

San Francisco Film Society
Oral History Project

Interview with Rachel Rosen
Conducted by Russell Merritt
Los Angeles, CA
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RUSSELL MERRITT: I'm talking with Rachel Rosen. It's Independence Day, Fourth of July. It's 11:30, and we are in her apartment. As I understand it, you joined the Film Festival some time around 1990 and 1991. Do you know how they heard about you, what you were doing at the time, and what the background was?

RACHEL ROSEN: How they heard about me? I found them. [LAUGHS] At the time, I was in the middle of getting my Masters degree at Stanford in the documentary film program. I had been a film publicist in New York for about five years. I left that to get my Masters degree. The Stanford program involved a year of coursework, and then you had about as much time as you wanted to finish your degree, which involved making a thesis film. So I had started to make a film, and then I was looking for a summer job, and I got a job at the New York Film Festival, as Director's Liaison, because it just seemed like festivals, because they use so much seasonal work, is a great thing to do as you're working on your own work. And I remember we'd bring the directors backstage and we'd come out, and there would usually be a few people lingering in the hallway, waiting to talk to the director. And one of those people always lingering in the hallway was Peter Scarlet. So I thought, "Oh, yeah, there's a festival in San Francisco. Maybe that would also be a good job." I got in touch with them, and they were looking for someone to do film publicity with Brian that year. And so I applied for the job.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You said before the New York Film Festival you had been working with a publicity agency. Is that right?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I worked at two independent agencies, and I also worked at Tri-Star for a couple years.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So are you from the East Coast, then?

RACHEL ROSEN: I'm from Washington, DC.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So the logic was, they needed someone to work with Brian to publicize. I assume this is before Karen Larsen, or was she already in place?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't know if that's pre- or post-Karen. We had an outside agency, but we also did a lot of work in-house.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What were the surprises, based on your work for the New York Film Festival? Did you discover that it was a radically different kind of operation from what you left behind in New York?

RACHEL ROSEN: It was a radically different operation. The New York Film Festival had a much larger year-round staff. And because they were part of Lincoln Center, there was just a lot more that happened there that was institutionalized. I mean, the ushers were the Lincoln Center ushers. **Playbill** printed the program guide. You know, it wasn't something that had to be churned out in-house. So they only hired a couple of people a year. I was one of the only non-year-round staff at the New York Film Festival. It's also a much smaller festival. They show about 20-something films a year, one at a time, nothing during the day on weekdays. It's very staid, compared to San Francisco, where things were a little bit more chaotic.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So I would expect that your expectation is, OK, a month or so of San Francisco, and then I'll be able to go back to New York.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I was living in San Francisco at the time, because I hadn't finished my degree. So the whole idea was I would shoot my film, and then I'd work on the New York Film Festival. And then I was actually a TA at Stanford at the time that I got the San Francisco job, so I was driving back and forth for a while. But I was living in Palo Alto at the time.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So obviously, it worked out well. What happens then? Was it, you stay in publicity for the next year or so?

RACHEL ROSEN: No. What happened was, that first year I quickly figured out that it looked like the more interesting stuff was happening over in the programming department. I mean, I never wanted to be a publicist. That's why I went back to grad school. But publicity was the skill that I had to offer that first year. And so I think I went to Laura, because the year that I did publicity, George Eldred was the program coordinator. And Laura was pregnant and about to have Caelina. Actually, I can't remember which year she was pregnant. But anyway, George was the program coordinator because it was the only way they were going to get to see each other.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Are we talking about 1991?

RACHEL ROSEN: That would be 1991, yeah. And so I went to her and said, "I'd be interested in being the program coordinator next year." And she and Marie-Pierre tried to talk me out of it. I think they thought that I wouldn't make a good assistant, because I was too far along the path of being in charge. They were saying, "Why would you want to be our assistant? You really would have to file stuff, and if you did publicity, you could be in charge and have a lot more power." And I thought, "No, I want to learn how to do this, and that would be the way to do it."

RUSSELL MERRITT: So already you've cleared up a major misconception I had. Basically, by being in grad school and through temperament, this is a much more congenial job for you than publicity. I had all these questions set up on the assumption that you were coming from publicity and training in publicity, and that you might be applying what you learned there to programming. Am I right that you're coming to something that grad school had already gotten you excited about, that is, looking at films for their own sake, not for their publicity value?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I'm always happy to have had the publicity background. I think it's really important and very helpful. But I think it was just more the idea of, somehow programming was closer to the actual films. And a lot of times, doing publicity for a

festival, I didn't have the opportunity to actually see the films I was pitching because someone would have seen them at a festival, and then I'd be kind of describing what seemed interesting to me based on the press kit. And then I'd see the film and think, like, "What was I thinking?" So it just seemed more interesting to me.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And obviously you were able to convince them that, yes, you'd be the perfect addition to the system between the two of them. I have talked with Laura and get a sense of her relationship with Marie-Pierre. And obviously the dynamics among the three of you are going to be very important because after Laura leaves, you and Marie-Pierre are going to be teammates, and then you will take over the program altogether. So it's a remarkable kind of ladder that you're climbing. Tell me about the earliest impressions you had. Was there anything more than doing clerical work that you were asked to do in '91-'92? Were you able to screen films and make an impact on what was being shown?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I definitely approached it very much as a novice, so mostly I was doing clerical work. But Laura did ask me to look at some shorts, I remember, and suggest some to her, and I did. And I don't think she liked any of them then. [LAUGHS] But I was very aware of wanting to absorb as much from them as I possibly could, and to figure out how it worked.

RUSSELL MERRITT: When would you say you were first an active co-partner with the three of them? Laura has these wonderful recollections of the three of you at her house, having slumber parties...

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, screening movies.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And all of you watching videotapes, defrosting the pasta and the pesto, and just going at it.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, '91 was the year I did publicity, so it might have started a little bit in '92. I was probably just a little intimidated by the two of them the first year. For no good reason, because Laura's probably the most welcoming person in the world. They were both extremely generous about bringing me into the process. So, we would screen together, and we would all go over to Laura's house. Sometimes we would all go over to Peter's house, and Edith would come too, so the five of us would sometimes screen things at his house. And it was lovely to be included. I don't think I contributed very much at that point, because when you're sitting in a room with those personalities—I'm sure I told them what I thought, but for me, I more remember, at least that first year, as just kind of absorbing the process and the information and how they talked about films and made decisions.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But you're plainly a fast learner, because by '94, the apprenticeship is over, and you are being asked to make judgments and to recommend films all on your own. When Laura talks, she describes the areas of special interest: Peter had Eastern Europe, France, Russia. She talks about Marie-Pierre's particular enthusiasm for African films. She herself becomes very interested in Chinese film. How about you? What would you say caught your eye, where you wanted to pitch for?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I started out with a very strong interest in documentary films, because that was what I was studying at the time. That was really what excited me. And one of the things I love about the San Francisco Film Festival is that they have such a great array of international documentary. So that was definitely the first thing. And then as time went on, I became more and more interested in Asian films, which I hadn't had a lot of exposure to before then.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So would you be visiting film festivals and going to film markets at a certain point, or was that left to Peter and Marie-Pierre and Laura?

RACHEL ROSEN: What happened was, I was the program coordinator in '92 and '93. And at that time, I don't think I did any traveling. Then in '93, that was the year I

graduated from Stanford. And through Freude Bartlett, who had been writing the program guide, I was recommended for a job at Film Forum in New York. That was the other thing that I had done right from '92. They asked me to write some program notes. I moved to New York in the fall of '93 to work at Film Forum, which I hated. I mean, I love Film Forum, but Film Forum was kind of the opposite of San Francisco, meaning Karen Cooper, who had run it all her life—could run it with one hand tied behind her back—whereas San Francisco, I had input way beyond my stature at the company, right? I mean, I was basically an assistant, but I could, by that second year, lobby for films and have some influence. When I got to New York, it was different. The job just wasn't as interesting for me, personally.

RUSSELL MERRITT: She herself had complete control over programming, and you were presented with a fait accompli?

RACHEL ROSEN: I was allowed to recommend things, but the final decision was hers. The number of films we were showing was limited. So I didn't feel that I was making quite as much of a contribution. Then in the fall of '94, Laura contacted me and asked me if I wanted to come back as a programmer.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that's toward the end of her career at San Francisco, so now it's you and Marie-Pierre that are dividing the kingdom. Were you traveling at that point?

RACHEL ROSEN: That's when I started traveling for the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Can you tell me about that, impressions, what personalities in film festivals you encountered?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think I might have gone to Toronto. That might have been the first festival that I went to.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that would have been about '93 or so?

RACHEL ROSEN: That actually would have been September of '94.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So that must have made an impression, the first time you went to the Toronto Film Festival. Is that the one that's called "The Festival of Festivals?"

RACHEL ROSEN: It used to be, yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Do you have any memories of it; the responsibilities, the excitements, what you saw there that you wanted?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember any particular film, sadly. I mean, I do remember getting there and realizing I didn't know exactly where I was supposed to go to pick up my stuff, and feeling a little bit lost and confused. I must have gone to Montreal that same year, too. Montreal would have been the first.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And how did the two festivals compare, by the way, Montreal and Toronto?

RACHEL ROSEN: The films are better at Toronto. I mean, Montreal is a very easy festival to access. You can just ping-pong from movie to movie, and yet, they have a lot of movies that are pretty good, so you stay through the whole thing and then you wonder why at the end. [LAUGHS] So it's not bad enough to send you out of the theater, but not good enough to want to show.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So Toronto was a much better fishing pool.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And I know that when Peter and Laura would go to those international film festivals, an important part of it was making contacts. Were there particular contacts that you made in Montreal or Toronto that you found useful?

RACHEL ROSEN: You know, it was more a question of solidifying contacts that I might have made already through Laura or Peter or the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Or through Film Forum or through your background and your film festival, sure. Were there any names that come to mind that you found particularly valuable, that came back to you over again as a way of either getting a film or getting recommendations for films?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I definitely remember meeting the people from Fortissimo. I think I met Wouter through Laura, but at the time it was Wouter and Helen Loveridge. They definitely had a lot of the good films at the time, and it was clear that having a good relationship with them was important. I mean, I liked them, so that was easy, too.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right, which is exactly what is wonderful to hear about, because we're trying to get a sense of what that community was like. Can you tell us a little bit more about Helen and Wouter?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think I met Wouter the first time in San Francisco. He was in San Francisco and he came by the office with Marcus Hu. It's funny because when people come by the office, you know, he just seemed like a nice guy stopping by the office, and it was only as the years went on I kind of figured out, "Oh, he's like a nice guy who's really important and has the key to a lot of really good films," so it was kind of nice to come at it through the personal introduction and then figure out that he was an important person, instead of meeting him and thinking, "This is an important person that I should get to know."

RUSSELL MERRITT: How about Helen? Did she also work with Fortissimo?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes, and I don't remember when I met her, because I know I met Wouter first.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Any impression of her or what kinds of films, or anything that would help us get a sense of how she contributed?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I tell you what—I mean, you can only see things through your own lens, and what I remember most—not just about her, but about a lot of the people that I met—was how predisposed they were to be nice to me because I was from the San Francisco Film Festival. There might have been a few people who didn't have good relationships with San Francisco, but the way that people approached you had to do with the family you came from, the San Francisco Film Festival being that family.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well this is itself interesting to know, because it's one of the things that it's hard for an outsider to get a sense of, the reputation of San Francisco, beyond the Bay Area itself, that on the one hand, I keep on coming up with this feeling that it's undervalued, that the superstars are Telluride and maybe Sundance and, of course, the European film festivals, but that we don't get the radar screen with that intensity in the popular press. But it sounds as though—and just tell me if this is anywhere near accurate—that among the insiders, San Francisco was well regarded.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, yeah. I mean, I think what's happened is that it has such a long history that at one time, it was way more important in the scope of things than it has come to be now. And there's been just a huge shift in the world of festivals in the past 20 years. But at the time I started, it was right when that Sundance explosion was happening and right when the proliferation of other festivals was happening. And San Francisco was not, even then, as important as Cannes or Berlin, but by virtue of its having been around for so long and made so many daring choices over the years, it was well regarded by the people who had been working in film for a while. I just remember, I could always call up and say, "We showed Mr. So-and-So's first film in 1962, and it would be a pleasure to

show his new one,” so there was always that kind of weight of history. You know, we would always have shown the person’s films before they were popular, before they were as famous as they became, and so there was some history that people had with the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that was leverage.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes, absolutely.

RUSSELL MERRITT: By the time you are visiting these first festivals, the competition must have been fierce. I think I count nine major festivals begun in the ’70s. So by the ’90s, it is a smaller pond with more fish. And I’m just wondering, did you feel that there were other festivals competing for the titles that you were interested in?

RACHEL ROSEN: Always.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You mentioned already one argument that you used, that, “We have shown his films before; we’d like to show them again.” Were there other arguments, say, that had to do with the timing of the San Francisco Film Festival, or the prestige of it, that you could use? And were you generally successful?

RACHEL ROSEN: It really depended. It was interesting coming from Film Forum. I mean, Film Forum had its advantages, because we were paying a rental, and it was a theatrical release. But even so, there were some organizations that would work with San Francisco that didn’t want to work with Film Forum, and vice versa.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Do you remember a particular title that you were very excited to get, that you had to work hard for?

RACHEL ROSEN: I’m so bad on the particulars, that I don’t think I’m going to be able to come up with an example, because what happens is, you fight for the films, and then

some of them get away from you, and you're upset that you didn't get to show them. And then the Festival comes around and you just fall in love with whatever you got. So I think I've been pretty good at just realizing that a certain percentage are going to be lost each year, and then just erasing them from my memory.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well I can give you a little background. In '93 and '94, these are the kind of things that were happening. In '93, that was the year that the Novikoff Award went to Andrew Sarris, that Ousmane Sembène from Senegal comes to get the Kurosawa award, and that Sally Potter gets the Satyajit Ray Award.

RACHEL ROSEN: I actually had a film in the Festival in '94.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Tell me! What was the film?

RACHEL ROSEN: It was my thesis film from Stanford. It was a short film called **Serious Weather**.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And this was about weather chasers?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, tornado chasers.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So was this related to that Hollywood movie that came out later?

RACHEL ROSEN: No, though I did run into a team of researchers who were working on that one at the same time.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's wonderful! So let's turn to '94. So this, in some ways, is a memorable Film Festival, in that it may be the most esoteric Film Festival in the history of San Francisco. It has films from Syria, Tajikistan, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Tanzania, Haiti. The winner of the Satyajit Ray Award was the director of **Palms**, Artur Aristakisian, about the lives of the Moldavian homeless. The man who wins the

Kurosawa Award had never had a film released in the United States, Manoel de Oliveira, so that he was purely film festival material. If I'm not mistaken, I think it was the next year, or maybe that year, that Gerard Depardieu shows up, and he doesn't show a Disney film; he will show one of the most obscure of the Godard films. But those are the main personalities that are coming. Lynn Hershman is receiving a screening from her work at UC Davis. Robert Kramer is honored, Jonathan Demme, Alain Renais is supposed to come but doesn't. The silent films are very strong that year—**The Goat** and **Safety Last**—because there's a postage stamp that's being debuted on silent films; Serbian epics, and—ah, yes, of course—the American independents are going to return because of the brouhaha. One of the things you may have noticed when you were showing your film is that there was a tremendous outcry about the cancellation of the New Visions category of the Golden Gate Award—a category that Laura had created and then withdrew—and there was a tremendous outcry among the Bay Area independents.

RACHEL ROSEN: Oh, yeah. They started a letter-writing campaign.

RUSSELL MERRITT: They did. I know Steve Seid was involved, and of course, the Cinematheque and so on. But anyway, that is what an outsider might have seen in '94. In fact, American independents are the films that are attracting the press, because of the brouhaha that had preceded them. Then, Spike Lee returns. And that might be a good example of what you were talking about; the famous introduction of **She's Gotta Have It** at an earlier Film Festival made him very agreeable to return with **Crooklyn**. And then there's **The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb**, Almodovar's **Kika** shows up with Bibi Andersen. There's an opera festival. And there's a GATT roundtable with Saul Zaentz and the rest.

RACHEL ROSEN: I didn't have much to do with those big things. Those are all things that Peter would work on. The things I remember being impressed by was **The Beginning and the End**, the Ripstein film, which I loved. But I still can't remember how it came to us, or **Dreamgirls**, which was the first Kim Longinotto documentary that I

think we had shown at the Festival. I thought it was fantastic, and we went on to show a lot of her work as the years went on.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Now, one reason that '94 is such an important year is that despite increasing attendance figures, despite increasing revenues coming into the Festival from the audience, it is a financial catastrophe.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And '95 is just as bad, and maybe even worse. And so there is suddenly a crisis in the board, and welcome, Rachel! These are the years that you get to co-run the show, particularly after '95. And I'm wondering whether you felt any kind of pressure, or were even aware of it?

RACHEL ROSEN: Oh, I was definitely aware. But really, to be honest, I had my number of films that I could program in the beginning. And that was my contribution. So Peter was calling the shots in terms of the major decisions being made, or Peter and Laura were working that out. I do remember the feeling that each year, it was always kind of a question mark whether there would be a festival the next year.

RUSSELL MERRITT: After '95 that became even discussed among the board.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, of course.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But '95 would have been the year your travel is getting started in Canada. What happens then? After Montreal and Toronto and a year or so, you're going to other places.

RACHEL ROSEN: Sure. I had started going to Rotterdam when I was at Film Forum, so I continued going there sometimes, Vancouver to see Tony Rayns' selection of Asian films.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would you say that was what hooked you on Asian films, was going to Vancouver?

RACHEL ROSEN: I would say it solidified an interest that was growing anyway. And I think it might have been the year that Peter got a hotel room that was too big in Cannes, and so Peter, Marie-Pierre and I all ended up in Cannes. It was either in '95 or '96. Got hooked on that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That must have been fabulous. That was your first time to Cannes.

RACHEL ROSEN: It was, yeah. And no better way to go than with Marie-Pierre, because having been a projectionist there, she knew everyone. She took me to parties I never would have gotten into and have never been invited to since.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Tell me about the parties. Tell me about the movies. How did that seem? What do you remember about Cannes?

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember we were sharing this hotel room, which had one little room with a single bed, where Peter was staying, and Marie-Pierre and I were staying in a double bed. And they'd bring in these fabulous breakfasts with the butter and everything, and Marie-Pierre and I would be in the bed, and Peter would answer the door, and I thought, "What must these people be thinking about what is going on in this room? You know, mogul and his two mistresses."

RUSSELL MERRITT: It's very French.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. And I remember Marie-Pierre took me to this party at a chateau up in the hills. It was the party for **L.A. Confidential**. And when we left they literally gave us a suitcase full of giveaway stuff, a little gym bag full of stuff. It was all

junk, but it just completely impressed me. And since then, people have remembered that party as being a standout party. For me, it was just the first one I ever went to. It was up at this beautiful chateau, and there was this dinner, and there was a big fountain there, and it was—

RUSSELL MERRITT: I would assume that the actors attended.

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember seeing any of the actors, honestly. I just remember the lavishness of the surroundings.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And again, I come back to the question, how about contacts? Do you remember meeting anyone at Cannes that became important to you or important to the Festival? Were you asked to seek out people?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember ever being asked to seek people out. I think I just kind of figured out that that was the way it worked and that was my job. And to be honest, Cannes is not a great place to do that. I find Rotterdam or Toronto or smaller festivals to be better suited to that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So this was mainly to scout out films.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And did you carve the pie with Marie-Pierre as to who would cover what? Did it work that way, or was it just, "I'll do the morning shows, you do the afternoon," that kind of thing?

RACHEL ROSEN: It's funny, because I do that now with Doug; we say, "I'll cover the competition; you cover this," and I don't remember ever being that specific about it. I think we all just went to what we wanted to go see.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though by then, Asian films would have been on your radar screen.

RACHEL ROSEN: Absolutely.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And I guess that it would come naturally, with American films and, of course, you said documentaries. Do you remember anything that you saw? It is one of the great strengths of the San Francisco Film Festival that the documentary—and I would say animation—kinds of focuses. Would I be right in assuming that you're helping—if not that there would be more documentaries—that you're a voice for, "Let's try and fit a documentary into the schedule."

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. It's funny because you hear people talk about San Francisco or Sundance having to fight for films. Even though we didn't all agree on what movies, I don't remember it ever being like a fight for it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Let me ask it this way: there had been a point where after what I'll call an apprenticeship, that Peter and Laura started to trust you; that is, they didn't have to see the films that you recommended.

RACHEL ROSEN: Right. Actually, I think it was '95. I think I might have been the only person in Rotterdam that year, and I brought back some films from Rotterdam, like **Mother Dao, the Turtlelike**, which was this very strange film from the Netherlands, all done with archival footage and a kind of poetic voiceover. I just remember coming back, saying, "There may be 40 people in the audience for this, but I think we should show it." And I do remember seeing that film and going and writing a note and leaving it at the hotel for the director, who ended up coming to the Festival. And at the same time, I also saw **The New Legend of Shaolin**, which was a Hong Kong/Taiwan action movie with a bunch of cute little kids in it—on the other end of the spectrum—and bringing that back.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though part of the visit is that if you run into a director whose film you've liked, that you could make the deal, even at the Festival.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes. And in fact, now I also remember a big battle to get **The Kingdom**. We originally had permission to show it and then, just completely unexpectedly to me, October Films picked it up, because this did not seem like the kind of thing that would be picked up by a distributor at the time, being a 279-minute-long series [LAUGHS]. And I remember begging, like trying to find the person at October who would give us permission, and trying to keep the film in the Festival, keep them from taking it out.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Am I right in following you that the fact **The Kingdom** finds a distributor might be—I'm answering my own question—that October wouldn't want you to debut a film in San Francisco that they were distributing?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. That might not fit in with their plans for releasing the film. But that one, I remember, was also a battle to get it from the start, actually. There were definitely people I would try and track down in Rotterdam and meet and tell how much we wanted the film.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But did you get them?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, in that case we did. Sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But you would be going after either the filmmaker or, I assume, the distributor.

RACHEL ROSEN: Or a sales agent. The sales agents are always the toughest. I mean, in some ways, the director or producer, you're offering them a trip to come to San Francisco, which is also another incentive to get people to come to the Festival. A distributor, you're offering them some level of recognition or publicity. But a sales agent

is really interested in selling their film. And at that point, that wasn't really happening so much in San Francisco. And they're not the person who's going to get to come.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's so interesting, because I know—we're now going back maybe a couple decades from the '90s—but I remember one scandal, that one of the great virtues of offering prizes to candidates is it's an incentive to salesmen and to a distributor, and that San Francisco made a deliberate choice not to give theatrical releases that might be in competition with Hollywood films awards. And the scandal was that there were some festivals that would actually guarantee a prize if you would open your film with them, these festivals remaining nameless. Did you ever want to do that, that idea that if you could get the prize, we would be interested in your—

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I definitely think that some European countries are only interested in being in competitions, because prizes mean a lot to them. So the fact that there was no competition—

RUSSELL MERRITT: So you'd say that the New York Festival offers—

RACHEL ROSEN: No prizes, but New York is very prestigious because every film in New York, because there are only two a day, got a **New York Times** review. It's like gambling, but that's a big incentive.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that brings up another issue that Laura raised, which may be relevant to what films you could get and what you couldn't get. She was expressing frustration with the San Francisco press, that they didn't go further in getting excited about the difficult films, the head-scratchers, the esoteric films. And she exempted Judy Stone from this, who she thought was just wonderful. But from your perspective, was the press effective? When you say the **New York Times**, I wonder whether there was any equivalent source like Herb Caen.

RACHEL ROSEN: I think I came in and it was sort of a given that this frustration existed, that there wasn't more excitement on the part of the **Chronicle** about the Festival. I remember, even back when I was doing publicity, I got like a wakeup call that was so strong that it was just a given. I called one critic because there was a movie that I thought he might want to see. I called him and I was pitching him this movie, and he basically said, "Well, I'm not assigned to review this movie." And I was saying, "Yeah, I get that. I'm not even telling you to write about it; I'm just kind of thinking that this is a film that might interest you." And he said, "Well, basically I really don't like to go to see movies unless I'm assigned to write about them." I was just dumbfounded. I mean, I'm sure that's not the case, and I'm sure he does actually watch a lot of movies that he's not writing about, but I thought, "You're the film critic for a major paper, and you're only going to see a movie if you're paid?" And maybe he was just trying to get me off the phone and he wasn't interested in the movie I was trying to pitch him at all. But I remember it was **The Bride with White Hair**, or some Hong Kong movie. And I was thinking, "This is going to be a major influence; it's a major wave of films coming in. And it's really fun." I just thought he would enjoy it. Anyway, I was like, "OK, if that's what we're facing, then"—I mean, I think the **Guardian** was great. The **Guardian** was a different animal. They were much more active. They would come see everything. And they were a little cranky in their attitude, and there was definitely the influence of the **Guardian** on things, like taking away that award, and they would always kind of tell you what they thought the Festival should be, or complain about local films that they knew about that weren't in the Festival. So there was definitely a kind of crankiness to their coverage. But in some ways that was preferable to indifference, because at least they were engaging with the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It occurred to me that the readership of the **Guardian** would be your—

RACHEL ROSEN: That was our audience. But that's a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the readership for the **Guardian** was our audience because no one was writing about the Festival in the **Chronicle**. I mean, I don't think the films were so difficult or esoteric that

the general public wouldn't have been interested. But apparently the **Chronicle** editors did.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I'm afraid it hasn't done any better. It sounds as though you certainly had your audience.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I was about to say, what's kind of telling about it is that the lack of coverage didn't really affect the popularity of the Festival. The audience was so enthusiastic that they knew how to find us, even though there were no signposts from the major press along the way.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And one of the things that I had noticed is that even when Judy would do a nice cover story for the Pink Section, that she and the others would have, of course, their favorites. But then, when you look at the ones that actually the audience has found, and I always thought that was a remarkable thing, because without a press, how does an audience find a movie? I wonder whether, in fact, you could comment on this, because it always struck me as something remarkable about film festival audiences. Here you are asked to pay a significant amount of money to see a film from a director that you never heard of, with actors you've never heard of, sometimes from a country you barely could identify, and yet, they came.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, I think that's particular to San Francisco in a lot of ways. I think that happens in some cities and not in others. But there's definitely a sort of appetite in San Francisco for people to challenge themselves. And what I always remember is, it would be foolhardy to gamble on what film would sell out first in the Festival, and yet, looking back, it would seem obvious that it was always one of the more difficult ones that would be the first to go. I remember one year where we were showing Nicole Holofcener's **Walking and Talking**—straight from the Sundance Film Festival, big success, American indie—and it didn't sell very well. It was in that big auditorium in the Kabuki, and we had to close the balcony, and I felt a little apologetic when they came. But I think that was the year that Chris Marker's ten-part documentary on Greek

intellectuals was the first thing to sell out, which, I mean, in any other city, it would probably have been the other way around.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And it might explain why there's this curiosity about the Film Festival—and maybe it's true of the L.A. Film Festival and the others, but it's certainly true of San Francisco—but **Variety** loves to talk about a film having legs, and these films get cut off at the thighs. They do fantastically well in San Francisco, and yet, one after another, they don't do well when picked up by a distributor.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. It may just be that the audience that finds it, that sells it out, is the entirety of the audience. When you think about it, a Chris Marker series may not be for every taste, but there's also something about the intellectual community in San Francisco, where they want to be the leaders and want to be the people discovering that material, so that once it's picked up and out in the world, it's maybe a little less exciting. Another thing that was always an issue in San Francisco is that audience members would get really pissed off if they went to something and then learned that it was going to be released later, as opposed to other festivals, where the ones with the big stars that are going to be released later are always the big sellouts, and people just kind of want to be the first on their block. In San Francisco it was very much that they wanted to have a chance to see the stuff that they would never get to see otherwise, and that's why those things were popular, I think.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What a great analysis. I wonder whether it's a variation of the enthusiasm other festivals have for being the first to show something that will later be shown around the country. The thing that makes San Francisco thrive is that "I'm the only person who's seen it."

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, and there were plenty of things like that at the San Francisco Film Festival, things from TV in other countries that didn't go on the festival circuit.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Was there a discrepancy between the press' love of being able to say, for the first time in the United States, first time on the West Coast, and the Festival's philosophy, more or less, of indifference to that. Or was there indifference to that? Obviously if something was going to premiere at San Francisco, that would be great, but that didn't sound, from what you're saying—and from what Laura was telling me—a terribly important priority.

RACHEL ROSEN: Having been in L.A., it's a completely different perspective, which has to do with the trades and the whole fixation on world premieres I don't remember being as aware of in San Francisco. Now, part of my suspicion is that it just wasn't as important generally, until the last few years, when "world premiere" might equal sale, might equal industry. And there's a whole kind of business interest. That might have been going on at other festivals, but it certainly was not a prevalent issue for us.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would it be fair to say that one reason for the relative obscurity of San Francisco among the superstar festivals is precisely because it was not a market-driven kind of festival, and so therefore, you're not getting the kind of buzz that would come from publicists and distributors wanting to draw attention to their movies?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. And look, those big festival things come from lots of press, which we didn't have, or business, which we didn't have. One of the things I loved about San Francisco was the kind of purity, meaning it was really designed for its own audience. And even though we were looking to the world in terms of content, really, that was only to be successful enough to get more films the next year for the audience that the Festival was for.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So with that in mind, let me take you to the years where you are really exerting a powerful influence over the Festival. This would start, I would say, in '96 and '97, when you and Marie-Pierre are doing the programming. And it corresponds with a change in the oversight of these operations. Barbara Stone comes in '95, she lasts through '96. And then she's followed by Amy Leissner, from '97 up to 2000, and then

Roxanne for the next four years. And one explanation for this was a concern about the deficits that were accruing, and another seems to be a reorientation with the Festival. I mention '94 being perhaps the most esoteric year ever. And it seems to me that from '95 onward, there was an effort at finding more accessible films, more accessible events; playing up galas, things like that. And first I'd like a general comment, whether that's an accurate perception, and then generally, what pressures, if any, you felt when shopping for movies.

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember it quite that way. I definitely remember there was a concern with the deficits. And my impression was that the board thought that we had become some kind of ridiculously corrupt organization, in that there wasn't enough discipline or oversight, and that Barbara was brought in to clean up Dodge. And that might have been an impression that she gave. The first thing she did was come in and review our vacation policy and decide that we were all getting too much vacation time. And the only reason someone would do that is if the board lead them to believe that somehow we're goofing off. I think that Peter's passion for the kind of films that he loved sometimes led him to make decisions that weren't the best for the overall future fiscal security of the organization, but I never felt like people were just goofing off or trying to get away with something, or trying to be elitists. In terms of when we started the award gala and stuff like that, I always felt like there was a tipping of the hat to those sort of bigger events, but that the core of the programming didn't really change significantly, and that yes, you can open it up, and at some point we started giving that Piper-Heidsieck award to an actor, and that's a little bit more mainstreamy and glitzy. So the idea was like, "OK, we can have something for the rich people and the Hollywood people, but they're not going to come every day to the Festival, so we'll just throw them a few events, which is fine, because that's not going to change the integrity of the Festival as it exists." That was always my impression. I don't remember anyone even intimating that we should go find more accessible films for the general public.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's important to know. So you're attending the same festivals as before.

RACHEL ROSEN: Absolutely.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You have the same passions. One of the surprises, again, for an outsider, is that all these revenues accounted for about 25 to 30 percent of the overall budget, and then another 10 percent from fees and programs, Golden Gate Award revenue. And that left a whopping 50 percent-plus from the sponsors. And I wondered whether you felt, when you were programming, that sponsors needed to be attended to, a films that would be easy for them to show clients, that would be easier to take their families to, things like that.

RACHEL ROSEN: Again, if you look back at the program, even from the most esoteric year, there always were—I mean, we weren't obscurists; there were always things in there that would be accessible and sponsorable, and they were balanced with things that you wouldn't point a sponsor to in a million years. The spectrum was there. I don't remember what year it was when Stewart McKeough came from Toronto to do development. He was actually the first development person that I remember strongly. And that was the first time someone asked us to make some concessions to make development easier. Until then it was really that organization, more than any festival I've worked for, that supported the vision of the programmers. Everything was in place to support the vision of the programmers. And I remember resisting Stuart's idea that we break the Festival into sections like Toronto does. He had come from Toronto.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Tell me what Toronto does.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well Toronto has World Cinema, Latin American Cinema—at the time it was a little different than it is now. And as you can see, we'd always kind of adamantly done an A through Z listing. And he would say, "Would you ever consider doing a spotlight on national cinema, like, say, this year, we're going to highlight the cinema of France?" And I think a lot of other festivals do that, because then you go to the government of France and you get a bunch of money for it. We always resisted that

because it would be like, well how do you know, when you're deciding in August that you're going to do that, that it's a good year for the cinema of France? There's no way to tell in advance. And that's why we always resisted doing it. That's one of the things I consider suspect, but it's commonplace in festivals around the world, like, "All right, who's got money?" "German cinema." "OK, let's do a section of German films; they'll support it." So we kept resisting, but we did end up breaking the Festival into sections. Again, as long as no one was saying, "Program more or less of this kind of films," somehow they convinced us that this would make it easier for them to market the films and to get money for them.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What about identity issues? That is to say, because you have no control over what's going to be strong in a given year and the rest, you're not going to go that way, but San Francisco is famous for its interest groups: Gay/Lesbian, Asian cinema, Black cinema, and the list goes on. To this day, Graham Leggat cannot get through a press conference without being asked, "How come there aren't more women directors," and so on. Were you at all conscious of that as you were cherry-picking?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, absolutely. One of the things about San Francisco that's so great and so terrible is that people felt a sense of ownership about the Festival and felt very deeply committed to what they thought it should be. And so every year, there would be an outcry about something. I remember the entire time I was there that there was a constant rumbling about the fact that there were no programmers of color on the staff.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And in fact, was there an effort to accommodate that?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think the thinking was always that as long as the program reflected diversity, it shouldn't matter who was programming. I don't know because I wasn't really involved so much with the hiring, but I do remember Peter being—not dismissive—I think he wasn't ideologically opposed to the idea, but then there was the practicality of having programmers that he could work with who shared a certain sensibility, and he felt like the programming was diverse, so he had a certain kind of impatience with all the

criticisms from outside. The bottom line was, we wanted the program to be as diverse as it could be, but we weren't just going to show a film to show a film. The bottom line was quality.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I have to say, I asked Laura, since Brian had no obvious background in running the Golden Gate Awards, what was it about him that encouraged her to hire him and recommend him to Peter. And she answered in one word: passion. And it sounds as though that seems to be the driving criterion, that you have to be able to keep insane hours; your enthusiasm has to be yearlong. It makes this notion about spending too much time on vacation a very odd one, that I never heard before, that there may be just too much free time.

RACHEL ROSEN: [LAUGHS] Exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: In fact, I have a bit of trivia to ask you. One of the things that so struck me about Laura discussing her advent—of course, this is not just before email; it's before faxes—and that you are up until two in the morning to help Europe greet the day. And I wondered whether that was part of your era as well, whether you just had to be dependent upon an international timetable?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I never had to learn how to use the Teletype machine. But I remember hearing Laura and Marie-Pierre talk about the Teletype machine. And the era of videocassettes was starting, but it was also an era where we'd have to get prints shipped in to look at them. I remember sitting in the conference room of the Film Society, watching a Gregg Araki movie on our 16mm projector. We would be projecting for ourselves and then returning the prints; there was a lot of print shipping going back and forth. And I do definitely remember setting the alarm clock and waking up in the middle of the night in my pajamas and calling Europe, absolutely. I have to say I still do that from time to time. Email has made things a lot easier, but when you really need an answer you gotta get up and pick up the phone.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So that aspect of it is a constant; probably more difficult back then than now, but still something that comes with the job description. Now, you're in the midst of programming. What festivals do you continue to seek out, now that you and Marie-Pierre are running the show? You mentioned Cannes. You mentioned Rotterdam. The London Film Festival, would that be important for you?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember that being important. I do remember at a certain point Pusan started. And Peter went to the first Pusan festival. And then I got to go to the next one. And I also remember for years trying to get Peter to go to San Sebastian. One of those more constant criticisms was about Spanish-language films, and how we didn't have enough of them in the program. And so, A, I thought that would be a good place to see Spanish-language films, but, B, I thought, that's a festival I've always wanted to go to, and maybe it will be like Pusan, and Peter will go, and then grow tired of it and then I'll be able to go. But unfortunately, that one he fell in love with, and that became sort of a regular trip for him. [LAUGHS]

RUSSELL MERRITT: How about Latin American festivals? I know Laura went to Cuba.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, the thing about Latin American festivals is, a lot of them are hard for non-Spanish-language speakers, which is why I was encouraging Peter to go to San Sebastian, because it's a little easier to see the Latin American product in Spain, because there was more subtitling. I think that Havana festival was a little chaotic in terms of—

RUSSELL MERRITT: Absolutely no subtitles, and you had an interpreter who would selectively translate.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I don't know, but wouldn't there be festivals in Rio de Janeiro, or—

RACHEL ROSEN: There was a big festival in Rio. I don't remember us going there. That was before Buenos Aires came on the scene and got very popular, although the timing was right at the same time as San Francisco when they started. So, I don't remember that ever being a big one.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Because I would think that that would be a legitimate criticism of the selection process, that you really need a Spanish-speaking programmer to take advantage of a considerable Latino population.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, Marie-Pierre speaks Spanish, so she was it until she left. And she was probably the person on the staff who was most interested in Spanish-language programming. And it's funny, because like any festival, we had our regulars. Like everyone on the staff loved Ripstein, so anything Ripstein did, we were going to show. But I think it's probably true that in terms of discovering new talents, we were much more on top of doing that for young Chinese directors than we were for young Latin American directors. But to be fair, I think there's a renaissance happening now with young filmmakers in Latin America that wasn't happening during the time I was in San Francisco. And really at the time, Argentinean filmmaking was a couple of kind of big budgety things that looked like Hollywood movies, except they were in Spanish.

RUSSELL MERRITT: In fact, that becomes a general criticism. That was actually one of the things I was very interested in your comments on. One of the prices that the Hollywood hegemony creates is a kind of mentality that many programmers would notice, particularly in Europe, that the object is to score big in the United States, and you do that by getting your product to look as much like a Hollywood comedy or dramatic film as possible, and that that wasn't always the case, that, for example, Marie-Pierre noticed that it's really in the mid-'90s that that starts to become an obvious pattern, and may be one explanation for the enervating quality of European product.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I think the mid-'90s seems to be the era of European co-financing, which is part of the problem, because it's not just making it big in the United States; it's that if you've got some German money and some French money and some Italian money, then you end up with these movies that are kind of confused, because they've got stars from different countries. It's what I remember Peter used to call the "Euro-pudding movies," where this co-financing made more money, bigger expectations, and it did all sort of start to seem bland and uninteresting.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Have you detected a similar pattern for Chinese films, Taiwanese films, Hong Kong films and the rest?

RACHEL ROSEN: No. I mean, what's interesting about Chinese films was that there was always a big dichotomy: There were the official films, which were the films made by big Chinese studios, which were more made to appeal to the entire population, so were a little bit more mainstream, at least in terms of outlook. And we showed some of them. It's not that they weren't good. And then there were the illegal films—the outsider films, the independent films—that started coming in the early '90s, which were very different in flavor. So what happens with some movements like that is with the independent films, sometimes they start getting more commercialized as they go on, but that didn't happen. I mean, it's not like the Chinese market opened up immediately. So I think that independent filmmaking movement stayed very fresh for a long time.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Of course, you were riding the crest of the Sixth Generation movement that comes. I heard the only effort at political intervention in the Festival came from the Chinese Embassy, or the Consulate, where they rather indirectly were suggesting that it might be better not to show films from Taiwan, and that evidently their argument was so naïve that you had no idea what they were talking about.

RACHEL ROSEN: It's so funny; one of the things I've grown to love about festivals is, I basically learned about the world and world politics. And half of what I know comes from either films I've seen or working at the Festival. But we ask everyone to fill out

registration forms. This was back in '91, when I was the program coordinator. And everyone fills it out. I remember the ones from Taiwan came in, saying "Taiwan, ROC; Taiwan, Republic of China." As the program coordinator, I just put down whatever the country wanted to be called. And that was part of this big thing with the Chinese Consulate, because were we going to call it Taiwan? They were very offended that we called it—

RUSSELL MERRITT: ROC.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So I wonder whether that wasn't the inspiration to give Peter and Laura a call.

RACHEL ROSEN: I think it might have been. And yet, for me, it was naïveté. It was, "This is what their form says, and so this is what I'm going to write down."

RUSSELL MERRITT: Of course, you were at the Festival when the earth moved, that you had, of course, the '89 revolutions that result in the fracture of the Soviet Union, with all the subsequent liberation movements, from Berlin to Eastern Europe and the like. And there would be individual cases of a kind of cold-war experience, where someone was coming from an Eastern European country, like the former Yugoslavia, with family more or less being held captive and so on. When you were there, were there any politically sensitive films that were being programmed with the appearance of politically sensitive filmmakers?

RACHEL ROSEN: There were. This is where my memory is not so specific. What I do remember is one of those waking-up-at-three-in-the-morning things, having to do with helping people get their visas to get into the country. I remember the human interest ones more. Maybe it was Kenovic who came, whose mother needed a hip replacement.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSEN: So, I do remember that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That made it into Herb Caen.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly, exactly. So it was more that I was aware—again, as naïve as I was then—of people coming who didn't have any currency. I remember Russian directors coming, or people from the former Soviet Union, and we just kept giving them Festival t-shirts, because they'd come in their one suit for the whole week, which is kind of different from people coming from the West.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But it does seem that, if I could put words into your mouth, that the phenomenon that you saw, to use Peter's phrase, "Euro-pudding," does not apply so much to non-European films, that you don't find that pattern in Africa or India, Asia.

RACHEL ROSEN: No. In pockets you do. I think the Thai filmmaking industry was comprised almost entirely of almost plagiaristic remakes of American movies, until a certain point, when it started being more interesting, independent. I remember seeing a Thai movie at Toronto, and I was like, "Oh, that's **The Village of the Damned**." But this new sense of kind of watering things down to appeal to a Western sensibility was entirely European. But that's not to say—As I was saying, from Latin America, we would get these movies that weren't Hollywood, but they were clearly designed for the popular audience of their own country. So it wasn't that they were looking at the U.S. as a market, but they also didn't have whatever that stroke of individuality was that we were looking for in programming. They were very clearly commercial vehicles for their own country. And that was true of a lot of the Middle Eastern films, too.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It occurs to me that with your specialties in documentary, that that must have put you in the orbit of Brian, because the Golden Gate Awards was so heavily devoted to documentaries of a wide variety. Can you talk about how that worked?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, the Golden Gate Awards, it was always kind of a strange arrangement, because it was the competitive section for a certain kind of film, yet we didn't show all the winners, and we would show that kind of film that didn't go through the Golden Gate Awards. So one of the things we would try and do was get people to—if we knew that a film was out there—to go through the Awards, instead of just taking a documentary from outside and inviting it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So that was your first preference, is to have them submit it.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. But then sometimes they'd submit and they wouldn't win anything, and then we'd still want to show them. I would say it was a shared enthusiasm, so things were pretty collaborative.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You were having frequent conversations with Brian about, “You might want to invite this filmmaker and you might want to do that.” Can you remember any time where any director might have done it? Because what impresses me, I guess, as the outsider, is the range of documentaries was incredible. You could have anything from **In the Shadow of the Stars**, which is, of course, an entirely cultural thing, to these severe polemical films that were exposing everything from the political prisoners in the United States to Hoover to Vincent Chin, and everything in between. I wondered whether that was because the Golden Gate Awards, which was having upwards of a thousand or more entries, could get that kind of range, or whether that was coming in from your end and trying to go around the world seeing movies.

RACHEL ROSEN: I honestly think that was from the Golden Gate Awards. I'd love to say that I had a big influence on that, but one of my things I loved about the Golden Gate Awards were all the entries we'd get from international television, because that was a whole area that I came to know about and love through the Festival. It wasn't anything I brought to the Festival. So the **BBC Arena**, where we got a lot of the most interesting English-language documentaries was an example of the TV station wanting to get

awards, so being willing to send things in and enter them into the Golden Gate Awards, which meant that we were getting access to a lot of stuff that most festival programmers weren't looking at.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I don't always mean to push my point of view, because I'd much rather hear it from you, but I can tell you that those are some of the most incredible discoveries. The best film on Watergate I ever saw was produced in England. And I was always puzzled why the San Francisco Film Festival lucked out in getting so many of these films, and our PBS outlets never did. You never got a call from the PBS people to say, "Could we take a look at these?"

RACHEL ROSEN: We have our print sources in every catalogue, the idea being that we'd help spread the word by sending these catalogues out. But I think it's also true that a lot of what we got from those TV stations was sort of heavy voice-over, TV-style films, a lot of which weren't interesting enough to program as part of the program, but that also brought in these really incredible movies that may have been funded by TV somewhere but were definitely theatrical quality.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well it's kind of interesting—and maybe that was part of the excitement of it—that these were more of those films that were sort of cut off at the thighs. They don't have legs. They don't get picked up and written about. **Film Comment** doesn't have a little thing on the exciting new directions of British television, when it's all here. But it sounds as though it came to San Francisco.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, yeah. It's curious. But it's what always made the Festival special to me. We would have our share of those films that were on the festival circuit, that might not have distribution but were the major film from Berlin that's now going from festival to festival. But there were always these special little things that were just happening in San Francisco.

RUSSELL MERRITT: By the way, would that emphasis on British television have come from Peter? Was that one of his enthusiasms?

RACHEL ROSEN: It was, but it seemed like it really came through the Golden Gate Awards. We showed **Family**, that first miniseries by Michael Winterbottom, which came in through the TV miniseries section in the Golden Gate Awards. So it was more a sense of discovering them, although Peter was probably different from a lot of other festival programmers in that he was open to the idea of television. I remember we showed that David Lynch film, something he had done for TV. So, even a U.S. TV series, we showed.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I'm getting a very strong picture that mainly, you were protected from the storm clouds hovering over the Festival by being permitted to do programming that you wanted to do. And that suggests that where the real chemistry was between you, Marie-Pierre, of course Laura when she was here, and then with Peter as well. Now one of the very important reasons that Laura was unhappy was over the increasing tension she felt with Peter. If I understand her correctly, the real problem was a reluctance to support staff and to acknowledge staff. Did that come across to you, or did you have an ideal relationship with Peter?

RACHEL ROSEN: I definitely didn't have an ideal relationship with Peter. But in hindsight, of course, it's easier to see that the liberties I had were exactly because it was Peter's show, always. So in some ways, Peter took all the credit, and he got all the criticisms. That's the way it always had been, and the way I figured it always would be. My relationship with Peter became more difficult. At a certain point I became Associate Director of Programming. And what that meant was, I was actually doing the administrative work that normally the head of the department would do, meaning I was trying to keep track of the budget and doing personnel stuff. I think Laura had been in a similar position before me. And what's difficult about Peter is that I can never ascribe his drawbacks or his flaws to some sort of bad intent. His passion for films was always there and was always genuine and was always inspiring, but it was matched by a dispassion for organization, which became difficult once you were trying to actually get a project done.

He's a terrible procrastinator, and he kind of thrives creatively in chaos. And I'm probably the opposite, as I think Laura is, meaning I like to get things in order and then that gives me room to be creative. And it just becomes wearing, like there's a certain point at which if I'm up at four in the morning and I don't have to be, that's not a good thing for me because I don't function well without a lot of sleep. For Peter, if he can futz around and then get something done at 5:00 a.m., that works for him. So there was always just kind of a tension about working differently. But I think the bottom line is, Peter kind of keeps people away from him in terms of the way he works. So there would be a team, and then Peter. And sometimes he would integrate into the team, and sometimes he wouldn't. But there would be times when we would all be kind of waiting for Peter, and that is difficult.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I would assume it would be even more difficult after Marie-Pierre left, and you are entirely in charge of programming. And if I can read the program correctly, you have a staff of your own now.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. To say I'm in charge of programming, though, at any point, is misstating the case, because I was in charge of the programming department, but Peter was always in charge of programming.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But would the staff—say, like Becky Mertens and the apprentices that are working—would they report to you, or would they report to Peter?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, that's part of what made it so difficult. In a way they were reporting to me, in that I was trying to help them understand what their job was each season and what they had to do, but then if Peter wanted something from them, they had to do that, too.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So he might call them directly without consulting you, and it might create a schedule conflict that couldn't easily be reconciled, things like that?

RACHEL ROSEN: Absolutely.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So would you be given more responsibility in terms of travel and in terms of making unilateral judgments about, “Peter, we need this film, Peter, I don’t think we like this film?”

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I think from ’95 I definitely had the ability to do that, to go seek out films. And at that point Doug was programming, too; so did Doug.

RUSSELL MERRITT: This is a new name to me, Doug Jones. I’d like to hear about him. So would he become your—well, I don’t even know how to say this now—

RACHEL ROSEN: He was the other programmer.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I was about to say, did he become your Marie-Pierre, or did he become—

RACHEL ROSEN: He becomes my me.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yeah, that’s right. He becomes your trainee that you start to groom. Are you dividing the kingdom the way that Laura and Marie-Pierre had done it, or had things sufficiently changed that you were doing it another way?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think what happened was, we had some vague territorial division. But of course that’s not practical if you’re also dividing the festivals up. So if one person is going to Rotterdam, they can’t just go see African movies, because then they’d be missing everything else. It was more in terms of who was going to cover what festivals. And even Peter was always hesitant to give up certain areas of the world. So the territorial boundaries were there, but they were never absolute because no one wanted to say, “Well, look, what happens if I see a French film that Peter doesn’t like? I still want to be able to invite that.” So that fluidity was always part of the program.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you get to know the board?

RACHEL ROSEN: I did end up getting to know the board members who actually came to the Festival and that I had some interaction with. I don't know if Peter tried to, but he did end up kind of coming between the board and the staff in that we never met with the board during the year. Peter would go to the board meetings. He rarely even reported back to us what had happened at the board meetings. But there were some board members, like Jeannette Etheredge, who were very involved in the Festival and who were around, so I got to know her. George Gund was always at the Festival, so I got to know him a little bit. Maurice Kanbar was around a bit. But it was never encouraged in any way organizationally for the staff to get to know the board.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Now that you're running a film festival of your own, is that the relationship that you maintain? That is, does staff have access to the board, and vice versa? Or is what you found at the San Francisco Film Festival a useful model?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well it's a little more complicated where I am now because there's a presenting organization, and the festival isn't the only thing that that organization does. And it's slightly different in that there's an executive staff and a non-executive staff. But all the executive staff, the head of each department, meets regularly with the board. And we're encouraged to be in contact with the board about things that would be helpful for us. So for instance, our board at Film Independent is largely made up of producers and filmmakers, and I am encouraged each year to get in touch with them about films that they might know about, or to seek their advice or assistance in a way that I never would have been in San Francisco. But that also kind of makes sense, because a lot of the board at San Francisco wasn't directly related to the film industry in the way that my board is now. We also have an opportunity four times a year to report to the board on what we're doing and to answer questions directly from the board. And I think just the fact that we're invited to the meetings gives you a face and a kind of dignity. It makes the interaction very human. I think one of the bad things about the Film Society is that there was just a

huge mistrust on both sides between the board and the staff. I mean, the staff felt like the board didn't appreciate them, didn't understand what they were doing, and made these sort of capricious judgments based on no information. And I think the board felt like the staff didn't understand the greater responsibility of the Film Society, and were kind of doing what we wanted and not honoring them as a board the way we should. And all that was just simply because there was no interaction between the two groups.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And you say that some board members went out of their way to get to know you, and they would have been the ones active in the Film Festival at large. I've got a couple of lists. One is the list of the board of directors in 1996, and the other is the board members in 2001. And there's a dramatic difference in the organization. I wonder whether you could speak to that. I'm first of all going to read off some names, and wondered whether in addition to Jeannette and George, whether any of these names meant anything to you, because oddly enough, they still remain names; they're not faces or personalities. So anything you could do to help fill in what kind of personalities they had would be helpful. Jan Halper?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes. I mean, again, I met Jan; I have a vague recollection of her, but I couldn't tell you anything about her.

RUSSELL MERRITT: William Randolph Hearst III?

RACHEL ROSEN: No.

RUSSELL MERRITT: William Johnson?

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember him. What's funny to me about the board is they were all kind of eccentric personalities in a certain way. In some ways George really dominated that board, but it was also a very eccentric board in a lot of ways. And people would kind of come to the forefront and recede. So William Johnson had a moment where he came to the forefront during the Barbara Stone era. And I don't even specifically remember what

it was about, but I do remember never having met him since 1991, and all of a sudden he came forward. I think he was in support of Barbara in some sort of, “Now we have to be this, or now we have to be that,” and then he just sort of receded away again, and I never met him again. I remember one report of him from a board meeting, which of course, I was not at. He came in and he kind of made some big statement, and then disappeared again.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And again, it would be secondhand. All the information was.

RACHEL ROSEN: Absolutely.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So, a name like David Kalish?

RACHEL ROSEN: Oh, I don't remember him very much.

RUSSELL MERRITT: There is someone named Martin Krasney.

RACHEL ROSEN: Oh, yeah. You know, it's more that I know the names than the people.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you have any connection with Tom Luddy, because he of course would have been very active? And the reason I'm putting these names forward, we'll come to in a second. Just a couple more. How about Linda Sontag?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't remember her.

RUSSELL MERRITT: There's Larry Wilkinson; someone named Lambert Yam.

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember Lambert, yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: OK. Ed Zelinsky, who evidently was older.

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember Ed too, yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And Raphael Che?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Now, on top of that, there are 19 members of the board altogether, but there's also something called the Advisory Board. And here's where things get interesting, that it is called the Los Angeles Advisory Board at the start, and a new name is Levon de Bedrossian. Do you know anything about him or who he is?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes, I know exactly who Levon is. Levon owns that excellent restaurant about halfway up Fillmore Street, La Méditerranée, But he was also a big connection to the film industry. He's Armenian; he's a great guy.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But he was based in San Francisco?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well his restaurant was in San Francisco. I think there was a point at which he himself moved to the Los Angeles area.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And so it sounds as though it's possible that even with the addition of Mr. Bedrossian, that this became the Los Angeles mafia of sorts, an effort at trying to extend connections down to Los Angeles. The reason for putting these names out is that we frequently hear about factions within the board. You mention, for example, Barbara Stone. This became a very sensitive issue in '95 and '96. It became the cutting point of an absolute declaration of war between Peter and Tom Luddy, arguing that Barbara Stone not only was a Luddy idea—and a bad idea at that—but also, because of the way it was engineered by a faction of the board, rather than a product of a search and screen, that it alienated the fellow that had sponsored the Satyajit Ray award, to the

extent—and we know that this for a fact—that that award was withdrawn and then given to the London Film Festival. Did you hear any of that at the time?

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember hearing all those things at the time.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But you had no sense of who was in one faction and who was in another?

RACHEL ROSEN: I really didn't know. I mean, I heard it all through Peter.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And so it would be through Peter's perception.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: By all accounts, Jeannette Etheredge was a remarkable board member, and maybe still is. I'm not sure whether she's still on the board or not.

RACHEL ROSEN: I think she's come back now that Graham is there.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I see. Because I also hear some remarkable things from Laura about how valuable she was in making connections. And it speaks well. Did she introduce you to Jeannette, or was that something completely separate?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think actually Jeanette Shaheen probably was the main introduction between me and Jeannette Etheredge, because Jeannette Shaheen was very close to Jeannette Etheredge. I was pretty friendly with Jeannette. And she really was a force. The thing about her is, she knows everyone in the film business, and she knows all the city people. So she was in a position to do these amazing things for the Festival. She also was very demanding, as she should have been. I think I was terrified of her at first, because she's pretty acute about people, but she likes to decide if you're a good witch or a bad witch pretty quickly. And I thought, "I do not want to know what it would be like if she

decided she didn't like me." And thankfully she did. She would get frustrated with Peter because he would turn down films by her friends or people she knew, and films that she thought would have been good for the Festival to have shown, and that she thought it was shortsighted of Peter to turn down. Now in those cases I get both sides of the picture. I understand Peter felt like he wanted to keep this creative autonomy and not feel pressure from the board to take certain things or not. And I also understand that some of those compromises might have felt a little bit bad but might have ultimately been beneficial for the Festival, some not. But overall it was remarkable what she brought to the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And moving from her to another board member, I always thought that Tom Luddy's position on the board was interesting, mainly because by the time he was asked to co-run the Festival in the mid or late '70s, he was already founding the Telluride Film Festival. Did that constitute a conflict of interest for you? Did you ever, as a programmer, get the word that, "No, we want to use this film for Telluride," or was he able to negotiate that fairly skillfully and fairly?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, [LAUGHS] I mean, that's a complicated situation. I'm not sure I ever had a clear vision. He has those Telluride screenings in the summer. I got to go to those. I would talk to him about certain films. And he was always very generous with me. That's what I remember about Luddy: Someone was in from out of town, and Luddy would have these dinners for a director who was there in the summer, and he'd invite Marie-Pierre and me, and I always kind of felt like maybe he had invited me by mistake; I always felt like any second they were going to say, "Oh, no, we thought you were going to give him a ride back to the hotel," or something. But he was always very lovely to me and invited me to these events, and brought me into his circle of film people in San Francisco. Then I would hear from Peter that he had somehow heard from someone on the board that Luddy had proposed that in order to save money, that the board could just have him and his Telluride team program both San Francisco and Telluride, and dispense with the whole programming department. Whether that's apocryphal or not, those were the kind of stories that trickled back. So there was definitely a dichotomy because he was so always open and warm and generous to me, and yet I would hear these stories that I

had no way of knowing whether they were true or not. I always felt a little bit wary about them.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But I guess we need to establish that this was something that you heard through a Scarlet grapevine, rather than—

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. That's what I'm saying. I didn't have anything firsthand. And it was always very strange because Peter and Tom were very friendly with each other when they saw each other.

RUSSELL MERRITT: My understanding is that Tom was indispensable in hiring Peter in 1983, and that also became part of the dynamic.

RACHEL ROSEN: Whatever it was, it was way more complicated than I was able to fully understand. I knew that it was more complicated than I was able to fully understand.

RUSSELL MERRITT: The third personality, of course, is George Gund; a fascinating fellow, from someone who has never met him directly. One of the curiosities about the San Francisco board is that George is more or less permanent as the chairman, whereas I think it's much more customary to have a revolving chair. And I wondered whether that struck you, again, comparing it with what you found in New York and now what you find in L.A. Is that a model for either of those other film festivals, to have someone so powerful over such a long period of time?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, that San Francisco board is unlike any other board I've experienced. Part of it is, it's not really that he's the chairman; it's that his financial contribution is so huge, and it's such a disproportionately large part of the Festival's budget. And yet, in some ways he's a very modest person. I mean, he makes that Festival happen; and yet, he hasn't seemed to want to be in the position of being the galvanizing leader behind the organization. That's what made that whole organization, from the board down, feel so tenuous to me, because I always got the impression that, at any moment, if

he felt underappreciated or lost interest, that he could pull the plug on it. And I think in some ways that was true. Starting from before Amy, with Barbara, the whole idea was to make the organization more stable and less reliant on George. And I think George was encouraging that, but I think he also, in a certain way, liked having it be his baby.

RUSSELL MERRITT: There was a woman named Colleen whose name comes up in memos fired back and forth.

RACHEL ROSEN: He has an organization, and I believe she was the head of his nonprofit. I think she was our—

RUSSELL MERRITT: Liaison?

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Because you're certainly right that there were people that were more or less his surrogates on the board. Not just allies, but someone representing his companies, that would take it over. And I gather she was one of them. So that would make sense.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: One of the things that is so striking about George as the leader of the board is that it's not just keeping a light touch on personnel matters; as far as you can tell, he had a light touch when it came to programming as well, is that right?

RACHEL ROSEN: Completely, completely. He was basically hands-off. I love him because he's really passionate about film. He'd have a genuine enthusiasm when he came there.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But he got what you were doing; that is, he understood and would defend you if the next film from Turkistan was only drawing 20 people, but that it was important to show it nonetheless. Now, this, I believe, was in 1996; it could have been in 1997. There was an amazing party that preceded the Festival, this taking place at Yerba Buena Gardens, in which Eddie DiBartolo shows up with the Forty-Niners. And I believe it was DiBartolo's daughter who had a film that she wanted to show. And so it was a chance to meet Forty-Niner superstars, and to see half naked—no, not half naked, entirely naked women—serving canapés, but they were covered in green paint, so the pleasure was somewhat diluted. In any case, it just seemed like a wonderful bacchanalian atmosphere. I wondered whether that was, again, George Gund who was behind that. Can you tell us anything about that?

RACHEL ROSEN: I do remember us showing that film for opening night. Again, I think that was one of the times when—If it had been a film that we couldn't stomach showing, we wouldn't have shown it. I think there was certainly an aspect to it where it was like, "This is Eddie's daughter's movie and should we show it?" but I remember Jeannette being an advocate of us showing it and knowing that, but I don't remember ever hearing anything about it from George.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It might as well have come from that increasingly important social aspect of the Festival that is very apparent after '96, and that we're getting to in a second. Now, related to that is a good segue. Another personality that we've totally ignored, that is making an emphatic impression, and that's Willie Brown. He's been elected mayor, and although there have been appearances by Jordan and by Art Agnos before him, this is, as far as I can tell, the first serious interest that the city of San Francisco takes in the film Festival, and it has to do with Brown's notion that San Francisco should be Hollywood north, and that the Festival could be useful in recruiting interest in San Francisco as a film center. And in fact, it's not just that he is now an honorary member of the board; there are subsidiary boards, hospitality boards that become the mayor's committee, and so on. And I'm wondering whether that, too, had an

influence on your job, or whether you felt it when watching what was happening at the Festival.

RACHEL ROSEN: I didn't feel it at all. It's really a fascinating thing to think about in so many ways. I don't know if Peter felt it, but in so many ways, I never was handed down a different mandate than I had from day one, which was to put on a great festival and show the best films. And in fact, I remember early on, at the last minute there'd be some pressure on Peter from some studio, and we'd end up with what I consider to be a relatively mainstream thing as a late addition. And at the beginning it bothered me so much because, of course, not being in his position, I had the luxury of being a purist. And I could say, "Oh, why did we throw in these mediocre things? They just water down the program." I'd get really frustrated with it. Now, in hindsight, you realize how important having a few things like that is. But I never felt any specific pressure on my job. The pressure I remember feeling was less from the top than from the community, because San Francisco is so small. In other words, every local filmmaker kind of felt like their film deserved to be in the Festival. They just couldn't believe it when we didn't want to show the film at San Francisco. So it was more from the local filmmaking community feeling like we were turning up our noses at them and that by virtue of being local, they deserved a place at the table. That was the kind of pressure I personally felt, because I was more in contact with those people.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Let's talk about that, because this is something Laura remembers as well, that as I trace it, came to a head in '93, when the New Visions category was cut off. And there was a vocal protest against it. And by 1994, that was the end of it. There had been a balance, especially through the Golden Gate Awards, which had not one, but two different—at least two different—categories for Bay Area films, and I remember being a juror and a jury chair, being instructed by Brian to keep a particular eye out for local product, that there had been a kind of *detent*. So it's very interesting that as late as '96, '97, and for all I know, today, that there is still this frustration that filmmakers feel, and I would imagine it would be part of the tension between being an international film festival that has exactly one week to show its wares, and a member of a community with

an active film community, that you could well argue has 365 days to find places to show off. And I wondered whether you could remember any of the people. Were there delegations that came, or was it letters? Were there meetings? How did it get resolved? I think I can anticipate what your arguments might be, but it would be better to hear it from you than to make them up myself.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well it was sort of instance-by-instance. I think our perspective was, and always stayed, that we were an international film festival and that if things met our standards of quality, then we would include them, but that we weren't under an obligation to show everything that was made locally, and that in fact, there were these Golden Gate Awards. So for me, personally, I'd almost only hear about it if there was a local narrative feature, because that was outside of the Golden Gate Award categories. And there's not a huge narrative feature production going on in the Bay Area, so it would never get to a point where there would be a meeting or a rally; it was more like dealing individually with the filmmakers, who just couldn't understand. There was this feeling that they were entitled to be in the Festival if they were an independent.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It's awfully hard to tell an artist that, isn't it, because you're trying to find all the other reasons and possible explanations, and then when they get toppled, you're left with one possible exception. I can tell you that I was on the jury when we gave **In the Shadow of the Stars** second prize, and oh, did we hear about that, because Allie Light thought, why shouldn't it be first prize? And in fact, she wanted the award withdrawn because it would look so bad, never mind that it was competing against a Werner Herzog film that we just thought was more deserving. Where's your loyalty to the home team?

RACHEL ROSEN: So you experienced the exact same thing.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes, but it's very interesting that that does replicate itself on a major scale. So then, speaking of pressures and the like, as we spoke over lunch, in comes a series of women who have been installed by the board to take over

administrative responsibilities, and to that measure, diluting some of Peter's responsibilities. The first was Barbara Stone, and then she was followed by Amy Leissner. Can you compare the two in terms of strategies and in terms of effectiveness?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. Barbara came in, as I said, with a kind of preset attitude that there was something corrupt in the organization. Now, I think there were some people who worked in departments other than programming who probably felt this to be true, and really were looking forward to having some controls put on Peter. And it is true that Peter had a lot of freedom that he didn't always exercise responsibly. But for me, I felt like Barbara's suspicion trickled down to the rest of us in the programming department, so I immediately was put on my guard about her. I felt like she had been heavily prepped by whoever brought her in, and that she didn't come in with an open mind about what was actually going on. I felt that kind of panic you get when you realize that you're not going to have your side of the story heard, that judgment has been made already, and that someone's operating on certain assumptions that may or may not be true, but they're not bothering to get the whole picture before they act.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And by the way, it was Tom Luddy, as I understand it, who led the charge to bring her in.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, that may well be true. But I think she got a heavy preparation from the outside and never came in and sat down with us and said, "This is what I've heard; what's your side of it?"

RUSSELL MERRITT: So she was not a very good listener.

RACHEL ROSEN: She came in with a mission from them, and wasn't very interested in information that might deflect her from that mission.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Her background, among others, was as the manager and owner of movie theaters in London, and she was coming to San Francisco to retire. And one of the

things that Peter was very excited about was the prospect of getting a permanent theater for the San Francisco Film Festival. Of course it never happened, but I wondered whether you had heard about that, and the adventures that led to the effort at creating a permanent theater.

RACHEL ROSEN: I remember there being a kind of constant, low rumble about getting a theater. Now, I'm going to get the names wrong, but I remember the woman who owned the Metro. It was the widow of the founder of the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Bud Levin, yes.

RACHEL ROSEN: And there was always some idea that she might be getting rid of that theater at some time, and maybe we could look at running that.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I had not heard that before. So this is Bud Levin's theater. His dad was the one who had created the Bridge Theater, and who had invented this, and this was the very first theater that was used for the San Francisco Film Festival, so it would be a wonderful kind of symmetry.

RACHEL ROSEN: Then there was some concern because it was a single screen theater, and everyone was looking at the Film Forum model where you had multiple screens.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes, and the first move of the Film Festival was to get out of the Metro in order to get a bigger venue.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. I remember, when I was brought on, in fact, it was the end of a discussion about how we couldn't have a startup team every year, how we needed more year-round staff, that we couldn't rely on seasonal staff all the time and expect to have the quality that the Festival wanted to have. And I think the budget was increased to incorporate that growth, because I was a new position. Before, it had been Peter and Laura and Marie-Pierre, and I was a new programmer added to it. And then from that

came the idea that, to sustain a year-round staff, we had to have more year-round activities, like we'd have to have some other series during the year to justify our year-round employment and help raise some revenue to help offset the cost of having more year-round staff.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Certainly by the end of the decade, the budget had risen from a million dollars to 1.5, and it sometimes hovered between 1.3 and 1.5. And of course that's such an interesting gap to have filled, that yes, it would have been taken up with new salaries for permanent positions.

RACHEL ROSEN: Then we started doing things like the New Italian Cinema series to have some sort of revenue generating activity.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So Barbara, though, having not been able to get a theater for the Film Festival, and creating a kind of friction, leaves after a year. And in comes Amy Leissner. What was your impression of her?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, at that point, I was instantly wary of anyone. And in a lot of ways she didn't seem like the San Francisco Film Festival type, meaning she was from Texas, she wasn't an elite intellectual, she was kind of a down-home girl. So I think initially I was a little leery as to whether the board had brought her in to sort of dumb down the Festival, to make it more accessible to the average man, because she was like an everyperson.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you have the feeling that she didn't get what the programmers were trying to do?

RACHEL ROSEN: Honestly, no; that wasn't the problem. It's just that she wasn't a snobby intellectual, and I was.

RUSSELL MERRITT: New York meets Texas.

RACHEL ROSEN: There was an instant fear that that's what she would be there for. But in fact, she was pretty good at not asserting herself in exactly the same way Barbara did, meaning not taking things on head-to-head, but just reasonably saying, "Look, I realize this is what you're trying to do, but this is the situation we're in, and we have to get our act together." She really brought a lot of organizational control. Believe me, it wasn't without friction, but in some way, I think the fact that she was so different from Peter and the programming department made it work in a way that Barbara Stone didn't. I think Peter may have initially been excited about Barbara, but I think when they argued, it was more head-to-head. Barbara knew people in the film business, and Peter knew people in the film business, so it got prickly, whereas Amy had run a drama company, she wasn't that embedded in the film world; she really didn't know anyone. In a way that was less threatening to Peter. It allowed them to work together.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though they did get along much better than he had with Barbara.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. I'm not saying that there wasn't friction, but I think she was not threatening to him in the way that Barbara had been.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Did you see change and reform as a consequence of her work?

RACHEL ROSEN: I felt like things felt a little bit more stable with her there.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So it would be fair to say that she was working out, that she was doing what she was asked to do.

RACHEL ROSEN: She did exactly what the board intended her to do, which was sort of figure out what was going on financially on a day-to-day basis and make some sense out of the way things were handled.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Certainly, the numbers look good. When she leaves, the revenues seem to be coming up from sponsorships, and the budget seems to be under control. So the question inevitably comes up, whose idea was it for her to leave, hers or the board's?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think it was the board's idea. I think what happened was, once they were over the panic of having things out of control, they started to want more. Her strengths were organizational. In fact, she would have made a great CFO, moving forward. But once she got things cleaned up, I think the board felt like she didn't have the personality that they were looking for in terms of an executive director. What they kept saying was they needed someone to take the Festival to the next level. And I think what that really boils down to is that, like I said, she was not a society type, and I think they were nervous about her going after the big money.

RUSSELL MERRITT: From what you're telling me, it sounds as though it was a mistake to get rid of her, but that it was not an irrational decision; it was who would know what the next level would bring.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. She left the organization in good shape, so if they had actually gotten someone dynamic into that position, it might not have been the worst decision in the world. It's just that they followed on her strength with someone who had weaknesses in every area.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Right. But it's very important to clarify that as best you can tell, the limitations that Amy had had nothing to do with her ability or inability to control Peter. In fact, that seemed to be working out; it was in these other areas that you mentioned.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, frankly, her ability to control Peter came from the fact that she didn't control him too much. It's impossible to see what the model would be, because after that, he left. I think the board really was ambivalent about Peter, and that ambivalence shows through all these decisions, that honestly, she was the perfect person

to work with Peter, if that's what you wanted to do. So really what they needed to decide was whether they believed in Peter or whether they didn't believe in Peter. And Amy was the closest they ever got to saying, "We believe in you, but we feel the need to exercise these restraints."

RUSSELL MERRITT: So take us to 2001, which is the year that you leave and that Peter leaves. First, if you could make sure that we understand the chronology properly; you and Peter both are there through the May 2001 Film Festival.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: When does Amy leave? Is it before then?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So when does Roxanne take over?

RACHEL ROSEN: Roxanne was brought in maybe a month or two before the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So she's not having much of an impact on the 2001 film Festival.

RACHEL ROSEN: Not on the content, but she is already trying to exert influence on how things are done.

RUSSELL MERRITT: She's certainly an important part of the press conference that introduces the Film Festival. Now, tell me about your feelings and about when you decided to leave. Was it independent of Peter, or was it because you heard that Peter was leaving and you had developed such a rapport that you wanted to go at the same time, or were there other factors?

RACHEL ROSEN: No, there were other factors. I mean, yes, at that point I had reached some sort of level of frustration with working with Peter, and in some ways, hearing that he was leaving caused me anxiety. But there was also that sort of excitement of, “Hey, I wonder what’s going to happen?”

RUSSELL MERRITT: That’s right, because by the time of the 2001 Film Festival, he’d already received the offer from the Cinematheque.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah, it was announced before the Festival.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But you had not announced your leaving.

RACHEL ROSEN: No. I didn’t leave until the summer. I just said, “I know they’re going to be hiring, and I’m going to say I’m interested in the position,” although even at the time, I had that feeling that even though I knew I could do it, that they would probably be more inclined to get someone with a bigger name from the outside, the way organizations often do. But I was thinking, “Well, should I put myself forward, because then if they bring someone else in, which they’re likely to do, will I have to quit?” But I was still saying, “I’m just going to wait and see what happens, because it’ll be interesting to see who they bring in, and my decision will depend on that.” One thing that happened was, we had this Kurosawa Award. This was the decisive moment. She was asking me for suggestions, and what would I do in this situation, and basically acting as if she was testing me out, but just kind of looking for someone to fill in, because she didn’t have any idea what was going on. So she asked me to put together a list of people I thought we could get for the Kurosawa Award, and I took it very seriously. “Kon Ichikawa, he’s still alive, he’s amazing; he’s never gotten the award. That would be a great person. I don’t think he’d ever accept it, but Godard has never gotten the award. Godard would be a great choice.” I have a list of about ten people of that ilk, of the ilk of the person we had been giving the Kurosawa awards to. She leaned back and she said, “You know whose work I always really enjoy?” And I said, “Who?” She said, “Chris Columbus.” So I went, “Well, you know, Roxanne, here’s the thing: with the local filmmakers, the thing is that

when it comes to local filmmakers, we've never given the award to Francis Coppola, we've never given the award to Phil Kaufman, we've never given the award to George Lucas. So maybe we haven't gone local because it's hard to decide where to start. But if we're going to give locally, maybe Chris Columbus shouldn't be the first person who gets it." And then I left the room and called IFP, because they had called and asked me if I was interested in a job earlier, because they had taken over the Los Angeles Film Festival, and I had said I wasn't interested. I picked up the phone and I said, "I know I said I wasn't interested in that position. Have you hired somebody? I might still be interested." And they said, "We're still interested, if you can get down here in a week." So that was basically where the San Francisco job ended.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But not only did you leave, but you stole your associate program director.

RACHEL ROSEN: I didn't initially steal him, but I did encourage him to ask for a big raise.

RUSSELL MERRITT: [LAUGHS] Sly boots.

RACHEL ROSEN: But I really felt like, look, we were all being underpaid, but he was being severely underpaid.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Was he full-time?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes. He was full-time year-round. But once I left it was like he was keeping everything together.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would he have been interested in that job? Would he apply for it, do you know?

RACHEL ROSEN: I don't know. I mean, maybe not the director job, but I think he would have been interested in staying.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So we're talking about Doug Jones, for the record. And he is another mystery to our listeners. So if we can just back up a second. It sounds as though, if I can make sure you finish the story, that you encouraged him to apply for a substantial raise, but he didn't get it?

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. And I think it all, from what I remember, happened while we were at the Toronto Film Festival in 2001. He was there under the auspices of San Francisco; I was there already under the auspices of L.A. You have to ask him, but I think a lot of people had left by then, too, like Varkey James, who also now has a job in at Los Angeles. But he left of his own accord.

RUSSELL MERRITT: We're suspicious. [LAUGHS]

RACHEL ROSEN: No, with Doug, I didn't even have a year-round full-time job to offer him the first year; I had a seasonal programming job to offer him. And he had to come down and leave his wife behind him in San Francisco and live here by himself for a few months. So it was more that he had reached a breaking point. And everyone he was working with had left by then.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yeah, consider the alternatives. So you, then, are leaving. What was Doug's background, by the way? At that point, he became your Rachel Rosen, didn't he?

RACHEL ROSEN: He did. Doug's from Minneapolis. He had worked on the Minneapolis Film Festival. He had moved to San Francisco with some of his friends, and his first job at the Festival was as Print Traffic Coordinator in, I think, '95. He had an immediate connection with Peter, because he was just incredibly knowledgeable about film and very passionate. Then, after '95 he had moved back to Minneapolis briefly,

because he got a job to run the Oak Street Cinema in Minneapolis. But after being there for a while, he was ready to get back to San Francisco. It just wasn't the right thing for him, so he came back. I can't remember what year he was hired as a programmer. I guess it must have been the year that Marie-Pierre left.

RUSSELL MERRITT: If that's the case, I would think '98.

RACHEL ROSEN: I just have this impression of him always being there, because I think he was there at the time Marie-Pierre was still there. I shared an office with Marie-Pierre, and Doug and the woman who was the program coordinator at the time, Danielle, worked outside the office. And then when Marie-Pierre left, he came in and shared that office.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's important to establish. He is outside your bailiwick when he is running traffic.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes, he's also outside my bailiwick when he's originally hired.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So does he catch your eye? Is that the idea, that the passion that Peter detects in him is sort of infectious; you notice he's a fellow spirit?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes, by working with him and getting to know him. Oh, I remember now. In '98, he's in this position that I didn't remember we had, which is that Danielle is the Program Coordinator, and he is what's called a Jury Coordinator/Program Assistant. So I think actually Peter brought him along as a kind of assistant.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I see. And this is in '98. But by now, you see him as a comer; that he is someone that you'd be comfortable working with.

RACHEL ROSEN: That's right.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So is it fair to say that you asked for him, or is that not the way it works?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think it's more like he was the obvious choice. You know, it's sort of like he was there and he knew how it worked, and we gave him the same opportunity that they had given me.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Sure, yeah, because you had been there yourself; you knew how that worked.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Now, what makes the relationship with you and Marie-Pierre so intriguing, especially on paper? It goes something like this: here is Marie-Pierre as literally Laura's right hand. And you come very much as the junior member of the tripartite, and we now get a point to 1995, where Laura is gone, and now the two of you are programming. What one would expect would be that Marie-Pierre would ascend to the senior position. And instead, that is exactly what happens with you. Did that create tension? Did it create friction?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think Marie-Pierre was still in the senior position.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's important to distinguish, because in the program, it's just alphabetical listing. The two of you are seen as being co-equal in dividing the kingdom.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes. But in fact, I always kind of deferred to her as the more experienced programmer.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So, what happens? That relationship exists for another two or three years, from '96 to '98.

RACHEL ROSEN: The thing about Marie-Pierre is that she originally came to the Festival through a grant. She had a grant to come to the United States and study archives, and she got involved in the Festival that way. And she had another half-year position. So she wasn't working year-round. She would be in Paris for part of the year. It was one of those things that was hugely advantageous to the Festival, because we got the benefit of her—

RUSSELL MERRITT: —expertise when she's not on your nickel.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes. So I think Peter was obsessed with the title; he hated that Laura had been called the Director of Programming when he was the Artistic Director, because he thought it was confusing to people. And that's why my title was Associate Director. And I think the idea was that I was going to be more like the functionary than that I had a stronger voice in the actual program.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So, why did Marie-Pierre then leave altogether?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think it was she got that job with The Quinzaine. She had two big offers that one year; one was to go work for MK2, and the other was to go to The Quinzaine. And those are just big time opportunities that you don't say no to.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So she was leaving under amiable circumstances, on good terms with you and with Peter.

RACHEL ROSEN: Whether there was something there that felt she'd be able to creatively stretch her wings and be in charge of a program, I'm sure that had something to do with the decision.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It's one of our great hopes that we can interview her. It's not certain because we don't know exactly when she might be available in the United States,

and it's part of the shortsightedness of the San Francisco Film Festival that they will not fly me to Paris for the day.

RACHEL ROSEN: How crazy of them! They could at least get her on a phone. Because, honestly, for a lot of reasons, I think she would be a person to interview, because Laura and I both had slightly adversarial and somewhat guarded relationships with Peter, just because of the position we were in. And both of us, it was partly our job to try and keep some kind of tabs on him. Because she wasn't in that position, and because he was a Francophile and because she had all these connections that he really respected, in a lot of ways Marie-Pierre had a closer relationship to Peter than either Laura or I did.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And I would think that it would mean that she could talk back to him more.

RACHEL ROSEN: Absolutely!

RUSSELL MERRITT: When we had the dustup over Leni Riefenstahl, she was the one who, no holds barred, told him he was nuts. And it might have been more difficult for you or Laura to have said that.

RACHEL ROSEN: First of all, I had learned everything I knew about festivals there, whereas Marie-Pierre had this weight in the world that he respected. So he was more hesitant to brush her off. And she was much stronger about calling him on stuff.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Would you say that there was anything to choose among you in terms of the strength of opinion you had on films? Did you feel that, temperamentally, one of the other of you—that is, now, Laura or Marie-Pierre—were either more passionate or more single-minded in driving for films?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think we were equally all passionate. I think Marie-Pierre was probably less qualified in her expressions of her passion. I think Laura and I are more of

the school that says, “I know you might think that this film is lacking in X, Y or Z, but I really believe it’s beneficial because P, V and Q,” whereas Marie-Pierre would just go, “This is a piece of genius, and if you don’t understand, you’re—” She was more emphatic in her expression.

RUSSELL MERRITT: A kind of take-it-or-leave-it approach, but once the position is made, there’s no backing off. Was it an eventful time when you discovered, “Yes, I can speak up for myself when it’s three against one?” Was there ever that kind of a time? I know that it was never quite that stark.

RACHEL ROSEN: We just didn’t program that way. It never was three against one, because it would be like someone would see something at a Festival, and they would want it. What I remember is arguing vehemently or vehemently disliking some of the things that Peter programmed, but there was never a question that he wasn’t going to program it. For instance, I never understood Peter’s sense of comedy. I believe in a lot of his passions, and then every once in a while, he’d just fall in love with some cheesy comedy that I just didn’t think was funny.

RUSSELL MERRITT: For what it’s worth - and I might even want to turn off the tape recorder for this - I may have been your adversary in this; I was so on Peter’s wavelength on comedies. He would call me up saying, “Russell, you’re the only one who’s going to like this. This is so dark, this is so evil.” It usually came from Romania.

RACHEL ROSEN: Oh, I didn’t mind the dark and evil, no, no, no, no. This is the English-language stuff or the—What was that French comedy about the restaurant that starred the French Elvis Presley? **American Cuisine.**

RUSSELL MERRITT: That sounds right.

RACHEL ROSEN: I don’t think you would have liked it.

RUSSELL MERRITT: No, he didn't call me about that. No, these were in the opposite direction. My specialty was collaborating with Peter on his Romanian films. "There's no way we could show this at the Film Festival, but you've gotta see this," but that could be a guy thing. Anyway, it sounds as though it was a remarkably nurturing relationship among the four of you, if that's a fair word, that it doesn't seem to have created any kind of enduring hostilities on the grounds of programming.

RACHEL ROSEN: No, not on the grounds of programming. I would say the relationship between me and Peter was fairly contentious at the end. I remember he had announced he was leaving, and it was right after the Festival. And he kind of knew that I had put myself forward. I kind of sat him down, and said, "Look, Peter, do you have any advice for me?" And he said, "Well, I'll tell you this advice, and I mean it in the best spirit. It's not going to endear you to people if you make them feel stupid." And I was thinking more, like, which board members should I lobby? I was looking for a different kind of advice. But in fact, it's been really great advice that I've taken with me. So in many ways I owe a huge debt of gratitude for that advice, because I had just gotten to the point where I was kind of angry at him, and I would just make these little snide comments. And because he had whatever power he was going to have, the only way I could get back at him was to make these little jabs at him, to make him feel taken down a peg. And he never seemed to react to them, which of course just made me make them even meaner and then keep going. So I wouldn't say there wasn't any hostility. But it was never on the grounds of programming.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That's pretty much what Laura said, that she had, she thought, a wonderful relationship with all of you, when it came to comparing notes about a film, whether the audience would get this, whether it's appropriate for us. If that were the world, it would have been a delight, but that it was other kinds of issues that came up.

RACHEL ROSEN: And for all of them, I never got the feeling that Laura had. It wasn't a question of recognition for me. I never really wanted to advance because I felt like I learned so much by my exchanges with all of them that, you know, being a low man on that totem pole was ideal.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Well, let me share with you a self-criticism that Laura had of herself. She said that she thought that over time she had become arrogant in that she felt that as long as she liked it and programmed it, the audiences would come. And she thought that over time, that the audiences were growing weary of the head-scratchers, and that she had no patience with audiences that would not respond to those films, or more accurately, she was indifferent, she said. And I wondered whether that was a fair self-criticism of her from your perspective. Was that a kind of swagger?

RACHEL ROSEN: It's so hard to say because there were so many audiences that responded deeply to the head-scratchers.

RUSSELL MERRITT: To the very last day?

RACHEL ROSEN: And they would celebrate the head-scratchers. And honestly, it's the one thing I most miss about the San Francisco Film Festival, is for every audience member that she might have felt indifference from, there would be someone coming up to me and thanking me for programming something that was out of the way or difficult. I think I'm in a similar position to Laura, now that I'm at a festival where I'm not exactly programming my taste in films. The festival I program now is not the Rachel Film Festival. I get in a few. Doug and I say, "OK, we can have a couple of head-scratchers a year, but we're also going to show things that we know the audience is going to respond to." I never want to be pandering, but I think a festival is a dialogue between the programmer and the audience. Maybe it's just that Laura's taste was naturally in sync with who our audience had ended up being after that amount of time. And I think it's true that the San Francisco Film Festival maybe never felt extremely accessible to the overall general public in San Francisco. But I also think it's true that the audiences of enthusiastic filmgoers we were getting, who were in tune with what we were trying to do, were big enough so that it didn't feel like arrogance; it felt like curation.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And in fact, Laura mentioned that you, of all the programmers, had the most curatorial sense, that you're not looking for homeruns every time; you're looking for films that an audience would find worth taking a chance on. They might not like it, but it would be worth considering, and it might even have some ancillary value in a way that sometimes films are socially very interesting that are not intrinsically interesting, things like that. So it's a good answer, that the audience made possible a kind of adventurism.

RACHEL ROSEN: I felt encouraged by the audience. I mean, I think it's fair to say we could have gone in a parallel universe and become more broad, and might have gotten as enthusiastic an audience of a different kind that felt like we were turning our noses up at them. But I think that's the kind of soul searching you do when you're not getting an audience.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And that's the case, I think, until 2001. You had an audience. I'm not aware that there was any serious dip. I know I need to ask other people about this; that is, to me, one of the great mysteries. The audiences seemed consistent. Even the sponsorships seemed consistent. And yet there seems to be a real rollercoaster as to certain years that were financial successes, others that were financial disasters.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I have a theory about the 1994 Festival, which is that there were too many films in the Festival. There was this thing of people inviting more and more films, and then some of them had bad screening times, and there weren't that many people coming to see an Oliveira film at 9:00 in the morning. So there is some sort of equation to the number of films; like, the Festival has a certain startup cost; it's going to cost your box office a certain amount, you're going to have to have a certain amount of employees, so there's a certain equation between what those costs are and how many films you have and get people to that's like a winning formula. And I think in '94 there were just too many films.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It was certainly a criticism at the time: “Yeah, this is just overkill.” But were there any individual film festivals that stood out in your mind? I know as a consumer, it’s almost as though certain film festivals had personalities, because of the people that were there and the discoveries you made. Was that true of you, that you remember particular years because of personalities or films as just incandescent, or less than incandescent?

RACHEL ROSEN: I’m sure at one point I did. Unfortunately, it’s kind of a blur. I have to look through the program guides, and then I remember moments. But it’s also strangely true that it’s all about these mercurial little details that may or may not have anything to do directly with the Festival. I mean, there are great interactions with guests and stuff like that, but what endures for me is working with Laura and Marie-Pierre and Doug and other people at the Festival. So the things I remember are like driving over to Tosca with this person or that person.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Laura was very good at describing some of the truly gracious celebrities and visitors and guests that you had. Do any personalities stand out for you as just remarkable people?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I was so excited to meet some of these people. For instance, I remember driving from one event to another with a bunch of people from Stanford Film School, in a hatchback, in which Werner Herzog was basically crouched in the hatchback in this car full of women. And my film school teacher was trying to have a serious conversation with him about film school, and he says “I think the entry”—I can’t do the accent—“exam to any film school should be that the filmmaker should have to clear his own height in a high jump, because filmmaking is all about the knees.” That was one of those moments.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yes, I could see. Any other moments like that, by the way?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I do remember the Abel Ferrara year. Somehow he got Doug's direct phone number, and he would call Doug and say, "Don't transfer me, don't hang up on me, don't put me on hold!" And Doug would be like, "But you want to talk to Rachel, don't you?" And I went down to meet him at the hotel where he was checking in. I rushed down there; I was kind of sweaty. I was sitting in the lobby. And the guy behind the desk looked shell-shocked and said, "I. Have. Never. In. My. Life. Encountered. Anything. Like. That." And I thought, "Oh, I guess he's here already."

RUSSELL MERRITT: [LAUGHS]

RACHEL ROSEN: But what I liked about San Francisco is that it was both small enough, and people were cool enough, that the celebrities could basically hang out without being molested. So I do also have another fond memory. We showed this Bill Paxton movie, and during the movie we took him to one of those Japanese karaoke bars. We were the only non-Japanese people in there. And he got up and sang his song, and—

RUSSELL MERRITT: Bill Paxton sang a song?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. And this Japanese woman at the bar said, "Keep your day job."

RUSSELL MERRITT: Having no idea.

RACHEL ROSEN: Having no idea who this is. I thought he was pretty good.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Yeah, I can imagine. He is related to a famous folksinger, so it may well be.

RACHEL ROSEN: Interesting. Actually, I thought he was excellent.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I think that because you've been so incredibly busy, that is how it comes, in flashes, little details.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Tell me about introducing films, because I mentioned when we were going to lunch about my experience of Peter introducing a film program. Was that the rule, that you would be given very little time to prepare; you just had to do something off the top of your head?

RACHEL ROSEN: No, I knew in advance which films. We'd sit down and do a schedule of "Peter's going to do this, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that." I think I did them even in that first year—maybe not the year I was a publicist—the first year I was the program coordinator. Our small theater was probably like a couple hundred seats, and I was just terrified then. And then I got to this point where I was a little less terrified there, but I was terrified on the big stage of the Kabuki. Then I got to the point where I was a little less terrified there, but I was terrified at the Castro, to the point where, at the end, I was like, "Hey, this is no big deal." I also remember another instance where we were showing **Dead Man**. And upstairs were Neil Young, Tom Waits, all these people. I was getting ready to lead them to their seats when Kelly, who was managing the Castro that night, came up to me and said, "Hold on, hold on, hold on." She told me that there was a bomb scare at the theater. And I was thinking I would rather myself and every person in this theater get blown sky high than have to get up on stage and tell people that they've got to leave. But the police came in and they did a check, and they let us go.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So how did they react, by the way?

RACHEL ROSEN: No one knew.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Oh, so you were told in confidence.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: And they were just left sort of cooling their heels.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. And I had to get up on stage and say we were late because of a technical difficulty. That was a tough one.

RUSSELL MERRITT: That was smart, though. And I suspect that if these guys were in the back of the theater that they would be interviewed on stage afterwards. Would you have been part of that?

RACHEL ROSEN: Generally, the thing is if you're the person doing the introduction, then you're doing the Q&A. But for **Dead Man** it was just Jarmusch who did the interview.

RUSSELL MERRITT: So did you interview Jarmusch then?

RACHEL ROSEN: Yes.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What was that like, as an interview?

RACHEL ROSEN: Again, interviewing means I ask a question or two and then open it up to the audience. But I remember I'd go up to people and say, "I'm going to introduce you," and Jarmusch said, "Say my name; how do you say my name?" And I said—I'm all flustered here—"Jim Jarmusch?" And he was like, "Yes, that's correct." Because I think so many people called him "Jar-MOOSH" or whatever, that he wanted to make sure that I had it right.

RUSSELL MERRITT: Were there any differences between good interviews, bad interviews? Do you remember any going particularly well, particularly badly, anything like that? Or is it pretty much a flow?

RACHEL ROSEN: I think some people are quieter than others. I mean, most of the bad Q&A's I remember, or difficult ones, I wasn't actually doing the Q&A. I do distinctly remember, we showed this Hungarian film that was beyond a head-scratcher; it was

designed to frustrate the audience. It was called **Twilight**. It was based on the same book that **The Pledge** was based on, about a child murderer. This would be a film where the shot would be from inside a car, and someone in an officer's uniform would walk over to the car. And the camera would be like stomach level. And it would start to slow pan up, and basically stop right here at the neck.

RUSSELL MERRITT: We're in the world of Straub-Huillet.

RACHEL ROSEN: It was a hard-core black-and-white art movie. And in the audience were a bunch of older Hungarian people who, I think, do that thing where they're like, "Here's a film from my country; I'm going to go see it." So the very suave Hungarian director gets up afterwards, and this man stands up and he was like, "I hated your movie. I don't know what I'm more angry about, my money or my time!" Now I think I'd be a good publicist, but then I just was too wrapped up in what people would think of me if I told them these bad movies were good, so I wasn't very convincing in finding good ways of pitching them. I was the only person out of the equation. **Family Parade** thought interviewing Sylvester Stallone for **Rambo II** was a great thing. I was the only person who thought otherwise. But towards the end I started cutting film clips; the little one-minute clips that you use when you go on interviews. I got to choose the little scenes. And then from there, I asked to be put in charge of what they called the electronic press kits, which is like a little fake documentary, but it's really a commercial. So when I applied to documentary film school I was thinking, "Well if nothing else, I could get a better job, which would be to create these electronic press kits." I mean, that's as high as my ambitions were for film art. And I went to film school. And then what happened was, I got sent to a student film festival in Karlovy Vary that was held every two years. And two people from each class of ours got to go, so I applied.

RUSSELL MERRITT: This was a Stanford project?

RACHEL ROSEN: It was at Stanford. It was student work from all these universities. And that's when I really got the festival bug, because I was like, "These are the people

I've been looking for." I'd been out of school for about five years then. In the five years since college, "These are my likeminded people who are excited about something." And so that's when I thought, "Film festivals, that's the place to be. That's where I'm going to find my people. That's where my people are going to be." And so then I started working at the New York Film Festival and really - yes, obviously I was in film school, so I was learning about film, even in graduate film school, and I was curious about what I was doing in the five years I was a publicist. So, honestly, I started reading some of the slightly trashier Hollywood books, like, "Hey, David Begelman, I used to work in the building with him. Let me read that book about how he embezzled all that money." Anyway, all sense of art was flushed down the toilet.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But corporate histories and the flamboyant side of running a movie company.

RACHEL ROSEN: Exactly. So I started to get interested in what was going on, but it was really through film school. And the New York Film Festival, even though it's pretty late in my career, was the start of my, "Wow, **L'Atalante**, that's an amazing movie." Starting to be interested in a broader range.

RUSSELL MERRITT: I was going to ask that, that most of your exposure to film would have been to contemporary film, even when you go to Karlovy Vary, that it's going to be student films of the day. Did that make you curious about film history at all, or does that come at the end of the process?

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I think it's starting to see, I mean, as I mentioned to you before at lunch, my parents had taken me to see some more unusual films when I was a child, like **Vampyr** and **Them**. But at that time—really until after school—I wasn't that interested in movies. I was really interested in interacting with people, and being in a movie meant that was a time I couldn't have a conversation with someone. But even when I was in New York working in publicity I was starting to seek out stuff. I'd go to the Public Theater, and I was starting to look for more unusual movies. I was also, at the

time, though, keeping up with every crappy Hollywood movie, because that was just what we did.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It was part of a social scene.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well, I also felt like it was a work thing; you needed to know what **Iron Eagle** was like; that was a movie I worked on. But it was once I got to the Film Society of Lincoln Center that this whole world of older films and silent films and art films and foreign films opened up for me. And so in some ways I think that's what I needed, because even coming into San Francisco I was looking for mentors. That's why I was so lucky to find Marie-Pierre and Laura, because I didn't have a film education, and I didn't feel confident in my knowledge of film. I was learning as I went, on jobs. I became very voracious about it, but there are still big holes in my past or my history because I don't have any formal film education. I just taught myself.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You say your mother was in dance. Did you develop a taste for live performance before you developed a taste for film? Would you enjoy going to theater, to seeing dance?

RACHEL ROSEN: No. I like live performances. But now I'm much more comfortable with "dead" performance, because I like that fourth wall. I hate it when something goes wrong. I remember seeing **Hair** with my parents in England when I was like eight years old, and some naked man came out in the audience. I thought I was going to die! That doesn't happen in movies.

RUSSELL MERRITT: What I was trying to get at was, I wondered whether there were seeds for this that came from interest in other arts, like whether you were a voracious reader, for instance.

RACHEL ROSEN: I've always been a very voracious reader, and I've been interested in photography since high school. I love Walker Evans and James Agee, and that was part of what fed into the idea of going to documentary film school.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But it sounds like you did that more or less on your own. When you say you were looking for mentors, you didn't find them necessarily at Brown or even in your family, that this wasn't something that your parents or your sister cultivated or encouraged you.

RACHEL ROSEN: Not particularly. I mean, my dad loved going to movies, but I actually hated going to movies with my dad because we'd come out and he'd say, "What do you think?" And I didn't think anything; I was just being entertained. I think having to express an opinion made me uncomfortable.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds as though it was a search that took a little time.

RACHEL ROSEN: It's something I just came to. I say I go the opposite direction, because there are all these people trying to break into Hollywood, and I started in Hollywood and I was trying to break free. Another formative thing that's kind of interesting—that led to this documentary thing—one of the films that I worked on my first job was **The Falcon and the Snowman**. So to work on that, I read the book. It was one of those things where I was like, "Oh, well, actually, the real story is just as interesting if not more interesting than the movie it's based on." And so again, I started going the opposite direction.

RUSSELL MERRITT: But it does sound as though part of the enthusiasm for what a film festival does is based on the alternative to that model. I was very impressed when you said that audience members got disappointed when they would discover, "Oh, this movie's going to get released generally." There was a kind of sense that, "I have this unique treasure, and now everybody's going to get to share it." And it sounds as though you were looking for treasure that you couldn't find in Hollywood, that suddenly it was

everywhere in these foreign, films. And so that may be the most interesting story of all, that because ordinarily people who become very successful in the film festival world are brought up in an atmosphere where that is encouraged, although I have to say that one of the ways in which film festivals are so interestingly different from, say, the world of academia—it's certainly true of Peter, certainly true of Laura, certainly true of you, certainly true of Brian—it's not through film schools. Peter never took a film course in his life; he taught film but never took courses in it. Laura tried film for a little while at Wisconsin and found this isn't for her. It was being much more comfortable making discoveries of your own. And it's going to lead to the last question that I have, and it is a hopeless question, because I suspect that when after each film festival you're so exhausted, the last thing you do is take a step backwards or look. But I'm going to ask you the question anyway. You are in the catbird seat, from the years 1991, but particularly in the years after 1995 and perhaps through today, in getting an overview of just about everything that is happening in international cinema; not literally everything, but so much deeper than what a survey or a headline can do. And most film histories are written by people who cherry pick from the most famous, the most discussed, and the rest. You, on the other hand, are watching infinitude of films that never get reviewed, or the reviews become incidental. And I wondered whether you were able to find historical patterns ranging from, say, the '90s that the more casual viewer would have escaped. If I could just rattle on for one more second, what brings this to mind is, in 1996, a fascinating piece by Susan Sontag. She says, "Art cinema's dead." Jim Hoberman comes back saying, "It's not dead. You've just been looking in the wrong places." And that would be an example of where you're so used to seeing films coming from Europe, when they no longer come from there, you just assume the scene is over. I'm wondering whether you can refine that at all, whether there were notable trends that never caught the eye.

RACHEL ROSEN: I think the overall trend that I really noticed is how success destroys trends. So for instance, there was a period in the nineties where I was really excited about new Korean cinema, and it seemed like there were really exciting things going on in Korea. And then what happened was, that new Korean cinema became extremely

successful, and then it started kind of having to be successful, and then it started to seem a little bit more homogenous. Then a few years ago there were really exciting things happening in Argentina; that comes from a certain reason. Lots of people have good theories, but the idea is, the economic collapse kind of opened the door for a lot of filmmakers, because in the years after the economic collapse there was an unprecedented amount of people in film school in Argentina, the theory going, “If I can’t make money as a doctor or a lawyer, I might as well be a filmmaker, I might as well do whatever I want.” And that seems like a really, really exciting place. Some of that, now, I’ve already seen sort of the watered down imitations of those first films, but I still think there are really exciting movies happening there, but then you start to say, “I get it.” These really exciting trends can’t always sustain themselves, because they need to metamorphosize, or else they start to seem like imitations of themselves, because this Argentinean cinema was shocking and austere and very simple, and then you kind of see version 39 and it’s not shocking anymore; it’s just austere and simple. So I think it’s just I am very wary as a programmer of this need for constant discovery of new trends and new filmmaking. I’ve seen a lot of programmers who specialize in certain areas get into this trap where they’re riding the crest of whatever the hot country at the time is, and then, “OK, it’s not new Iranian cinema anymore; now it’s happening in Thailand,” but they don’t know anything about Thai cinema. I do get the sense that there are exciting trends peaking up in different countries, and it’s different every five or six years. The overall trend, though, is just that there continues to be a huge majority of banal, commercial, uninteresting work in any given circumstance or country, and that there are exciting individual voices which may be pushed to the forefront by a cultural trend, or may be the one anomalous voice in their own country. But I think overall it’s like any art. Of all the people trying to do it, there’s going to be a relatively small percentage of people who really have a unique vision.

RUSSELL MERRITT: One reason for invoking the Hoberman/Sontag debate was that I was impressed by how often the Film Festival is on what I guess could be called the cutting edge of things. And I wanted to ask you, because you were bringing up Thai cinema and Argentinean cinema, what about Vietnamese cinema? That seemed to be brought to San Francisco before just about anywhere else in the West. And talk about

patterns, usually Americans embrace the culture of the people they've just been fighting, and it's a tradition that goes way back to the American Revolution, but with Vietnamese films it didn't seem to quite work that way, that there was a gap.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well I think another trend that I've noticed, which even as a programmer I still struggle with and I think audiences struggle with, is this question of authentic voices from countries that we're not habituated to. So I think what was exciting about the Western art cinema is it was pretty easily translatable to the U.S. I mean, a French movie wasn't that different from a U.S. movie; it just had less clothes. What's always a puzzle about some of the countries where there are really big differences in storytelling modes is what works when you bring it to the U.S. What comes to mind are some African films, where there's a theatrical style—heightened and more theatrical. We showed some of those films in San Francisco; we've shown them in L.A. Sometimes people look at them and they just think, "Wow, that's bad acting." They can't help but look at it through their western eyes. I think there's something to that in terms of the Vietnamese cinema, in that there was a slightly melodramatic tint to some of the films we showed from Vietnam, which, I mean, as a programmer, I'm not an expert in everything, nor were we at San Francisco. So we relied on a lot of outside expert programmers in different countries and different fields to suggest things. I can't tell you for sure that that is a style that has ties to Vietnamese culture as opposed to the fact that it was just a little too cheesy for the American public. But I think there are some cinemas that are harder to bring into the U.S. that people don't know how to relate to the same way.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It sounds to me, from what you said and what the others have said in the Festival, that's when it gets interesting, when it's really difficult to make the connection, because it's part of the adventure.

RACHEL ROSEN: Well it is, because it's funny, too; like a lot of those, even Fifth or Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers were usually criticized for sort of kitsching up their country's history for Western consumption. But to be accepted in the West means to be

accessible in some way to the same kind of storytelling that people are used to. And I am interested in where that gray area is, where it starts to get difficult.

RUSSELL MERRITT: You raised a very interesting question this morning, whether it's not another kind of adaptation when you're trying to make a culture popular to the indigenous population; that is, that there's an equal adjustment to just making your own history accessible. Now of course, in Hollywood we know nothing about that, but there is some evidence that this thing happened.

RACHEL ROSEN: And, it's interesting to take a step back because often even my first judgment is, "Oh, it's a total soap opera."

RUSSELL MERRITT: I wonder whether I can try one out on you, that especially given your background and your interest in documentary, whether there's a kind of reversal that goes on with international film festivals, that we're always told about how immigrants gain their first impressions of the United States from the movies and that we know that subtitles were frequently used through immigrant populations as a way of just learning the language and the rest. It seems as though the film festivals reverse that process. It's a way that you get American audiences to emigrate to these cultures that you are never going to know intimately, but which give you a sense of alternatives to what you know.

RACHEL ROSEN: I'm a little bit leery of that. I mean, I see where that fits for documentaries, but to me it's a way of getting you to emigrate to the imaginations of those countries. I mean, it's the same in literature, too. You can read Tolstoy and not necessarily know that that's the reality of the time and country he was writing about, only that he was a great storyteller. So looking at Bela Tarr, there's something in there that tells me something about the country that it's coming from, but it's more about his head than it is about his place. What it does is it creates a curiosity in me about where that might have come from, so it's a springboard for an introduction to a country.

RUSSELL MERRITT: It doesn't sound as though the excitement of travel is the overwhelming motivation that you had in getting interested in film.

RACHEL ROSEN: It was more about storytelling.

RUSSELL MERRITT: When I talk to other programmers, they just love the idea, "I'm going to get to go to Czechoslovakia, to Edinburgh," and the rest; but you want to take another kind of journey.

RACHEL ROSEN: Yeah. It's a head-trip.

RUSSELL MERRITT: A great way to end this. Thank you so much, Rachel. It's been a wonderful afternoon.