fx at Renegade Motion Picture Corporation. Mr. Hillman is a self-taught multifaceted artist. Using his innovative cutting edge design principles, he has given unique style to over 150 productions in the last ten years that he has animated, produced, or directed going to air on television and film. Before Ghost FX, Hillman opened his first company in 1994 and since has won an array of awards from Gold and Silver International BDA's (Broadcast Design Awards), Graphic Design Exchange, and the Best Canadian Station ID spot in 2000. Hillman has directed visual effects for a Disney television special (*Tough to be a Bug*), two international short films for Bravo, two years of the Canadian Juno Awards, and two feature films (*The Covenant* and *Battle Queen 2020*).

Daniel Pellerin - Sound Design

Daniel Pellerin is one of Canada's finest recording and re-recording mixer/engineers, sound designers and music supervisors. He has worked with a who's who of Canadian filmmakers such as Atom Egoyan, Clement Virgo, James Cameron, Shelley Saywell, Min Sook Lee, Michael Kot, Ron Mann and Bruce MacDonald. He has been nominated for 10 Genie Awards of which he has won three (Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, Istvan Szabo's *Sunshine* and Clement Virgo's *Love Come Down*). He has been nominated for 16 Gemini Awards, for which he has won two (*Musicians in Exile* and *Under the Piano*). He has worked extensively with Storyline Entertainment and he was the supervising mixer for Min Sook Lee's *Tiger Spirit* and *My Toxic Baby*.

Amit Bhalla - Production Coordinator

Amit Bhalla joined Storyline in 2011 as an Assistant Editor on *Herman's House*. He graduated in 2009 from Yale University where he studied film, theatre and sculpture. Before *Herman's House*, he co-wrote and produced a play, *The Privilege of Death*, for the Doctorow Center for the Arts.

Shasha Nakhai - Production Coordinator

Shasha Nakhai joined Storyline in January 2011. Having graduated from Ryerson University's Broadcast Journalism program, she has completed stints with Summerhill Entertainment, CBC Radio, CKLN fm and Africa Independent Television. Shasha came to Canada as an international student from Nigeria in 2003 and now resides in Toronto. Her first documentary film, *Baby Not Mine* (2009) won awards at the Human Rights DocFest and Montreal World Film Festival. Her short documentaries including *The Sugar Bowl* (2011), *Joe* (2012) and *Unsinkable* (2012) have screened at the Hot Docs Film Festival, Atlanta Film Festival and the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival.

Social Media Pages

Facebook

www.facebook.com/hermanshousethefilm

www.facebook.com/storylineent (production company)

Twitter

[@HermansFilm](https://twitter.com/HermansFilm)

[@StorylineEnt](https://twitter.com/StorylineEnt) (production company)

[@AngadSBhalla](https://twitter.com/AngadSBhalla) (director)

[@lisastoryline](https://twitter.com/lisastoryline) (producer)

Festival Screenings

True/False Film Fest

Full Frame Doc Film Fest

Hot Docs

Mid Atlantic Black Film Fest

The Best of Hot Docs

Open Roof FF

Prescott Film Festival

San Francisco International SA Film Festival

Harlem IFF

Camden Int Film Festival

Antenna Doc Festival

United Nations Association Film Festival

RIDM Rencontres Internationales Documentaire de Montreal

TrindieFest

New Orleans Film Festival

Hamptons Int'l Film Fest

Hot Springs Doc Film Fest

Cinema on the Bayou

San Francisco Doc Film Fest

Frequency Film Festival

Big Sky Doc Film Fest

Credits

Written & Directed by

Producer

Executive Producer

Editor

Director of Photography

Composer

Animation

Editorial Consultant

Additional Editing

3D/2D VFX Artist

VFX Editor

VFX Executive Producer

Architectural Rendering

Stop Motion Animation

Associate Producer

Assistant to the Director

Production Coordinator

Production Assistant

Transcription

Archival Research

Dialogue, Effects and Re-recording Mixer

Sound Design Edit

Dialogue Edit

Effects Edit

Re-recording Mixer

Mixing and Editing Facility

Musicians

String Quartet : **Bridget Hunt, Carol Lynn Fujino, Douglas Perry, Winona Zelenka**

Trumpet : **Bryden Baird**

Cello : **Anne Bourne**

Harmonica, Charango, Guitars, Piano : **Ken Myhr**

Online Facility

Online Editor / Colourist

Post Production Coordinator

Still Photographer

Angad Singh Bhalla

Lisa Valencia-Svensson, Angad Singh Bhalla

Ed Barreveld, Loring McAlpin

Ricardo Acosta

Iris Ng, Angad Singh Bhalla

Ken Myhr

Nicolas Brault

Joe Bini

Angad Singh Bhalla

James Andrews

Pete McAuley

Tony de Sousa

Dan Hatch

Tom Hillman, GhostFX, Casper

Sean Kang

Ricardo Acosta

Amit Bhalla

Shasha Nakhai

Feyrouz AbdulRahman, Luke Allen, Mangla

Bansal, Amanda Feder, Jairus Martin,

Michael Musser, Nicolas Krebill, Patrick

Sutton, Marlo Thomas

Amit Bhalla, Sarah Grundy, Rich

Williamson

Erin Chisholm

Daniel Pellerin

James Mark Stewart

Geoff Raffan

Rob Hutchins, Geoff Raffin

Matthew Chan, Christopher Guglick

Theatre D Digital, The Royal

Fearless Post

Andrew Mandziuk, Laura Aqui

Shasha Nakhai

Mizue Aizeki

Text Consultant
Music Consultant
Production Accountant
Production Bookkeeper
Legal

Production Insurance

Jennie Punter
Ronen Landa
Jimmy Ye
Celia Phillips
Ian Cooper, Jeanette Lee, Stohn Hay
Cafazzo Dembroski Richmond LLC
Steve Beatty, Mainway Hunter Creighton
Insurance

Additional Music
"Over The Rainbow"
written by E.Y. "Yip" Harburg and Harold Arlen
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<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/hermans-house-art-installation-turned-construction-project/article4607550/?service=print>

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Herman's House: Art installation turned construction project

ADAM NAYMAN

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The titular abode of *Herman's House* is both an actual structure and a freestanding metaphor. In both cases, there's ample room for exploration. Angad Bhalla's gently affecting documentary follows the efforts of New York-based artist Jackie Sumell to design a model of a dream house to the specifications of Herman Wallace, a former member of the Black Panthers who has been living in solitary confinement in Louisiana State Penitentiary for nearly 40 years. (For those keeping track at home, his is the longest stretch of any prisoner in the history of the American penal system.) What begins as an art installation, however, eventually becomes a full-scale construction project, as Sumell heads down South to try and actually build the thing from the ground up as a community youth space.

One of the points made by the expert talking heads in *Herman's House* is that Wallace's idealized living area is rife with structural implausibilities: not quite as weird as the Overlook Hotel, perhaps, but a little bit shaky. This is a forgivable problem since the architect has been living in a 54-square-foot cell for four decades. It's to Bhalla's credit that he turns this fact into a kind of organizing principle for the film, juxtaposing the impossible blueprint of Wallace's dream house with the setbacks suffered by Sumell, which are numerous.

The first half of *Herman's House* gives us the back story of Wallace's incarceration (convicted of murder on flimsy evidence) and of the beginning of his correspondence with Sumell, who attended a speech by paroled ex-Panther Robert King and couldn't stop thinking about the torturous aspects of solitary confinement. Her indignation is shared by the filmmaker: Bhalla means to critique a criminal justice system that could sentence a man to a lifetime of isolation, without much in the way of proof. Yet the film's treatment of the case is itself brisk and even cursory – understandable given that it's telling a different story, but also a bit of a missed opportunity. The dynamic between the noble victim and the socially engaged artist working on his behalf is familiar. Sumell's gallery show, with the artist triumphant inside a scale reproduction of Wallace's jail cell, could have easily served as a rousing climax.

Except that *Herman's House* takes its cue from Sumell and keeps going beyond the approbation. The artist shows that she's all in by continuing her association with Wallace beyond the completion of her acclaimed installation. She decamps to New Orleans to attempt to raise money and secure land for a Southern-style manor, which proves expensive and impractical. It also makes this habitually solitary woman feel even more like an outsider. "You're a white girl from New York," chides one of Wallace's former Black Panther colleagues, neatly encapsulating the fish-out-of-water nature of Sumell's quest.

Sumell is a sympathetic figure, but also thorny and idiosyncratic (her adolescent passion was full-contact football), and so resists the role of a standard-issue crusader. Wallace, meanwhile, doesn't appear at all, except in photographs and as a disembodied voice on recorded phone conversations. And yet he still comes across as something more vivid than a symbol of the penal population's invisibility; his optimism and magnanimity under the circumstances seem like hard-earned virtues rather than a coping mechanism. *Herman's House* is conventionally produced, but it does right by its two uncommon subjects.

<http://artthreat.net/2012/05/the-house-that-herman-built/>

ART THREAT

More houses, less prisons

A review of the compelling documentary *Herman's House*

by Ezra Winton on May 4, 2012

It's hard to make a house without materials, and even harder if you are in solitary confinement in a US prison and have been there for forty years. What is required in that situation is imagination and perseverance, mixed with a healthy dose of love and anger — all of which the wonderful new documentary *Herman's House* deliver.

Directed by Angad Singh Bhalla and produced by the keepin-it-real folks at Storyline, *Herman's House* was deservedly very well-received at Hot Docs this year. The film follows New York artist Jackie Sumell who forges a relationship with former Black Panther Herman Wallace, who is locked up at Louisiana's Angola prison since accused and convicted (with little evidence) of killing a security guard in 1972. Sumell becomes close with Wallace and provoked by her passion for social justice and art, eventually asks and Wallace what kind of house he would live in, setting on a journey to implement his dreams.

Anyone expecting a biography of Wallace, or even much in the way of images of the unjustly kept man will be disappointed, for that is not this film. We only learn small tidbits about his case and history and we really never see him.

That's not to say he isn't a driving force in the film — his voice, recorded from telephone conversations, is a steady and sure keel that not only keeps Sumell focused on her impossible mission to build Herman's house in New Orleans (which is intended to be a community centre for youth), but keeps the whole film centred and focused as well.

Conceptually inventive, poetic and original, *Herman's House* achieves a great feat in constructing a compelling narrative about a man we never meet and goals that aren't quite reached. But looking closer at the film, as one is want to do with this slow-paced and extremely thoughtful doc, one realizes that the film isn't just about Wallace, it's about the relationship between him and Sumell and its about the profound sense of social justice and creativity that give meaning to and shape that relationship.

Sumell's dedication to and at times seemingly obsessive approach to Wallace's imaginative wishes is difficult to fully understand, but Bhalla's film gently pulls us along, revealing just the

right moments so that this complicated union unfolds much the way a house is first conceived in the mind, plans are drawn, the foundation poured, and the walls and roof built.

There are many houses being built here, and much like a Matryoshka doll, they fit inside each other, beginning with the house in Wallace's imagination, to the houses of Sumell, to the house that is the film, and to the houses that all of us imagine for ourselves and for those suffering injustice in the world. In the end, none can contain this unique and moving story, and we are left with our own imaginations, completely activated by this magnificent film.

<http://www.soundonsight.org/hot-docs-2012-%E2%80%98herman%E2%80%99s-house%E2%80%99-is-documentary-filmmaking-on-strong-form/>



Hot Docs 2012: 'Herman's House' a deeply moving account of penitentiary life

Posted on April 24, 2012 By Justin Li

Herman's House

Directed by Angad Singh Bhalla

Canada, 2012

Today is April 24th 2012. Last week marked the 40th anniversary of Herman Wallace's initiation to a punitive epoch in solitary confinement. This commemoration is made even more lamentable when we learn that he's been there ever since.

In a documentary shot over five years, Toronto filmmaker, Angad Singh Bhalla, tells the story of Jackie Sumell, an American artist looking to give Wallace a small semblance of life and humanity. At times an intricate political statement and at others a torrid character study, *Herman's House* is a contemplative look into the searing brutality of the American justice system, as well as the seemingly altruistic compassion of strangers.

In 1972, a 25-year old Wallace was already repaying his 25-year debt to society for a bank robbery, when he was accused, and convicted, of murdering Brent Miller, a 23-year old Angola Prison guard. Many believed him to be innocent, but their ire was further exasperated when he was constricted to a 6-by-9-foot jail cell.

In 2001, while attending a lecture about solitary confinement, Sumell learned about Wallace's languishing situation. Outraged, she contacted him. Since sending her first letter, Sumell and Wallace have struck up an unlikely relationship.

After getting him to contemplate his dream house, Sumell created an art show called *The House that Herman Built*, which uses Wallace and his concepts as afflatus. But when Wallace asks her to turn his abstractions into a physical reality, Sumell goes to New Orleans to try and make his dreams come true.

Early on, the most disconcerting aspect of the film is Sumell's unexplained devotion and loyalty to a complete stranger – a convict no less. But what Bhalla masterfully does is let us into her psyche by letting Sumell open up about her history and past experiences. Through these revelations, she is revealed to be a fragile and emotionally vitiated person.

In a somewhat similar fashion, Sumell has lived a life of seclusion and isolation. For instance, we learn that she was the first female to play full contact football in Long Island. Being different, eccentric and anomalous, it is implied that Sumell has lived a socially imposed solitary life, which, no doubt, allowed her to connect with Wallace on an unspoken level.

Furthermore, her relationship with Wallace could be seen as compensation for her turbulent, and malevolent, relationship with her father. As such, we can see Wallace as a father figure to Sumell – as a paternal proxy. And when we consider how she is the catalyst for his escapism, their mutually significant relationship takes on a lyrical and poetic beauty.

Although this relationship is by far the most intriguing and captivating feature of the documentary, *Herman's House* also includes subtly caustic criticisms of both the policies of the Bush Administration and the American judicial system (although the latter is not as muted).

Since the film was shot over a period of five years, it is within reason to presume that *Herman's House* was recorded during the height of the Bush presidency. As such, it's also within reason to draw parallels between Wallace's judicial maltreatment and indefinite detention with some of Bush's domestic and foreign policies (namely Guantanamo Bay).

There are even mentions of torture, as well as a heated debate between Sumell and an elder gentleman about the validity and practicality of cruel and unusual punishment. When we are hearing phone conversations between Wallace and Sumell (we never see his face), there is an audible disclaimer about the possibility of their conversation being recorded. Put into context, the comparisons are unavoidable and essential, if somewhat untimely.

The only genuine impediment to the film's often-powerful narrative is the occasional, but off-putting, breaking of the fourth wall. Namely, there are instances where we actually see the crew in frame. While one inclusion could be forgivable, this happens on more than one occasion, reminding us that this is indeed a movie and reducing the film's overall realism.

But nevertheless, *Herman's House* is documentary filmmaking on strong form, and will likely remind viewers of Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line*. Although the film never questions Wallace's innocence or presumed guilt, it succeeds in telling a deeply moving account of penitentiary life. In making a film about unattainable desires, Bhalla has made a picture with power beyond his wildest dreams.

- Justin Li