

Conversation With Joe Saltzman

By Norman Corwin on October 16, 2008 2:54 PM

Four decades ago, USC Annenberg School for Communication professor Joe Saltzman produced a daring documentary, *Black on Black*, after the South Los Angeles riots. At 5 p.m. Monday, Oct. 27, on the 40th anniversary of its premiere, the film will be screened in Annenberg Auditorium as part of a Visions and Voices event. Saltzman was interviewed about the film by Norman Corwin, the legendary radio director and screenwriter who is writer in residence at the USC Annenberg School. (Today's *USC Chronicle* did not give the exact date of Oct. 27.)



Joe Saltzman will give the audience a sense of what it was like to produce such a program in the late 1960 s.

Photo/Philip Channing

NC: *Black on Black* won many major awards, including the Edward R. Murrow Award for "distinguished television reporting and best documentary," an Emmy and the first NAACP Image Award. How did you happen to produce such a groundbreaking documentary in a time when there were very few programs featuring African Americans on TV and very few working in TV?

JS: It wasn't easy to do such a program at that time. I had wanted to do a documentary told without a narrator depicting how it feels to be black and live in South Central Los Angeles. I wanted to do this program for years prior to the race riots that were taking place throughout the United States, but no one was interested in doing it.

But thanks to my executive producer Dan Gingold, who fought to get the program on the air, we were finally given permission to do the documentary in 1967. Only Dan understood what I wanted to do: My conceit was to treat the South Central Los Angeles area as a foreign country, exploring the culture, the music, the hairstyles, the language, the daily life of what it was like to live in that area day in and day out.

The idea was to tell the story with the words of the people who lived there, to form a narrative out of their own words and feelings, to tell their story without censorship or compromise.

NC: *What was the reaction at the time?*

JS: Even though the program was an enormous success and defined my career for the next 10 years, I wasn't prepared for the hatred the show engendered. The program, which begins in black (another innovation of the time), almost broke the CBS switchboard with hundreds of hate calls from people who weren't watching the program but had seen it advertised in *TV Guide*. My life was threatened several times and the LAPD revoked my press credentials. Copies of the film donated to the Los Angeles Public Library were mutilated within days.

I didn't realize how much racism there was in Southern California until I did this documentary. The CBS news camera crew assigned to the program had run for their lives during the Watts riots when a mob set fire to the camera truck. They didn't want anything to do with this project. It was emotionally very difficult for me to be in the middle of such hatred - from the camera crew against blacks, and from the blacks against whites.

NC: *Would you tell us something about the scheduled celebration of Black on Black?*

JS: I'm very excited that USC Annenberg plans to hold an anniversary celebration for the program. It will be the first time *Black on Black* will be screened in its entirety in about 35 years. USC Annenberg Avid editor

Lee Warner and I spent a month reconstructing the program for this event. It will be interesting to see how an audience in 2008 responds to a program that was so controversial 40 years ago.

The program seems to get longer as the years go by since it is an old-fashioned documentary in which the word is as important as the picture. There are no fast cuts or short sound bites and you really have to listen to the documentary to absorb its full impact.

I will introduce the documentary and hope to give the audience a sense of what it was like to produce such a program in the late 1960s. My problem is there are so many stories to tell about the production that if I'm not careful, I'll go on too long.

NC: Your family suffered a devastating loss in the death of your son not long after he graduated with honors from Yale University. I understand the Saltzmans created a charity based on a book written by your son that is helping ill and special-needs children. How is that going?

*JS: It's been one of the most amazing experiences of our lives. David's book, *The Jester Has Lost His Jingle*, is the basis of our charity, The Jester & Pharley Phund. More than 57,000 books and 57,000 Jester & Pharley dolls have been donated to ill and special-needs children.*

My wife Barbara and I will never forget the phone call from Yale in 1988 telling us that David, a senior majoring in English and art, had developed Hodgkin's disease. Despite a bone marrow transplant, David died 11 days before his 23rd birthday.

Barbara, who was daily Calendar editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, had promised David, whose senior thesis was a children's book, that she would see that the book was published just as he had envisioned it and that copies would be given to children with cancer to bolster their spirits. Working with our son, Michael, they achieved that goal. The book became an overnight publishing sensation on best-sellers lists throughout the country.

And it keeps on going - a special 10th anniversary edition of *The Jester* was released two years ago, and there are more than 300,000 copies in circulation. We also have a Web site - www.thejester.org - that chronicles The Phund's community efforts.

NC: I know your most recent project has created a new academic field for journalism, the image of the journalist in popular culture. Tell me about it.

JS: The mission of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project of the Norman Lear Center at USC Annenberg, is to investigate and analyze, through research and publication, the conflicting images of journalists in film, television, radio, fiction, commercials, cartoons, comic books, music, art, video games - demonstrating their impact on the public's perception of news gatherers. I founded it in 2000 and today the IJPC Web site (ijpc.org) and the IJPC Database are considered the definitive worldwide sources for this subject and are used on a daily basis by scholars, students and professionals who want to do more research in this area.

We now have more than 175 IJPC associates representing 110 academic institutions around the world, and the new 2008 IJPC Database has more than 67,000 entries. We just inaugurated the peer-review IJPC Journal and hope to have our first issue out by the end of the year.

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