

THE AXE IN THE ATTIC

a film by
Ed Pincus and
Lucia Small

PRESS PACKAGE

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, two filmmakers, drawn together by outrage, take a sixty-day road trip from New England to New Orleans. Along the way they meet evacuees and witness the loss, dignity, perseverance, and humor of people who have become exiles in their own country. The breakdown of trust between a government and its citizens, the influence of race, class, and gender – as well as the ethics of documentary filmmaking itself – form the backdrop for this universal story of the search for home.

LONG SYNOPSIS

What does it mean to be exiled in your own country? Drawn together by outrage, documentary filmmakers Ed Pincus and Lucia Small embark on a sixty-day road trip from New England to Louisiana, and ultimately into the Hurricane Katrina devastation zone to meet evacuees who have lost their homes. They make the uneasy choice of integrating themselves into the story, “because when you’re two white northerners heading South, remaining behind the camera just doesn’t feel like an option.”

When the film opens, it is six months since Katrina hit New Orleans and the levees breached causing the largest internal migration in American history. We first see the eerie beauty and horror of the shattered landscape, draped in heavy fog and emptied of its residents.

The story of an American Diaspora unfolds – the displaced struggling with loss of home, family, and culture. Emotions range from deep pain to surprising humor, as filmmakers and subjects tackle questions of race, class, and our government’s failure to protect its own.

The Axe in the Attic documents the natural and human landscape of Katrina and how evacuees adjust to new environs – some achingly familiar and others wholly alien. Having lost everything, they seek safety and comfort however they can. Amid the grieving and isolation, family, church, cell phones, and consumer goods become life support.

The filmmakers encounter a range of evacuees grappling with the daily grind of their altered lives – from a close-knit African American family that comes from the Lower Ninth in New Orleans to start over in the wintry hills of suburban Pittsburgh, to a single, white working mother raising two teenagers living in a condo on the outskirts of Cincinnati, to Baker, Louisiana, where the residents of



LONG SYNOPSIS (CONTINUED)

FEMA's largest trailer park ("Renaissance Village," with almost 600 trailers) live as if in a refugee camp.

As the filmmakers approach the hurricane zone, the mood darkens. A surreal atmosphere of calm prevails as days are spent managing endless government and insurance paperwork. Disillusionment runs rampant. Health problems abound. Spouses argue about the future. Grown men weep. Most are still in shock and reeling from the monumental task of starting over. Hope emerges as evacuees cope in myriad ways – by shifting from harrowing tales to humor, or by recreating the foods and smells of their lost homes. Above all they seek meaning in what has happened to them.

Their search for meaning in the world resonates with the filmmakers, whose life experiences bring two different, frequently competing viewpoints to the story. Their personal perspectives shape their filmmaking choices at every turn, becoming an undercurrent of *The Axe in the Attic*. As they encounter difficult choices and awkward situations with some subjects, they question their approach and the ethics of documentary filmmaking.

The consequences of a breakdown of trust between a government and its citizens, and the capacity of human beings to survive and endure with dignity, form the backdrop for this universal story of the search for home.



DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS

We were discussing various film ideas when Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Mesmerized, horrified, and disillusioned by the events unfolding in New Orleans, we decided this was the film we wanted to make.

Katrina brought about the largest internal migration in U.S. history since that brought on by the Dust Bowl. This would be a story that would not only affect generations to come, but one that spoke directly to our country's complicated history.

The issues of Katrina addressed many of our main concerns – such as how race, class, and gender affect everyday interactions. We wanted to tell the story with social issues emerging through people's lives rather than relying on experts or celebrities to tell it. We were also both committed to making narrative social documentaries that explore the underlying assumptions of documentary film.

We discussed how to make a film about the immense topic of Katrina – and how to give the life of each of our subjects his or her proper due, while capturing the scope of the disaster. The focus of the film would be on the story of people uprooted and displaced – the Diaspora of Hurricane Katrina. It would ask what it means to be exiled in one's own country, with a government that is conspicuously absent.

Our aim with *The Axe in the Attic* was to create an intimate film with the people we would meet, along with an immersion in the American landscape in which the evacuees find themselves – as though the viewer was there. It was important for us to reproduce the raw feelings and weight that such a disaster has on people's daily lives.

We felt that integrating the filmmakers into this story would offer a structure that would allow greater breadth and depth. Separated by social background, gender, and age, we hoped to integrate two points of view into our film, believing that who tells the story is integral to understanding the story. In matters of race and class this is especially important. Although Katrina damaged rich and poor alike, divergent outcomes were the inevitable legacy of the longstanding neglect of the poor.



DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS (CONTINUED)

Turning the camera on ourselves would risk making some viewers uncomfortable, but the idea was to break the protective wall of the camera, to put the viewer in our shoes, and have them ask along with us some of the tougher questions about the ethics of the situation as well as those of documentary filmmaking itself.

Even though we wanted to raise questions of responsibility, both of government and of ordinary citizens, we did not want *The Axe in the Attic* to be a message film in any overt sense. We felt the country had voted against "big government" by electing George W. Bush. Consequently, the government was not there when needed. We wanted the viewers to understand on a visceral level what happens when a trust is broken between a government and its people. Many stories woven together joined by layers of sound, music and powerful imagery, we hoped would create this experience in film.

The title of *The Axe in the Attic* comes from an oft-repeated story about the evacuee's experiences from the floods of Hurricane Betsy (1965). In order to keep from drowning in your home, you have to keep an axe in your attic to break through the roof. This notion serves as a metaphor for the many poor people who are left to fend for themselves. As one evacuee shakes her head: "Same old levee." Another exclaims: "We are repeating history." We, in fact, believe that Katrina and its aftermath is a modern-day horror story.

– Ed Pincus and Lucia Small



FILMMAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES

ED PINCUS (Co-Producer, Co-Director, DP) began filmmaking in 1964, developing a direct cinema approach to social and political problems and events. He has producer, director and DP credits on eight of his films and has been a cinematographer on over twelve additional films.

His films include: *Black Natchez* (1967), a one-hour documentary that follows the aftermath of a car bombing in a Southern town during the Civil Rights movement; *Panola* (1965, 1969), a portrait of a wino, alleged police informant, and follower of Malcolm X in Mississippi in 1965; *One Step Away* (1967), an intimate hour-long portrait of a hippie commune in California during the Summer of Love commissioned by public broadcasting; and the seminal *Diaries: 1971-1976* (1981), about the filmmaker's marriage, family and friends, during an era when the Women's Movement wrought havoc and redefined personal relations.

Ed Pincus' filmmaking has been on the technical cutting edge of documentary – for example the early use of color in natural light situations and the development of single-person

LUCIA SMALL (Co-Producer, Co-Director, Editor) has been an independent filmmaker for over 15 years. In 2002, Small premiered *My Father, The Genius*, her feature documentary directorial debut, which garnered several top film festival awards, including Grand Jury Prizes for the Best Documentary and Best Editing at the Slamdance Film Festival. *My Father, The Genius* was broadcast internationally and in 2003 was featured as part of the Sundance Channel's newly launched DOCday series. It is currently distributed by New Yorker Films.

Small has a list of credits as producer of several nationally televised programs and award-winning documentaries. Producing credits include: Beth Harrington's *The Blinking Madonna and Other Miracles* (1996, ITVS); Laurel Chiten's *The Jew in the Lotus* (1998, ITVS); *The Mississippi: River of Song* (1999), a 4-part PBS series; *American Wake* (2003), a fiction film distributed by Horizon Entertainment and Netflix; and the historical documentary *Damrell's Fire* (2005), broadcast nationally by American Public Television.

She has also worked as a freelancer for Scoutvision, Discovery Channel, USA Cable,



FILMMAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES (CONTINUED)

PINCUS CONTINUED

filming techniques. He started the Film Section at MIT where he taught for ten years and influenced a generation of documentary filmmakers.

Recipient of numerous National Endowment for the Arts awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship, author of "Guide to Filmmaking" and co-author of "Filmmaker's Handbook," he has also had stints as visiting filmmaker at Minneapolis College of Art and Design and Harvard University. For the past twenty years, Pincus has been running a farm in Vermont. Recently, he decided to return to filmmaking.

SMALL CONTINUED

C-Span, Media One, John Hancock, and on numerous fiction films.

Small is developing several projects under her production company Small Angst Films, including *Genius II* and *War Stories*, which has received a pre-production grant from the LEF Foundation.



REVIEWS & COMMENTS

One of the most challenging and unsettling American films of the year.

- Livia Bloom, Cinema Scope Magazine

The film is about rediscovering our common humanity—pushing through the flat screen of TV footage to connect with the Katrina victims as individuals.

- Ty Burr, The Boston Globe

Depicted with a touching, funny honesty and genuine humility.

- Peter Keough, Boston Phoenix

"The Axe in the Attic" is inspiring filmmaking. Ed Pincus and Lucia Small exhibit deep humanity and personal courage in making this film, which deftly balances depictions of victims of Hurricane Katrina with a presentation of the filmmakers' struggles to tell these victims' stories.

- Ross McElwee, Filmmaker
("Bright Leaves" • "Sherman's March")

Pincus and Small remind us how precious each image captured of the world can—and should be.

- Richard Pena, Film Society Lincoln Center
Professor Film Studies, Columbia University

Any American who is concerned with America should see this film. Anyone fascinated by truly fine filmmaking should see this film. It's a unique, thrilling and dramatic reflection of one of our more terrifying and disturbing political events.

- Andre Gregory, Actor and Director
("My Dinner with Andre" • "Vanya on 42nd Street")

"The Axe in the Attic" is something everyone should see at least once.

- Lance Hill, Tulane University
Director of The Katrina Research Project on Equity

The film captures with grace and dignity and respect the souls of the people who called New Orleans home and the terrible betrayal they endured and endure still.

- Kimberlyn Leary, Harvard Medical School
Ph.D. Psychology in Psychiatry



CREDITS

Produced, Directed and Written by
LUCIA SMALL & ED PINCUS

Executive Producer
BRUCE TWICKLER

Principal Cinematography
ED PINCUS

Editor, Sound, and additional camera
LUCIA SMALL

Original Score
TODD HORTON

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MELANIE LA ROSA
EMMA PIPER-BURKET

Home Movies
LINDA DUMAS

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LINDA MORGENSTERN

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Assistant Editors/Producers
KEITH WASSERMAN
KERESEY PROCTOR

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ALEX SHUM

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MORGAN FAUST

The production and post-production phases of *The Axe in the Attic* were supported by grants from The Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program, The LEF Foundation, Docema LLC, and private individuals. The producers wish to thank our supporters for their dedication, commitment, generosity, and on-going belief in this project.



SPECIAL THANKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

LAUREL TURNER
LOLITA BROWN
KIZZY HATCHER
PASTOR ARTHUR BROWN
MARVIN HATCHER

Cincinnati, Ohio

VICTORIA ELFER
COLTON LOOMIS
MARY NORTHART
TORI ELFER

Murray, Kentucky

CHERRY JACKSON
COLLEEN ANDERSON
TARA JACKSON

Joe Wheeler State Park, Northern Alabama

DONNA THOMPSON
JULIUS THOMPSON
DARRELL REED
LARRY D. MILLER
OLIVIA REED
RAMONA "MONA" REANY
SUSAN CROSS
RAY CROSS
JOE CROSS

New Orleans, Louisiana

MAN ON STREET
DAVID AVERBUCK
JIMMY BROWN
LISA BROWN

Chalmette, St. Bernard Parish

DAVE MOUSE
LUKE MARENGO
DAVID LOOMIS

Gentilly, New Orleans

JOHN FOGARTY
JAIME COOPER
TRUDY COOPER
NICOLE COOPER

Baker, Louisiana

JOSEPH GRIFFIN
JUDAH BECKER
REVEREND CHARLES JACKSON
LINETT DIXON

Upper Ninth Ward, New Orleans

SPUD WALLACE
NONNIE WALLACE

Hopedale, Louisiana

HENRY MORGAN
JUDY MORGAN
BERNARD JOHNSON
MARIE REEDY

Lower Ninth, New Orleans

NOAH MORRIS
BRANDON DARBY
MALIK RAHIM
LISA FITHIAN
MAN WITH GAS MASK
TRONE HOLMES
RUTH CREECY
MILTON CREECY
CARLTON BROWN

Austin, Texas

LINDA "TINY" DUMAS
JACQUELINE JAMES
LINDA "RED" GOFF
BRUCE ACHELLES
RUTH YOUNG
KEYIONDA GOFF
TAISJANEA GOFF



ADDITIONAL CREDITS

Major Support Provided by
DOCEMA, LLC
TILLMAN GERNGROSS
BARRY HERSHEY
THE SUNDANCE INSTITUTE
THE LEF FOUNDATION

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SCOTT BRIGHTWELL
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SUSAN NORGET FILM
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CARMEN BORGIA

Sound Design and Audio Mix
KEVIN WILSON

Online Editor
JOHN REHBERGER

Legal Services Provided by
DONALDSON & HART
MICHAEL DONALDSON & LISA CALLIF

Stock Footage Courtesy of
THOUGHT EQUITY MOTION
CNN
NBC NEWS ARCHIVE
GLOBAL IMAGEWORKS, LLC

Excerpt from Black Natchez
Courtesy of
ED PINCUS & DAVID NEUMAN

Music Produced and Recorded by
TODD HORTON
Soulsearch Music
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Featured Musicians
TIM GIVENS - BASS, CELLO
KEISHA HUTCHINS - VOCALS
MIKE KAPLAN - PIANO
STEVE SMITHIE - GUITARS

Additional Musicians
BRUCE BRACKMAN - CLARINET
CHARLIE FARDELLA - TRUMPET

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child
Traditional
Arranged by TODD HORTON
Performed by KEISHA HUTCHINS

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TECHNICAL

The Axe in the Attic was shot primarily with a shoulder-mounted JVC in HDV at 30p (to minimize "the video-look"). Most of the tracking was shot at 24p SD for a "film-look" with a Panasonic DVX-100A camera.

Two hundred hours of tape were recorded during a sixty-day road trip. The crew consisted of the two co-directors – Ed Pincus, mostly on camera and Lucia Small, mostly doing sound. Sound was recorded with a boom mic with a wireless connection to the camera.

Editing was done on Final Cut Pro 5.2 and took place at Ed's farm in Roxbury, Vermont. Editing took a year and a half with frequent breaks for fundraising. Lucia Small was primary editor. The film was mastered on HD CAM and mixed in Dolby Stereo.

On-line, sound design and sound mix were done at DuArt Film and Video in NYC.

Total running time is 110 minutes