

San Francisco Film Society
Oral History Project

Interview with Brian Gordon
Conducted by Russell Merritt
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RUSSELL MERRITT: I am talking with Brian Gordon in Nashville, Tennessee. What I'd like to do, Brian, is start you off by telling me how you joined the Film Festival, what background you had, and how the circumstances of your getting hired to be coordinator of the Golden Gate Awards came about.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, my background was managing theaters for Landmark, which used to be called Parallax, and it goes back to '78, when I graduated from college. I ended up managing a theater in Cincinnati when Parallax tried to open up a couple of theaters there. The theater didn't go over, but they offered me a theater in Denver. I was kind of excited about going out there, number one, because I had just gone to college in Cincinnati and wanted to be on my own, certainly, and make up for lost time in terms of growing up. And when I got out there, I had known that there was a Denver International Film Festival, so I was excited about not only managing this art theater in Denver, but also volunteering for the film festival there. I always had a thing about film festivals, ever since, as a college student, I'd gone to the Athens, Ohio Film Festival, which was in the spring. I went there in '77 and '78, just took off a few days from college.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Now in '77, '78, you were going to which university at that time?

BRIAN GORDON: University of Cincinnati.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Is this Athens Film Festival at Ohio University, the one that is associated with **Wide Angle** and Peter Lehman?

BRIAN GORDON: That's right.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So he was your introduction. You'd say that was where you got the bug?

BRIAN GORDON: That was, without question, where I got the bug. That was at a time, you know, back in the late '70s, when there weren't a whole lot of festivals in the U.S. And it was a pretty important festival for winning prizes for shorts and narratives. I remember the first year I was there, Marcel Ophuls was there with **The Memory of Justice**. And the next year in 1978, Wim Wenders was there.

The first year I was there, they showed **Every Man for Himself and God Against All**, which was my introduction to Werner Herzog. And it was just marvelous. I had the best time in the three or four days I was there. I saw films nonstop. I went back the next year, and then graduated from college and ended up moving to Denver about a year after I graduated.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that was with a job offer?

BRIAN GORDON: With a job offer, yes. So I volunteered for the Denver International Film Festival for the three or four years I was there. And Ron Henderson was there—he's still there—who started the festival. I remember the first thing I did as a volunteer was pass out the program guide on this college campus, and I ended up selling advance tickets at a Peaches record store, (LAUGHS) if anyone remembers Peaches. I volunteered there, not every single year, but for two or three years, and ended up writing press releases and helping out on the publicity end of things. Then I moved to the Bay Area, still managing theaters.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It was, again, Landmark?

BRIAN GORDON: No. I actually left Landmark when I was in the Bay Area. I was with Landmark in Denver, and then ended up working for Premiere Cinemas when I first moved out there, for about a year and a half. That was Ben Myron and Don Taylor, if you remember Ben Myron.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I don't, so you might want to talk about him. Was Gary Meyer with Landmark at the point that you were working there?

BRIAN GORDON: He still was, yes. I managed the Northside Theater in Berkeley.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So it's mainly through managing theaters that the trail goes from Cincinnati to Denver and to Berkeley.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, I was managing the Northside for about a year and a half. I wasn't really happy there, and ended up getting a job as the first manager of the Opera Plaza Cinemas. That was in October

or November of '84, and I think it opened up in November of '84. I ended up volunteering with Karen Larsen for the '85 Film Festival. I hung out there a lot in the daytime, helped writing the press releases and worked with her. So I got to know Peter Scarlet. Laura Thielen wasn't there that year, but there were Peter and Steve Horowitz. Patricia Marshall was doing special events, and there was Shelley Alexander, who was the development director, and I never really got to know her. There were other people there as well. And in 1986, I was with Renaissance. SFIFF was using Opera Plaza for press screenings, so I got to know a lot of the press. That's how I met Judy Stone, all sorts of people: Michael Sragow, Barbara Schulgasser and all the other critics.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So you definitely are making your presence felt at the Film Festival.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: How does it happen that, if I understand it correctly, you are going to replace Stephen Horowitz with the Golden Gate Awards? Why that specific situation, or that particular position? Was that something that Peter engineered, or how did that work?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, the way it happened was that the last year that Steve did it was '86, and I was still managing theaters at the time. And another big step in getting my name out there and getting known was that, in '86, part of the San Francisco International Film Festival took place at Opera Plaza, if you can believe that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I didn't remember that.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, you didn't know that? Well, they used the two big theaters there, the 165-seater and the 130-seater or something like that. That was actually an amazing year, because they did all the press screenings there too. I remember this skinny little African American kid hanging out there at press screenings, and nobody knew who he was. Of course, it was Spike Lee. Anyway, they showed **She's Gotta Have It** at the Palace of Fine Arts, which, as you probably know, is one of the most famous—if not *the* most famous—Film Festival story ever, with the power going out.

Oh, you don't know about that? I wasn't there, but that's recounted in John Pearson's book. They worked like heck to get a full house there at the Palace for **She's Gotta Have It**, for the world premiere, and 20 minutes into it, I'm sure this is recanted elsewhere, the power went out. The whole block was out, and they came pretty close to just canning the whole night. And Spike Lee got up there, keeping the crowd alive or just engaged, and then the power came back on just as they were about to evacuate the theater. That's the short version. I'm the wrong person to speak with about that, because that would be Peter or Laura.

So the Film Festival was there that year, and that's how I got to meet Laura, and then Linda Cohen, who was the executive director at the time. And I got to know Peter a little bit better. Peter I got to know from volunteering the year before with Karen. And the other great thing about that year was they had that big Mike Leigh retrospective. So he was hanging out there all the time, and they had all the Mike Leigh screenings shown on double-system 16mm in one of the theaters there. And that just went over like crazy. I was still managing the next year, in '87. I was really sick of managing theaters. And so around July or August of '87, I ended up getting a part-time job at Mill Valley. I was working there part-time and then full-time before the Mill Valley Festival started. It was a really great way to get started in the film festival world, because I was working with Mark Fishkin and Mary Pottier, who was programming at the time. I was in charge of getting program materials, like stills, and I did print traffic, and I also was one of the managers at the Sequoia. I don't know how I did all that, but I came pretty close to a couple meltdowns that year. But I got through that. And then at the same time, in '87, I served on a Golden Gate Awards jury. And just backtracking, Steve's last year was '86. And I think in '87, Laura was the one who took over Golden Gate that year.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That sounds right, yeah.

BRIAN GORDON: So Laura took over Golden Gate, and there was no Golden Gate Awards coordinator that year. Laura got to know me from managing Opera Plaza, and then I was approached to be on the Golden Gate Awards jury for the '87 Festival, so I ended up spending a weekend looking at films in the Sociology category with David Brown, who was the jury chair that year. I thought that was kind of a cool thing, although it was really funny, because it sort of threw me at first when they wouldn't look at all of one film. But I got to understand that quickly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But that process, then, is still pretty new to you?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh yes. That was the first time I was ever on a jury.

RUSSELL MERRITT: How about the films and the kind of films that were being considered; would they have been a new direction for you?

BRIAN GORDON: Yes. When I started getting into film, I enjoyed documentaries. But just discovering all the films there—I still remember some of the titles. There was a film called **A Singing Stream**, about a gospel quartet. And I remember the film that won, **Moments of Play**, which was this beautiful documentary by Jørgen Leth, the Danish documentarian. His most famous film was the one he did a couple years ago, **The Five Obstructions** that he did with Lars von Trier. That guy's a master. He's a poet. And I remember a few others. I don't remember the titles, but one about an Inuit that was pretty good, and a few others I remember watching. It's funny how I remember those films. I haven't talked about those films in, well, since then. (LAUGHS) So that got me interested, and then when I was in Mill Valley, they decided to have a Golden Gate Awards Coordinator position reopen. I interviewed with Laura and Linda Cohen, and I got the job. So the first year I did it was for the '88 Festival, and I started in November 1987, I believe. That year it was just a seasonal job, and it ended after the Festival ended.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So it was mainly Linda and Laura that were the scouts and the interviewers. I was thinking of a connection between Peter and Mill Valley, but that seems extraneous.

BRIAN GORDON: No. That had nothing to do with it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So now you are with the San Francisco Film Festival, and you're given this new responsibility. It sounds as though they were willing to go in a new direction. What was it that you found? Was there anything there that you wanted to change right off the bat, or would you need to take a year or two to get your bearings?

BRIAN GORDON: It took a few years, actually, because I was kind of happy with the way it was. I think there were certain things about it; it was administrative, and that kind of satisfied me at the time, that I could still run something. And the first year wasn't curatorial at all, in fact. No programming. I basically followed what Laura did the year before. I didn't really know a lot, I didn't know that many film people in town. The jury pool, for example, was based on people that had done it the year before and people's suggestions. I knew a few people, but just a smidgeon, relatively speaking.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It's been more than once described that the Golden Gate Awards is a festival within a festival and that this is, of course, a non-competition Festival, and yet there's this competition within that non-competition Festival. Could you talk a little about how that developed, and whether there's anything about that that eventually you'd want to alter or adjust? And why isn't it a competitive film festival? Why did it seem to be a good idea to have a competition that would exclude certain kinds of films and include others?

BRIAN GORDON: That's an interesting question. Oddly enough, I think the original Golden Gate Awards included feature films back in the '50s.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's my understanding.

BRIAN GORDON: And I think that the Golden Gate Awards I inherited had different motivations. A lot of people saw it as a good revenue generator, from the entry fees, but when Steve was doing it, I think he may have gotten some ideas from other festivals, like Chicago. I don't know if Chicago was his model or not, but Chicago still has this thing called Intercom. They don't have it during the festival anymore, but they have all these different prizes for local and network news documentaries and the arts. There was a local division and a network division for PSAs, commercials and stuff like that. I think what Steve Horowitz was running was similar to that. It was everything except features. You had short narratives and all these different types of documentaries. We would get entries from NBC and the CBC in Canada, the BBC Channel 4 and all over the world.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Were the categories inherited as well?

BRIAN GORDON: The categories were inherited, but we sort of changed them every year, which was really good—Laura and I, and to a lesser degree, Peter. He wasn't that involved the first few years I was there in the categories, but Laura and I would go over them, and it was basically Laura's suggestions. I was basically doing admin work the first couple of years. And it was based on what was submitted and the quality of things that were submitted.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Was there ever a changed mix between what we'll call institutions, that is, the networks, the studios and independents, or did that stay pretty consistent?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, you know, we had the whole Film and Video division, and we also had the TV division, so there really wasn't much of an intermix.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And would they be represented in equal numbers, would you say?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, no, film and video was much bigger, especially with all the short narrative entries.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So although you would get institutions, and boy, do I remember that from my years, though there were networks that would contribute, the lion's share would come from independents.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, but the thing with TV, the entry fees were higher. (LAUGHS)

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yeah, I'm getting the pattern here. So you're finding your sea legs in those first couple of years. And I'm just going now by my own experience, and tell me if this was characteristic: in terms of the sheer volume that was coming in, I'm counting up 45 hours for one panel, about 36, 40 films.

BRIAN GORDON: That sounds about right.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What would be the average number of panels? Probably about ten, twelve panels?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, we had more than that, plenty more than that. I would imagine there would be about 20, maybe. It's hard for me to remember.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yup. You're closer than I was. There were 29 categories.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes. There were 29 categories, and toward the last few years there, sometimes a few juries would handle more than one category.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So this is huge. That put you in the tens of thousands of films.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, throughout the years, sure.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Were these entries that you sat back and watched coming in, or would you on some occasions actually pursue? Can you tell us a little about how that process worked?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, the first couple of years I was there, I wasn't there year round, so I was just basically an administrator. I basically sat back and watched them come in. The first couple of years, the entry forms had already been designed and sent out, and so by the time I got on board—I know this was the case the first year, and I can't remember if it was the second year, for the '89 Festival—there were a few already in by the time I started. By the third year, for the 1990 festival, I started a little bit earlier. I'd done Mill Valley again for their '88 festival, and I can't remember when I started the '89 Festival, maybe around the same time. But for the 1990 Festival, I started sometime in August, so I started right then and there. I think that year I must have worked on the entry form, or just the categories. So with that starting earlier, I was actually helping Laura try to get some feature films; I was looking at feature films earlier. But then I also discovered this world of film festivals. I remember Bob Hawk telling me about Oberhausen, which is a great shorts festival in Germany. That got me excited. That got me thinking, "Well, hmm, maybe we should start looking at their mailing list." That was the first year I started doing more outreach in terms of looking at other film festival catalogues and sending people the

entry form. And then I started finding out who won competitions at other festivals and getting them to enter the Golden Gate Awards. This was mainly short narratives. I think what happened that year was, the number of entries started going up. I did a lot of work. The Black Maria Film Festival, for some reason, ended up contacting us, and we would trade mailing lists. And so I started doing that—I had a lot of time, and we had just gotten Macs in the office, and I discovered Filemaker, which changed my life. I just love Filemaker. I was the Filemaker geek there at the office for a while. I just loved entering data. (LAUGHS) So I entered data from other film festivals.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So basically it's through mail and festival visits and email that you are getting your presence known, and making sure that everybody knows that you're around.

BRIAN GORDON: Exactly. And I'm sure at that same time, Peter and Laura were telling me to call in films for the Golden Gate Awards.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds like you're already starting internationally, and Oberhausen and, I would assume, some other festivals.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, sure.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would you limit yourself to Europe and the United States, or were you going to the third world and—?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, eventually I was going all over the place. I would get, for instance, the Ottawa Animation Festival catalogue, and then the Yamagata catalogue for documentaries, and of course, IDFA (International Documentary Festival Amsterdam). I mean, all over the place. All the catalogues that Peter and Laura would get, I would go through.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would there be any point to your actually visiting any of these festivals eventually?

BRIAN GORDON: I started traveling in '93. It took a while, but I went to the Independent Feature Film Market in New York in '93, and that was the first festival I ever went to where SFIFF paid my way.

RUSSELL MERRITT: The idea is that you are looking at films at the festival, and then you're encouraging the filmmaker to apply?

BRIAN GORDON: Right, sure. And of course, that's not really a film festival; that's a market. So there are people there with films that they want to get out. Half the job there was taking a bunch of entry forms and sticking them in all the filmmakers' mailboxes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right, but it sounds as if you're going there in person, that you probably are knocking on some doors or tapping some shoulders, saying, "You know what? Consider us."

BRIAN GORDON: Well, that's a given. The successful film festivals out there are the ones where someone goes to the festivals, so they can associate a human with a festival, and not just an email or a voice.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I would assume that you're oriented towards independents and towards one-of-a-kinds, that it's the filmmakers themselves. Would there be a reason or a need to go to corporations or to sponsors, or to that level, when, for example, you're interested in getting PBS or BBC or other kinds of documentaries?

BRIAN GORDON: I went after everybody. We definitely would get people interested. There was still the economic motive, you know, in terms of the goal for the entry fees. But there was also the idea to get more people interested in the competition. And the truth was, I think it was a really great competition. It really built up. The idea of having your work judged by peers was really nice. We would end up getting quotes from the juries on why they won. When it reached its full form, if you will, we had a really good thing going. People respected it. Winning a Golden Gate Award was a big deal.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that would be because it was a jury of your peers. Let me just switch a little to that. I've been sort of grilling you on how you might recruit the artists. About the juries: you

mentioned that of course, the first couple of years, it was pretty much the list of people that you inherited. When you started becoming actively involved in recruiting, can you tell me anything about how that worked, or where you would look for jurors?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, I would get suggestions from people, and there are certain established jurors I liked, and would use just about every year I was there. It was a really good core group. Then I would get suggestions from them, and there would be other people The Bay Area is such a great, big film community.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would you say that the universities or the colleges would be your main hunting ground?

BRIAN GORDON: Not necessarily. I mean, there were certainly people at State and City and Berkeley, who were on juries through the years, but it was mainly from the general film community, and Stanford.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I remember on the jury that I was on, it was very important to you that there be a filmmaker on the jury.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes. I always wanted a diverse jury, and diverse in as many ways as possible, through their profession, age, gender, race and other ways. It didn't always work out that way, but for the most part, it did.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you have a sense that you had more applications from jurors than you had positions for, so that you could pick and choose, or do you find that you needed to recruit, as you had for some films, in order to get the mix you wanted?

BRIAN GORDON: It was a combination of that. There were always a few people every year I couldn't get on juries for one reason or another. I always ended up having more people than I had room for. And at the same time, I always wanted to get new people. I always tried to get new jurors, and I really relied a lot on the jury chairs' and co-workers' suggestions, and I trusted their judgment, for the most part. Some people would work out, and some people wouldn't.

RUSSELL MERRITT: One of the things that we know mainly from gossip, and that you'd be in the unique position to know—My experience was always of an extremely genial group of people. My first jury experience was with Bill Nestruck, and he sort of taught me how to conduct a jury. But I've heard from many other people that they were involved in very divisive past juries. Can you tell us a little about that, how you as the coordinator would resolve irreconcilable differences? Would you have tactics? And did you see it as a serious problem, or something inevitable when you have a lot of independent spirits?

BRIAN GORDON: It was inevitable. I know there were a few times when there were some really bad things that happened. What happened more often, though, there might be a jury that would reach a consensus that not everybody was happy about. There were certain films, maybe, that the jury chair felt more strongly about, but was happy that they reached a consensus, but there's still this feeling that it wasn't really a good experience. You had some juries in which people didn't know each other but everybody fell in love with each other, but then you had other juries in which it just didn't quite gel for one reason or another. There were some things that I did the last couple of years that, kept that to a minimum. We had juries of six people, and because of the sheer volume of entries in some categories, you would have juries of three and three. And one jury, Group A, would take a bunch of things, and Group B would take a bunch of things. And then Group A would look at Group B's top choices, and vice versa.

RUSSELL MERRITT: The more publicized kind of divisions that came with Golden Gate Awards had to do with local independents versus international. To put it in context, that seems to be the classic tug of war with the San Francisco Film Festival: How global do you want to go; how grassroots do you want to go, and how local. So the famous episode is in '93, as I understand it, where, in fact, people who are still active in the film scene—Jeffrey Skoller, through Project X—

BRIAN GORDON: X Factor.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Sorry, X Factor, were complaining that there wasn't enough being done for local filmmakers through the Festival as a whole, but specifically through the Golden Gate Awards. Can you bring us up to speed on that?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, what happened was, there were four divisions in the Golden Gate Awards. There was Film and Video, TV, Bay Area and New Visions. New Visions was for experimental film and video. And I don't remember exactly—There was all this grumbling, I think, about not getting experimental films enough of an exposure in the Festival, especially when a lot of the films that won awards had already shown in other places in town. I think that Laura was the one who got New Visions going. When Steve was doing it, there was no experimental film division. Laura introduced that in '87. But there was this feeling among some of the people in town—I know one critic was David Gerstein; he used to be at the Cinematheque. And he was actually a jury chair one year. I liked David; he was a great guy.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And Jeffrey Skoller.

BRIAN GORDON: I can't place his face, but I remember him.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well, he's now teaching at Berkeley.

BRIAN GORDON: Anyway, I think there was this feeling in the community that experimental film should not be in any sort of competition. There was grumbling that this is not the way you showcase experimental film and video in the Festival. And it wasn't the only place. Laura and Peter were doing some programs in experimental film outside the Golden Gate Awards. Part of the problem, too, was the Golden Gate Awards' place within the Festival. We hadn't found a permanent place there the first few years. I remember one year, it was all free shows. And for the first few years I was there, the Golden Gate Award winners were listed separately from all the A to Zs, so it gave the false impression of being kind of the stepchild, or the latchkey child, as someone put it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Ghetto.

BRIAN GORDON: And I think that X Factor and the people supporting experimental film were the most sensitive to that. So anyway, I think that there was just enough of this grumbling every year that we decided in 1992, when we got ready for the '93 Festival, that we would drop New Visions in Golden

Gate Awards and show experimental works outside the competition. But we didn't talk to anybody about it, which was a mistake. The lack of dialogue with the community was a mistake. Then, the '93 GGA entry form comes out in September, October, and people are saying, "Hey, where's New Visions?" So a lot of people complained about that. Finally, the big deal was the 1993 Opening Night. Craig Baldwin was doing something and people were handing out these little tickets or something; I forget exactly what it was, but it was like, "Where's New Visions? Where's the New Visions division?" which was kind of surprising, considering how people had thought about the Golden Gate Awards. But what had not taken place was a dialogue with the film community about what to do with New Visions in the Festival. So it was really weird.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I got a green card.

BRIAN GORDON: Little green cards, is that what they were?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Just so that our listeners know, Craig Baldwin is the head of Other Cinema.

BRIAN GORDON: The Other Cinema. God bless him. I love Craig. Anyway, so the next morning, the second day of the Festival, Peter called Craig and said, "Hey, we'll bring back New Visions next year; don't worry." And we had a nice discussion with the X Factor people that summer, just talking about it, and it was back. And people were very happy about it. I'm sorry it had to come to that, but I think the outcome of it was a better dialogue with the local film community. That was not just for the Golden Gate Awards, but, for the entire Festival. There was more respect after that, because I think they had always felt that the Festival didn't show enough local work. But there was a really good outcome, having a better dialogue with the film community.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did the business of cutting experimental films outside of competition ever get resolved, or was that subsumed into the other story?

BRIAN GORDON: No, actually, what we ended up doing—and I can't remember what year that started; that might have been '95—but what happened was that we showed experimental winners throughout the Festival, and they all got screened. Then the Cinematheque would always do a program

with the Festival as well, which didn't include Golden Gate Awards entries. And then there were plenty of programs throughout the Festival of other experimental shorts programmed by Peter, Laura and Marie-Pierre.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's what I remembered, that from, say, the mid-'90s, this business of putting the Golden Gate Awards in a separate latchkey door was traded for a system in which the programmers would cherry pick the most programmable or the most attractive, from their perspective, films, and then integrate them into the Festival as a whole. Can you be more detailed on exactly how this transition came about?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, it's interesting, because the first year I was there, I was doing an administrative job. And winning a Golden Gate Award didn't mean your film was going to get shown in the Festival.

They still ultimately didn't like the idea of giving something a prize and not screening it. But we ended up showing more and more Golden Gate Award winners as the years went on. By the last few years I was there we ended up showing nearly all the shorts winners. Then somewhere in there, in order to cut down on the number of winners that we didn't show, we ended up, I think, in '96—I'm jumping all over the place—we changed the names of the titles from Best of Category to Golden Spire and Silver Spire and two Honorable Mentions. Then we ended up getting rid of the Silver Spire, so we wouldn't have to be stuck with not showing as many winning entries. Another challenge we had was telling the juries what to look for. We didn't want to tell the juries what to choose, certainly. In 1996 we started making more detailed rules and regulations about judging, like pitfalls to avoid. And those gradually morphed over the years. Because we had a PC problem in which a terrific documentary divided a jury, in which three people in the jury just thought this was a brilliant film—which I happened to think as well—but three people in the jury, I guess, were just put off by the subject being too vile a person, and why should we show a film depicting this person? They couldn't get past that. It ended up being an Honorable Mention. That was the year that we had to finally tackle PC-ness not being a criterion.

RUSSELL MERRITT: In fact, it becomes very explicit in the guidelines that you put out—at least in '97—and it sounds like in '96 as well.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, '96 is when we changed it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Do not confuse the nobility of the cause with the quality of the film.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: For what it's worth, the parallel experience we had on the jury I chaired had to do with a documentary on Richard Wagner, and this was, to some members' way of thinking, a totally admirable film, because it was exposing his anti-Semitism, his racism and all of his serious limitations. I mean, it was very much a hit piece, and there was nothing particularly new about all of this. But what saved the day was that—at least as far as the jury's politics was concerned—those enthusiastic about all these aspects of the film got angry when part of the accusation was that Wagner was insufficiently censorious of gays. Well, suddenly the film loses all credibility. But it was very unsettling to have these kinds of opinions filtered entirely through political or what you would call PC factor. So it comes up over and over again. And I'm sure it will for a long time.

BRIAN GORDON: We sort of got off on another tangent there, but I wanted to say that the Golden Gate Awards, I think they're still seen as a separate entity, and it really wasn't officially part of the programming department until '94, which was really weird because prior to that, I was just kind of on my own out there. I was reporting to Tom Schmidt, and I was reporting to Laura, reporting to Peter. It just didn't really seem to belong anywhere. So '94 was a bit of a turning point, because, from that year on, the Golden Gate Award winners were incorporated within the A to Zs for good.

RUSSELL MERRITT: How did it finally get worked out in terms of programming itself? They get mentioned in the catalogue, but I happened to notice that in the year—what year are we talking about?—I believe it was 1993, there's altogether 20 different categories. And so are you saying that, then, all 20 of those winners would have been shown?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, you know what? The top winner that was in Film and Video, Bay Area and New Visions. It didn't include the TV winners. I forgot about that. That would be roughly a little over half. But we showed as many of the other winners as possible.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So what you're saying is that in '94, they're no longer in the kiddies' room.

BRIAN GORDON: Exactly. They're not at the kids' table.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And how did that get reflected in the way they were programmed, as opposed to where they appear in the catalogue? That is to say, instead of being all shown at once, one after another, would they have been distributed then?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, I think they were shown at different times in prior years throughout the Festival, but a lot of them would be concentrated toward the end of the Festival. And we started having the Golden Gate Awards ceremony toward the end of the Festival, in '92. Prior to that, it was toward the beginning of the Festival. In fact, the first couple years of the Golden Gate Awards, the ceremony was the night before Opening Night. So a lot of them would be programmed toward filmmakers coming. They were programmed kind of with everything, throughout the Festival, with an emphasis toward the end of the Festival, because that's when we had the ceremony.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I want to get a sense of how they were programmed within the Festival. That, too, evolves that year.

BRIAN GORDON: It sure does.

RUSSELL MERRITT: They had always been shown throughout in one convenient place, but it becomes important, I gather, that increasingly, they do get shown more toward the end of the Festival, as momentum for the Festival cooks up, and as the draw of people actually appearing to accept awards increases.

BRIAN GORDON: Exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So that idea, by the way, of a big ceremony only starts in 1992, that before that there was not a ceremony for bringing all the winners into one room.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, I think they did a ceremony when Steve was there. They had ceremonies, but it would be at the beginning of the Festival, and some people would be there and some weren't and all the local people would usually be there. But the ceremony really evolved a lot. The first four Festivals I was there, it was held in the big Kabuki house. And the first couple of years it was free, and so a lot of people would show up. But it just didn't quite seem right. It just didn't flow very well. And then I would be the MC and Peter would take turns in awarding something, Linda Cohen, and then other people on the staff —Tom Schmidt announced some, Jeannette Shaheen would announce some—and it just ended up not flowing very well. Then Tom Schmidt came up with this great idea in the '92 Festival, in which the jury would present the awards and tell them why they won. That was the turning point. The first three years we had it like that, it was held in one of the smaller Kabuki 250-seat auditoriums. That was really nice. It was still kind of intimate, and it still seemed to be a little bit staid, but it was very much more meaningful than having it in the big theater. Finally, '95 was the big turning point, because we had it at Slim's. That was great, because it turned out to be a real party. It was a really fun party thing. It wasn't like we had a band or anything like that, or showed clips, but we had it in a setting away from the Kabuki, in a much more festive atmosphere. That made it much more memorable and much more enjoyable. And we still had the jurors presenting the awards. That was there as long as I was there. That ceremony was the big turning point for the Golden Gate Awards, and I think we showed more winners than ever that year.

RUSSELL MERRITT: 1,280 submissions.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, it really picked up. It had almost increased by 50 percent from the year before, or something like that. That was a very good year: I was more involved than ever that year because I had been given X amount of slots to program. For Golden Gate Awards, they had actually mapped out that many. It was much more structured in terms of the programming. Peter had some, Laura had some; Rachel Rosen had hers, Marie-Pierre Macia has hers, and I had mine. I was working much more in

programming that year. That was the first year I scheduled the films with everybody else, which was a lot of fun.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So is it fair to say that after that point, your energy was spent mainly in getting the films, getting the juries together, and making sure that the films got to the juries, but that starting in '94, '95, you are then, in addition to all that, also programming how the winners are being shown?

BRIAN GORDON: I was doing much more then. I started doing a little bit more of that in '93.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And I would assume too that you had to be the mastermind behind these ceremonies— Getting the jurors and the jury chairs.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, I was basically outlining the ceremony.

RUSSELL MERRITT: With all that now being added to your plate, did you get more help?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, yes. '95 was the first year I had an assistant help me with all the entries and stuff like that. The first year was Kenyatta Monroe. She gets a special gold medal for putting up with me, because I had been used to being a one-man operation. At that time, it was really hard for me to delegate. So she put up with a lot. Then the next five years, Mimi Brody worked with me, and Mimi is just a total gem. She's at the UCLA Archives now. Then the other thing was, in '90, '91 and '92, I was also a publicist for the Festival, so I was not doing too much programming. I went back from doing that and programming the winners to helping out in publicity. I barely got through '92. I just had too much to do; I had too much on my plate, and I was too scared to say, "Hey, this is too much." Finally, I got a little bit of help from the staff in terms of getting second opinions on films. But I actually had it down. I was really enjoying myself the last five years there, putting it together. It actually was OK on my time.

RUSSELL MERRITT: As the Golden Gate Awards competition meets more success— somewhat more elaborate ceremonies, more entries, increased process, more juries to work with—did your budget get bigger, or did you remain fairly consistent from one year to the other?

BRIAN GORDON: Interestingly enough, I know that the Festival had a really great year; 1997 was, \$90,000 or so in entries. It was still less than ten percent of the total budget of the Festival. People looked at the Golden Gate Awards as this big cash cow, and the entry fees, if nothing else, provided some cash flow for that time of year. Oddly enough, though, the Festival at that time had one of the higher entry fee tables in festivals. We actually lowered them the next year. Amy Leissner, at that point, redid the budget and lowered the fees, which I think was a good thing, to make it a little more attractive, because they were on the high end. And we ended up getting more entries. They kept on increasing. I don't know if it was the same as the last year in the total entry fees. It might have been a little bit less. So I think that everybody appreciated the value of the Golden Gate Awards a little bit more beyond just the fact that it brought in entry fee money. The sponsorship people got behind it and were able to get food donated for the juries, for example. Then somebody went out and got that great place where we had the ceremony for 3-4 years.

Keep in mind that Tom Schmidt was still there, too. In fact, one of the best things that Tom ever did—for both the Golden Gate Awards and the Festival—was this two-year grant, for '91 and '92, for multiethnic marketing, to help market the Festival to different communities. I helped him with that. We had flyers for the Spanish-language films put into Spanish, all the Chinese films printed in Chinese and the Japanese films printed in Japanese. We hired people to translate the stuff. It was great.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes. That would be a good example. You weren't pressured to get any of the local famous people?

BRIAN GORDON: Not at all. In 1996, we had Joan Chen on the Bay Area Documentary final jury, which was cool. In fact, Joan Chen announced the awards that year at the ceremony. I can't remember if we had any other famous jurors. Part of the problem is the time commitment beforehand, in January.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It isn't very glamorous work.

BRIAN GORDON: No, it isn't, but enjoyable, if you're in the right mood. We had Elvis Mitchell and Kent Jones. I think Kent was on the Skyy jury. But I don't even think they had any famous people on the Skyy juries.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What about the programming? Would that influence be felt in what films you were encouraged to show from the Golden Gate Awards?

BRIAN GORDON: One thing we started doing in '97 was the Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award, which was a lifetime achievement award given to somebody whose body of work was not feature narrative films. This was Rachel Rosen's great idea. The first year was Jan Svankmajer. In '98 was Robert Frank, which was absolutely wonderful. In '99 it was Johan van der Keuken and then in 2000 it was Faith Hubley. In 2001, it was Kenneth Anger.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's right. And then this year, Guy Maddin got it.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, great! That's odd, because he's mainly made features. I guess you could stretch it, but that's my opinion.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well, actually, though, the nice thing was that when Guy Maddin got the award, they showed all the short films.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, there you go. Good.

RUSSELL MERRITT: By then, of course, his 20-minute film was considered too long, so it was mainly his five, six-minute films. In fact, I guess you can say since it was the Toronto Film Festival that commissioned it, that **Heart of the World** is the San Francisco Film Festival find. It was the next festival after Toronto that showed it.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, really?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes. So you have that, which is kind of nice. I wish I could pick up the link that you were making to that Persistence of Vision Award, because I think that is one of the great developments within the Festival. I think consistently, it's the most interesting filmmakers.

BRIAN GORDON: It really is. I was very pleased about that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: They're established experimental filmmakers.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, they're not necessarily experimental. I mean, they are in some ways, but Svankmajer—He's unique, but I don't think he's experimental. And Frank was especially pleased with that award, because that was, believe it or not, the first award he ever received for his filmmaking.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Does the proliferation of other competitions—you mentioned the Skyy Award, and then the Persistence of Vision—did that have any impact on the direction of the Golden Gate Awards? You mentioned, for example, the jurors, now, were being directed to the Skyy Award.

BRIAN GORDON: I don't think it really had any impact. Actually, it was great because it brought in more people. We were able to bring in more jurors. And that was great because it provided further exposure to the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Your official resignation is in January—

BRIAN GORDON: Of '01.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Needless to say, a lot is happening that year, and a lot more would happen that year. But Peter is also announcing his resignation. Rachel Rosen is going to leave—

BRIAN GORDON: Rachel, I think, finally left for good, in August or September.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's right. Now, in the case of Rachel and Peter, there's always talk that they are leaving in response to new organizational arrangements. I don't think I ever heard that discussed with your leaving; that certainly, your comments in the press were that you were excited about the prospect of running a national festival of your own, and your love of country music. Did you feel that you had done your work at the San Francisco Film Festival, that it was becoming repetitious, or that you

were being cut off from something that, because of a better offer, you would have loved to continue with otherwise?

BRIAN GORDON: I was ready to go. Actually, I was probably ready to go before the 2000 Festival. I just felt the rumblings. And '98 was a wonderful, wonderful year. It was Robert Frank, and it was a great year for the Golden Gate Awards because '97 was the first year I went to the documentary festival in Amsterdam, and I got more people interested in entering the films in the Festival, and we just had great stuff that year. What was really great about that year was that the juries picked practically everything we wanted them to pick. And that's something we haven't discussed. I'll be honest with you, there were some times we would be disappointed when they didn't select a certain film that we all liked for some reason. But then, on the other hand, there were films like **Cane Toads** that just came out of the blue, that we just were so excited about showing, thanks to the jurors. Anyway, '98 was a really great year. And then in '99, the quality was a little bit down. It was still a very fun year, and having Johan van der Keuken there as the Persistence of Vision recipient was just fantastic. I admire him so much, and was really sorry he passed away in 2001. I had gone as far as I could within the Festival's organization. I wanted to be a "straight" programmer, instead of waiting to see what the juries would select. I basically had outgrown the job. It was still great to travel. It was still great to go to Amsterdam, especially. And then I went to Marseilles for the Documentary Market and Film Festival there for three years, too, which was marvelous. But the travel was about the only thing that was keeping me going the last year or so I was there. I still loved working with Rachel and Peter and Doug, and Miguel and Hilary and everybody else.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Had you already been offered the job from Nashville?

BRIAN GORDON: I had gone there for a couple of interviews, and I got offered the job on January 2nd. And I was so ready to go at that point. Had I gone through another Festival, I would have been really unhappy. My heart wasn't in it anymore. Plus, the whole dot-com explosion was a bit of a turnoff too. I had found this really great place to live in Oakland, and like a lot of other people making about the same amount I was, in different arts organizations, the only place they could afford to live was in the East Bay. And the commute finally just neutralized it for me. I was so happy to get this place, but the one-hour commute just wasn't worth it to me.

RUSSELL MERRITT: We now have a digression on Mimi.

BRIAN GORDON: Mimi Brody was absolutely wonderful. She was the Golden Gate Awards assistant, and then she ended up being the Golden Gate Awards Associate the last year, from '96-2000. That job was a three, four or five-month job, and it would end in February, when she got all the tapes returned. The first few years I did it alone. Once the volume of tapes came in, I used to really enjoy just cataloguing everything. Even today, it's exciting around deadline time, when all the tapes come in, like Santa showed up. Kenyatta Monroe did it the first year, and that was great. And from '96 to 2000, Mimi would help out with contacting filmmakers who didn't submit things properly, and administering everything. And she would oversee the interns who would help file everything. I was a one-man operation the first few years, but I ended up not only needing an assistant, but having interns. And she set up some really good systems. Then Mimi also, in her first year, ended up doing print traffic. And she ended up eventually working in guest services as well, helping in travel. So she was instrumental in a lot of ways.

RUSSELL MERRITT: By the time you'd left, she'd obviously gotten such a handle on the job that she could really now make major decisions.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, oddly enough, after the 2000 Festival, she moved to L.A. to find work down there. She was down there at the beginning of the year, in 2000, at the beginning of the "Golden Gate season," and we had GG Geddes assisting. And then when I left in January, after I gave notice, Mimi ended up moving back up to San Francisco to take over the job that year.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's also awfully good to know, that it wasn't that she was at-hand.

BRIAN GORDON: She was not at-hand. No. She actually came back up from L.A.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I wanted to pick up something that you had mentioned somewhat earlier about when juries don't deliver on films that you're expecting, and the films they do deliver seem to you undistinguished. I'm wondering, first of all, if you could name names, and secondly, what happens in

situations like that? I can understand that there might be a dilemma. On the one hand, this becomes a kind of opportunity to expose a kind of fraternalism that the organization's elite might override what the jury does. On the other hand, you are the ones responsible for bringing in an audience, and I expect that there was a tension in that.

BRIAN GORDON: I think it was a question of if they arrived at it in the way they were supposed to, then that was fine. For example, one year, we were real big on Lars von Trier's miniseries, **The Kingdom**. It was a really incredible film. It did not receive a Golden Gate Award, and we just kind of shrugged our shoulders. We were a little bit perturbed by it, and disappointed, but we ended up showing it anyway. It ended up getting shown after all; it just didn't get a Golden Gate Award. Put it this way: I think there were sometimes films that received the top award, and it wouldn't have been any of our first choices, but we could understand why the jury chose it. Every once in a while there was a film that we just couldn't see what they saw in it at all, period.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Were you ever tempted to go back and ask the jury how it reached the verdict? Because one of the things that was striking from the perspective of a juror, is how the requests made of the jury would shift from year to year. At some points, each juror was expected to write out a full commentary, and these would be collected; other times it was almost like a checklist; rating them on a scale. And then, at others, only the jury chair spoke to you. Were those shifts in response to earlier ways in which judgments were being made?

BRIAN GORDON: Part of it was, originally, there was only so much space for them to write comments, and there was this whole thing of rating; like, would this be offensive in any way? Part of it was just to make sure that the juries rated these films fairly. And then we would provide the evaluation sheets, if the filmmakers wanted to see them, if they didn't win. And that ended up being more trouble than it was worth. Number one, on an administrative level, it was really a pain in the rear, because some juries would not turn them back the way they were supposed to, and then we would have to fish through them to try to find all the ones for a certain film. And then some juries wouldn't write anything at all. We'd have nothing to give back to the filmmakers. One year, I spent the summer just watching some rejected films, because people hadn't written the evaluations. So I had to write them. And I saw some pretty bad stuff that way. I remember one year, there was a local film that was submitted, (LAUGHS) and one

person didn't write a sentence or anything like that. I don't even know if it was a narrative or a documentary or what, but the only word they wrote down was "homophobic." And then I guess everybody else agreed it was homophobic. So there were five evaluation sheets, and there was just one word on each one: "homophobic." And we ended up giving those to the filmmaker, and the film ended up showing locally at the Roxie or something like that. And there was an article on the film in the Pink Section. And it mentioned the fact that it was submitted to the Golden Gate Awards, and all he got back, (LAUGHS) were evaluation forms with "homophobic" written on them, and that's all. So then we thought, well, maybe it's time to discontinue this. In a way, I think it's too bad, but the problem was the sheer volume of stuff that people had to look at. I mean, if it wasn't a contender, it wasn't a contender.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It doesn't seem that the discontinuance of that had any adverse effect on the number of entries being made.

BRIAN GORDON: No, not at all. It was basically a nice service to have for the filmmakers. And every once in a while, somebody would respond, saying something like, "Did you really see this film? Did they go see this film?" We used to try to make sure they were OK to send them all back, because sometimes people would write really stupid things like, "Find another career." And they were probably being honest, I have to say. But someone ended up getting one of those, and said, "I don't really appreciate this." I think we ended up refunding his entry fee.

RUSSELL MERRITT: How much was the entry fee?

BRIAN GORDON: I remember the highest it was before we reduced them— You could pay \$110 for a feature-length doc. But I think we ended up reducing it by about \$20 after 1997, because we just figured it was too high. I'm really glad we did that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though when the protesters against discontinuance of the New Visions award weren't complaining about the expense of submitting.

BRIAN GORDON: No, I don't think so. In fact, New Visions entry fees were lower than film and video entries.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Just to clear that up. So in any case, there is this evolution of the way in which jurors are supposed to respond to the entries. Which ones did you find most satisfactory? It sounds as though that the requirements started changing, you gained more confidence in the juries. Is that fair? Or did you feel that as you got to know the juries better, these are people that don't need to be quite so detailed in their—

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, definitely. That was one thing that was a little bit difficult with the juries each year, because we always wanted to get new people in there, but we always felt that there were many people, whether it's documentaries or shorts or animation, who we really admired how they found great films. There were some really terrific jurors who just understood it. Not only did they love to watch the films, but they understood the jurying process, and they understood how you had to reach a consensus. We had some terrific jury chairs, who knew how to run a jury. There were some really good people I wanted to have all the time, but at the same time, I wanted to bring in new people. We made an effort to rotate people in and out and try to get new people and keep it fresh, but even despite the large film and video community in the Bay Area, there were still only so many people who were willing to commit to the time. There were a number of people who were there year in and year out. Thank goodness for that, because these were people who were really dedicated.

RUSSELL MERRITT: My experience was that it would take a full weekend to evaluate these films.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, yes, for the juries that you were in, but for some other juries, it could take three or four weekends.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I see. We always attributed that to our skill in managing time, but maybe there were other factors. So were you at all alarmed by the possibility that having return juries would create a kind of club atmosphere, would create a coterie?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, that was a problem we were always up against. Ultimately, people would get rotated. We would at least get different people on different juries. But on the other hand, there were certain juries that would just return with great stuff, especially the short narratives. The short narrative

was just a monster in and of itself, because there were so many submitted—hundreds and hundreds—so we would divide up the juries. We had one group of people sifting through everything and then passing their picks on to the final jury.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It was a huge category.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, exactly. But boy, I'll tell you, some years, though, some of the final juries were still into finding some really great stuff. And I know, for example, Anita Monga chaired the final jury for a few years there, and they came up with some really terrific stuff.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You mentioned that some categories were more difficult than others, and that short narrative seems to stand out. Were there other ones that were either easy or difficult in terms of administering?

BRIAN GORDON: Another tough category was the International Sociology category. We eventually changed the category name to Society and Culture. That was always a very huge documentary category. It wasn't really current events as much as it was looking at different groups, whether it would be an ethnic group, or it could be centered around an ailment or a disease. It was a very broad category. And it was also a very rich category with a lot of great stuff. It ended up becoming so big that one year, we ended up splitting the category up into Society and Culture U.S. and Society and Culture International. That was a really good thing in terms of the Festival, not just because of the volume of entries, but there were all these very interesting documentaries that would end up drawing a lot of people. I think we ended up having nine people as opposed to six on the International jury, because there was so much to look at. But the problem was, having nine people deliberating instead of six could have the potential of diluting the process, because more people would have to agree on the choices. But they always came up with great stuff.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So that's a big one. Were some categories more difficult to fill with jurors than others? Did you find that there were some categories that everybody wanted to be a part of?

BRIAN GORDON: Everybody wanted to be on Animation; everybody wanted to be on Society and Culture and Documentaries, until they found out how much they had to look at. Actually, I can't remember having trouble filling certain categories. A lot more people wanted to be on New Visions than we had room for. I was very careful about who we put on that category, because I wanted people who are experienced with watching a lot of experimental work. And it was always very tricky in what people considered experimental. The last few years I was there, we had a pre-screening process in which everybody would look at all the entries to make sure they fit, and if not, we would move them into Short Narrative, or someplace else. Some people, at the very least, would grumble about not being on the category they wanted to be on, but they would be happy to be on one.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right. Well, it's interesting that you would ignore the category that I monopolized, which was TV Arts.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, people loved to be on that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's right. That's a very stable jury. And so that made it a pleasure to work with. But you always worried whether you were getting inbred with the same group.

BRIAN GORDON: That's true.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But the professionalism of it was so exhilarating, just the smoothness of that kind of operation. I know that after Roxanne took over, one of the new practices was to have staff members sit in with the juries, more or less to see how they were doing. And I won't comment on the jury's reaction, but I wondered whether you ever attempted to do that.

BRIAN GORDON: (LAUGHS) Yes I did. The first year I was there, I sat on one or two juries. Just to see how it worked. And I remember sitting in on Steve Seid's Experimental Video category in '88. I only did that about two or three times, and that was enough. I just felt like I had no business being there. I don't think that's a good idea. In fact, it's funny that you say that, because I was on a jury in Nashville here with somebody who sat in on a deliberation process. I felt he really had an influence on the decision-making. I don't think that's a good idea.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It also, though, speaks to a kind of confidence that you're building in the jury.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, that's true.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And so I think you answered a question that I was preparing, which was that when you were giving the unsuccessful filmmakers their feedback, whether you got feedback from them. But what's related to that is whether you ever had someone that you gave an award to that preferred to decline it.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, that happened. Actually, this happened twice with Allie Light and Irving Saraf. I think the year that they submitted **Dialogues with Madwomen**, it got only an honorable mention. Was that '92? I remember Irving called up and said, "I don't want this award," or something like that. And they didn't really need it, because the film had already gotten out there anyway. It was kind of superfluous or insignificant at that point. But I think I sent it to them anyway. And then they did the same thing with **In the Shadow of the Stars**. They didn't want the award, and I tried to talk them into it. He called back the next day. Allie Light first left a message, and then I called back and talked to Irving. He had talked with Bob Hawk, who convinced them that the award was a nice thing to have, so he called back and said, "OK, I'll take the award." I don't think he really cared at that point. He just did what Bob said. So I sent them the award, and that was that. With **Crumb** winning the honorable mention and not winning the top award, I mean, Terry didn't really give a shit. Terry said, "Well, you know, honorable mention, I don't really care. I don't think I really want the award." And I don't remember, I guess listed it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You certainly showed it.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh, we showed it. But that year, two or three jury members just couldn't see past that whole PC thing.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though that became one of the most persistent problems you had. Getting jurors to disconnect a kind of rigid political or social—

BRIAN GORDON: We had a problem one year with a juror in another category—it was on an arts category—who already made up her mind before they had even popped the cassette in, that one entry was going to be a contender because she really liked the artist that the film profiled. That created some animosity. And then the same juror, I guess they were putting in a documentary about Yo Yo Ma, and she just shouted out, “This is classist, if you have a film about classical music.” That was a problem.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It becomes a kind of leitmotif that these celebrations—the ceremonies themselves—are the punch line to a kind of arduous process. I come back to this idea that it’s a festival within a festival. And the Festival parties have a very distinct personality—outrageous, flamboyant, naked women in some—there’s all kinds of fun. And the personality of the Golden Gate Award ceremonies is much different. I’m wondering whether any of them stand out, aside from the kind of spectacle of having these gorgeous elaborate PowerPoint things. Were there ever any outrageous comments made, either in accepting or in delivering an award, any backroom dramas leading up to awards?

BRIAN GORDON: I remember the first year that we had it. This guy named Ed Jones won a Golden Gate Award in the Experimental/New Visions category, and we didn’t show his film, and he made a big deal out of it at the ceremony. That’s when I realized that maybe we should make some changes. That was only my first year, so I had no idea.

RUSSELL MERRITT: If that’s as serious as it gets, you had a pretty good ride.

BRIAN GORDON: Well, I don’t remember catfights or anything like that. I remember one year, we had a guy from Norway. He had a little flash camera and was taking photos of the crowd from the stage. I’d never seen that before. And then we had that Armenian filmmaker come up. He was probably the drunkest recipient I’ve ever seen. I was a little concerned that he would fall off the stage. That was a great ceremony in ’95 because it was the first time we had it outside the Festival site. We had it at Slim’s, and that was magical. We built on the idea that Tom Schmidt had with the jurors presenting it to the winners, and having it in a much more festive setting than in the Kabuki Theatre.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It occurs to me, by the way, just as you're repeating all this that the distances that the award winners are willing to go.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh yes. We had a lot of people come in. That was the nice thing about having the winners beforehand, because for example, the Norwegian Film Institute—like other Scandinavian countries—pour lots of money into the arts. They've got these big film institutes that can sponsor people's trips. So that year, not only did he come, but one of the people from the Institute came from Norway as well, from Oslo. Actually, that year, they had a little brunch at the Norwegian Consulate in San Francisco, honoring him. And another year, we had somebody come out from the Swedish Consulate. The Swedish Film Institute sent out one of their winners. The same year, in '95, the Finnish Film Foundation underwrote the travel for a winner to come out from Finland. Then the next year, '96, was an insane ceremony because there was an incredible heat wave that year during the Festival. And Transmission, of course, had no air conditioning. Everybody was just sweating like crazy inside that club. I remember that very well. There was one jury chair; I won't mention her name. That same space had been used for something for Bay Area filmmakers at one time when it was some other venue. One jury chair who was a bit tipsy went up there, and went on and on for about 20 minutes, it seemed, talking about the importance of this location. It was kind of funny. (LAUGHS) And everybody was just— Not really groaning, but everybody was wondering how long she was going to go on. This person, by the way, I absolutely love, but anyway, that was memorable.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I think that one of the aspects of keeping it late in the Festival is that by that time, the winners have gotten to know each other.

BRIAN GORDON: The winners have gotten to know each other and the films have shown, so a lot of people have seen the films, and they want to give the filmmaker another hurrah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I wanted to move to a point that we were arguing, which was about the development of the children's panel in 1996.

BRIAN GORDON: That was actually not with children. It was called Youth Works, stuff made by high school kids.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And it started in 1996. It was Rachel Rosen's conception. It occurred to me that as this was being developed, there seemed to be other kinds of outreach programs designed particularly for teenagers and maybe even preteens. For example, the San Francisco State activity that was going to create a one-credit course. And I'm wondering whether that developed from 1996.

BRIAN GORDON: The San Francisco State program, I think the first year was 1989, if I'm not mistaken. It may have been later, but it was in the late '80s or in 1990, somewhere around there. I believe Laura was the one who started that. I was not really involved in the starting of that at all. I ended up taking it on.

RUSSELL MERRITT: In fact, there's a logical tie between Golden Gate Awards and community outreach, isn't there?

BRIAN GORDON: Sure. We ended up giving the Friday, Saturday and Sunday mornings of the second weekend over to student-only screenings, and we would try to have filmmakers there. And the students paid one price on a Friday morning for all six films. There would be different instructors each year. I know Larry Clark did it one year, Karen Davis did it another year, and there were plenty of other filmmaker instructors.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you do the recruiting of those people?

BRIAN GORDON: Oh no, not at all. They did all that at State.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I see. So what precisely was the Festival's responsibility and commitment to that?

BRIAN GORDON: Basically, the Festival's responsibility was to find six films. We had to make sure that the prints would be there at the Kabuki. And then if you were lucky, you'd have films for which there were filmmakers. The last few years I did it, we always had at least three or four filmmakers there to answer questions after. It was great. One year we had the South Korean filmmaker who received the

Kurosawa award in '98, Im Kwon-Taek. That was cool. He was there answering questions afterwards. Guzmán was there. We had a real variety; Andre de Toth, he was there, and we showed one of his films. It was a great mix of people.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So would you have selected the six films on that basis, trying to match them with a visiting filmmaker? Was that something collaborated with San Francisco State, or was that part of what you delivered?

BRIAN GORDON: It had to do more with print availability. And we had to get permission from the filmmakers to have a screening first. That was a basic criterion. And we didn't want anything super difficult, since the people taking the class weren't all hardcore film students.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds a little analogous to what we do in Berkeley with Film 50, where you're trying to interest people in films they wouldn't otherwise see, and get them at a young enough age that it might affect what kinds of careers or at least what kinds of enthusiasm they might later have. One of the things that provides a nice transition from the South Korean director coming to direct this group is that in 1994, there was a fascinating exchange between Susan Sontag and J. Hoberman.

BRIAN GORDON: At the Festival?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Not at the Festival, but something that would relate directly to the Festival. Sontag was arguing that the age of cinephilia was over, and she looked back to the golden age of the '60s and early '70s. And Hoberman said, "It's not over; you're just looking in the wrong place," that if you're looking to Europe and if you're looking to the kind of cinephilia that's associated with **Cahiers du Cinema** and the rest, yeah, that is passé. The real action is in Asia, in Africa, third world. And one of the glaring differences, at least on first glance, between the Festival and the festival within the Festival is that the Festival reflects that shift with incredible entries coming in from China, from South Korea, from North Korea, from Africa. I don't recall that kind of reach in the Golden Gate Awards. Was there, in fact, a significant number of Asian entries coming in?

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, there were. We ended up showing quite a few films from Asia. We had some documentaries. It certainly wasn't the same level as Europe and the U.S., but we did a few.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would it reflect, do you think, a difference between the way in which Asian features—to talk very generically and broadly—were getting produced, and the ways in which Western filmmakers are getting started? That is, there is a culture of short films and experimental kinds of films that lead to—especially in state-sponsored kinds of national cinemas—to the growth of features; do you think that it was that, there are fewer kinds of documentaries?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, you answered me when you said that, because in terms of shorts, we had quite a bit of variety. We had a lot of Asian shorts that entered the Golden Gate Awards off and on throughout the years, and especially in animation. And there's also a lot of experimental work. I was thinking more like documentaries. I don't think there was a whole lot. I can't really remember anything off the top of my head. But we had a few. I don't know if that's apropos to what you said, as much as what we had people send in. I think it had a lot to do with that. I mean, we did plenty of outreach to get films from other parts of the world—especially Asia—to get them to invest in the Golden Gate Awards, but maybe they just didn't win awards. I think it's more of a function of that as much as anything else.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Obviously the distances are greater in every way. Can you tell me anything about efforts made to publicize the Festival and the Golden Gate Awards in Asia and Africa?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, I don't know exactly what Hilary did, but I think when we first started setting up the press release and getting the word out, I was always on the lookout for film organizations in other parts of the world. Now most of these film organizations—like the Finnish Film Foundation—are in Europe, so those are the places that you get the most promotion, since there are more in Europe than any other continent outside the U.S. But we still tried to get the word out. There were still some other organizations, like film schools that we would get in Asia. So that was one really reliable way to get the word out about the Golden Gate Awards.

RUSSELL MERRITT: A detail about the naming of the awards: In 1996, you create the name Golden Spike Award. And then that was discontinued. Can you tell us just a little about what the reasoning was to rename the award, and then to unname it?

BRIAN GORDON: Up to 1995, we had just the categories. And then there was the Special Jury Award and two honorable mentions in each category. And in New Visions film that year, in '95—I guess it happens sometimes—the jury didn't award anything in the top category. And there was one year for a Short Narrative category, 16 to 30 minutes. They didn't give any awards that year. This particular year, the New Visions film jury gave two honorable mentions, and nothing else. And one of the filmmakers was pretty upset about it because his reasoning was, well, if I got an honorable mention, it's still the best film in the category.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Oh, I see.

BRIAN GORDON: Then he started reading the fine print on the entry form, and he found a loophole. So we ended up compromising by giving him half the prize money that he would have gotten for Best of Category. He had a point. And nobody had brought it up before. After that, we decided, well, we want to take out "best," just to avoid any sort of confusion. So in '96 we came up with the new names: the Golden Spire, the Silver Spire and two honorable mentions. And then—I can't remember if it was '99 or 2000 we got rid of those awards; we changed it to Golden Gate Awards. As a Golden Gate Award, I think people were confused because you could introduce your film as having won a Golden Gate Award, but it could have been an honorable mention. You follow?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Oh, I understand exactly.

BRIAN GORDON: So there were too many award names being tossed around. It was very confusing. The Golden Spire was a Golden Gate Award; an honorable mention was a Golden Gate Award. So we decided to have a Festival where the Golden Spire was now the Golden Gate Award. So you had a Golden Gate Award in the Current Events category, and you also had an honorable mention, the Golden Gate Award being the top award. I thought that was a little more succinct. And then of course, you would go on to compete for the Grand Prize.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And was there a name given to that super prize?

BRIAN GORDON: It was called the Grand Prize.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that would also explain something that I don't remember from the earlier juries, but certainly was true by 2000 and 2001, which is that you could split honorable mentions. You could have two honorable mentions, but you could not split a Golden Gate Award. There could only be one Golden Gate Award in your category.

BRIAN GORDON: As a matter of fact, when we changed the Golden Gate Award, we eliminated the Silver Spire level. And the reason we did that was we just wanted to get out of the business of awarding that many films. I never really was comfortable with that. It turned out there, by the end of the Festival, I think Golden Gate Awards was allotted 22 or 26 slots over the course of the Festival, so we ended up showing nearly all the winners of Film and Video anyway.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But not all of them. In fact, in 1994 I count 30 categories.

BRIAN GORDON: Oh really?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes. That was your all-time top. And that represents 1,110 entries from 53 countries. And that was not a personal best. By 1996, you were up to 1,300 entries from 56 countries. And it got even bigger than that. But that's the last number that I actually tracked. How did you reconcile, then, that dilemma that you were talking about last night, where a jury awards a grand prize to a film that you and the other programmers can't quite see, and you suddenly have to decide between your responsibility to the filmmaker and your responsibility to the film audience. And I assume that that dilemma never goes away.

BRIAN GORDON: It never goes away, but it didn't happen every year. There would be films that you could understand why they gave an award to, and every once in a while there was a film that we just didn't think was that great, but we could understand why the jury liked it. The bottom line was if the

audience liked it, fine. It wouldn't have been our top choice. Oh, maybe a couple times they gave a top award to something that we just thought was so-so. There was a short narrative one year that we don't know what on earth they saw in it. We thought it was a really mediocre film, but we showed it anyway, and life went on.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So if you're going to err, your feeling was, on showing a film that you didn't quite like, but since it won a prize—

BRIAN GORDON: If it won a top award, we had to show it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But I don't think that was always true. I think that in '87, '88, you weren't necessarily all showing the first prize.

BRIAN GORDON: The first year I was there, as I mentioned, there was no system in place. Peter and Laura would watch the film, and they decided. I didn't have any input in programming that year.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right. But by the time you were in control of that process, that was, I think it's fair to say, a reform that you affected, that if it went to top prize, you show it, regardless of your feelings.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes. 1987 to '88 was my first year, but in '89, the second year I was there, we started showing all the top winners of Film and Video, and I think we showed all the winners of the Bay Area category. And we may have shown all the New Visions as well, but I'm not sure. But then that year, at the same time, a lot of films were being shown in a free noontime program during the week. And we did that for two years. That gave the films kind of a secondary status. Plus the whole deal with not giving the same amount of space in the program guide.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I said I was going to jump around, and I'm going to keep my promise. Does the name Merchant Commerce still mean anything to you?

BRIAN GORDON: Merchant Commerce, that's where the ceremony ended up?

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right. Exactly. It was on California Street, ninth floor.

BRIAN GORDON: Great spot.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It was. It just reminds me of San Francisco at its most elegant. And it was a lovely setting because there were two parts to that floor. You could have a reception in which people could schmooze and get the hors d'oeuvres, and then they'd move out to this grand ballroom type of environment, and it really was reminiscent of that old style Academy Award setting in Coconut Grove, that kind of atmosphere. And by the time you got rolling, as you said last night, there were graphics, it was really structured, lovely. And two more, and then I think we can wrap it up. We talked generally about standout juries. If I understand you correctly, you would say that the short narrative film, that was a category that kept on coming up in our conversation last night as being a site of controversies, of some divisiveness, but also of real discoveries. And I'm wondering whether you could talk about some of the outstanding chairs of juries, whether there were personalities that you responded to. I know you can't be inclusive of everybody you'd like to mention, but off the top of your head, were there people that literally inspired you with the kind of questions they asked of films and the kinds of discoveries they were making?

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah, I think Anita Monga's jury was really great in Short Narrative. She didn't do it every year, but the years she did, they were really great about it because the sheer quantity of entries makes it tough. And I think people had different ideas about what makes a good short. I tried to veer away from getting people on the jury who thought something with nice lighting and nice camerawork was the way to go; some of those can be the most boring short narratives ever made. There were always a few that were still good, but then there were the ones that the people just tried to be quirky and went out of their way to be David Lynch or something, or just too many stupid shorts where some nerdy guy would end up getting his clothes mixed up with that of a beautiful blonde in the laundromat who's going to—

RUSSELL MERRITT: (LAUGHS)

BRIAN GORDON: I don't know. But Anita's jury always came up with a really diverse selection of films. And they went with some really funny things and some really serious films, and all different styles. I remember one year they gave an award to this really kind of cheaply shot black and white—I think it was shot on black and white video, back in '95—and it was this young kid out of Detroit, and it was just really great. He came out, and that was really cool. It was an angry film, but very innovative. And then I always liked Kris Samuelson. She's a professor at Stanford. She always was great, she was really passionately involved in the documentary categories, but she did different ones. And then there were Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine. I liked them because you can always find juries, but finding spaces—and they always lent out their house. They would sometimes chair the juries, and they were really passionate. And I think you needed an eye for the documentary and different filmmaking styles. I think the best jurors are the ones who are open to all the different styles and genres, and reach an idea of what a documentary was supposed to be like, and I think that was especially important because the whole documentary style evolved in the 13 years I was there.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And what was their background, the two names you just mentioned?

BRIAN GORDON: They were Stanford graduates. And they won Best of Category in 1989 for their documentary **Isadora Duncan: Movement from the Soul**.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Oh, absolutely!

BRIAN GORDON: God, there's so many, but those people popped into my head. There are plenty of others, believe me. Rick Tejada-Flores was really good. He wasn't there too often, but he stood his ground with contentious juries. I know that he was very good about that. Anyway, there's plenty of others.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I would imagine that New Visions would be an especially difficult category, precisely because as we talked about yesterday, it is so difficult to compare what have to be surreal oranges and expressionist apples. And I'm wondering whether there were jurors that were able to untie that Gordian knot?

BRIAN GORDON: The last two years there, we had some really good people chair that jury. There was Irina Leimbacher. And Kathy Geritz did it the first couple years I was there. I can't remember, but there were other great people. I think for the most part, it got better throughout the years. We were very careful about who was on that jury for a long time, because people had different ideas about what experimental film was. Jack Walsh did it one year. It was people who didn't choose what we wanted them to choose, but they were very thorough. They had an idea of what experimental film was, so they were very open to what it could be; what its potential was.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What it sounds like is you developed a kind of criteria based on the intention of a filmmaker, and you evaluate on that basis rather than the more direct kind of comparisons that you'd make in less experimental kinds of divisions. There's always that problem of you prefer a botched omelet to a beautifully done hard-boiled egg. But what's interesting about the names that you proffer for that category is, these people teach experimental film, and that seems to be an interesting way of training. Did you ever work with Steve Seid on experimental film?

BRIAN GORDON: Steve did Experimental Video the first couple years I was there, but left after a couple years.

RUSSELL MERRITT: With the larger Festival, when the programmers come up dry in Eastern Europe, they all just simply shift the spotlight to other parts of the world. You don't quite have that luxury in Golden Gate Awards. If there're not very many interesting films coming up in New Visions, the category stands. Were there other ways you could tweak the competitions? For example, could you send out calls? "Do you have anything coming out of your university, anything coming out of your department that you could send us?" That kind of thing?

BRIAN GORDON: Well, we had certain films that Peter and Laura and Rachel and Doug and Marie-Pierre and I for that matter, would see at other festivals that we would make sure would get in the competition. What's happened in the last few years is that any sort of documentary or short, if Peter or Rachel or Doug saw it at another festival, it would have to be in the Golden Gate Awards. Even if it was a shoo-in for the Festival, it would make the competition better.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It guaranteed a certain floor that you could build on.

BRIAN GORDON: Yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I see.

BRIAN GORDON: And that's important. It helped the Golden Gate Awards really mean something, and that got people to enter. It was a good thing to do. It really helped the competition.

RUSSELL MERRITT: In my book, that comes under responsibility to the audience, that you've got to get the best things out there, no matter how it may kite things toward celebrity filmmakers versus non-celebrity filmmakers.

BRIAN GORDON: Yes, and that was a really important step, because prior to that, Peter would have a documentary to show in the Festival, but it didn't go through the Golden Gate Awards. So, like, that film **Palms** went through the Golden Gate Awards in '94.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Do you think it should have?

BRIAN GORDON: Well yes, even now, because just to see it win the Golden Gate Award, that would be great.