

FEATURES

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Back to *Attica*

Reeler Interview: Firestone discusses landmark documentary in advance of rare NYC encore

By S.T. VanAirdale



Riot act: An image from *Attica*, screening Thursday at the Walter Reade Theater (Photos: NYWIFT)

It only took 33 years and what director Cinda Firestone quantifies as "a zillion bootlegs," but the landmark documentary *Attica* is on the verge of a major revival. A detailed, unflinching chronicle of the 1971 riots at the titular prison -- where 31 inmates and nine hostages died in one of the bloodiest domestic uprisings in U.S. history -- and the inquiry that followed, *Attica* found instant acclaim before slipping into an obscurity of distribution hell. Its legend grew, however, in underground circulation and its influence on the policies of correctional systems nationwide, not to mention its maker's self-imposed withdrawal from the film scene.

Through little more than blind luck, the New York Public Library several years ago tracked Firestone down at her Puerto Rico home to initiate a restoration of *Attica*. Underwritten by the Women's Film Preservation Fund of New York Women in Film and Television, the new print premiered to packed houses last spring at Tribeca; it screens tonight with the filmmaker in attendance at the Walter Reade Theater. The Reeler recently caught up with Firestone about

returning to *Attica* after three decades away -- and keeping it alive for decades ahead.

THE REELER: You came to the Tribeca revival earlier this year, right?

CINDA FIRESTONE: Yeah, I did. The two screenings sold out within an hour, and they added a third screening. I went to all three and did a Q&A afterward, which was interesting. I met some really, really interesting people and learned a lot besides just answering questions. I talked to one person who was a student at John Jay; we discussed the differences between penal systems then and now. And a guy who was in *Attica* whom I hadn't seen in 30 years. I kind of enjoyed it.

R: Most filmmakers dread them, but I guess this was your first in a few years?

CF: Years and *years*. I was just reminded of this one Q&A when I did a lot of colleges around New York City. It was all great except the NYU film school -- the graduate studies department. They were all guys, and they were so nasty to me. It was *unbelievable*. The professor had to get up on stage and yell at them to calm down. I think they were angry because I was younger than them, and I was a girl, and I hadn't gone to film school. And I'd made this movie. They accused me of being a fraud and insisted [Fox's mentor] Emile de Antonio really made it -- not me. I was just a front. It got really nasty. But other than that I really like doing Q&A's.

R: What was it like coming back to the film itself after 30 years?

CF: It was weird, because what happened was I thought I just let it lapse. Evidently it had a life of its own; there were zillions of bootlegs out there and people were watching it. My husband said to me: "The way things are going, I really think *Attica*'s relevant again. I hate to say it, but I think you should re-release it." Literally the next day I got a call from the New York Public Library that they wanted to restore it. They'd wanted to restore it for years, except they didn't know where I was. I changed my name to Fox; I moved to Puerto Rico. But then they saw Andrew Firestone [the director's cousin] on *The Bachelor* and thought, "Gee, maybe he's related to Cinda." So they called him up, and he gave them my number. That's how it got restored.

The thing I don't find pleasant is that I still find it relevant. Even *more* relevant. The one thing that isn't still relevant is actually what the film is about: They don't go killing people anymore. I felt good about that because I found out the film was rented by tons of prison departments; they all watched and said, "OK, this is what

we should do." On every other count, though, things have gotten worse. There are 2.2 million people in prison. Nobody even talks about rehabilitation anymore. There are no more federal grants to in and educate these guys. I had kind of forgotten how brutal it was. I'm usually a very squeamish person; I don't watch violent films or anything like that. When I was watching it after all those years, I thought, "Did I really make this?" You can see people shooting people in the head and kicking them in the groin. Horrible stuff. It reinforced to me how dangerous it is to give absolute power to other people.

R: And now it's almost the equivalent of a new film in many ways. At the very least, you're bringing it fresh to a new generation of audiences.

CF: Well, there's really sort of a chilling atmosphere now. I got beaten up really badly, and I got thrown in jail, but I was never really *afraid*, if you know what I mean. But now, this whole idea that someone can be called an enemy combatant and put away for years? That's scary! And nobody seems to be jumping up and down about it.

R: Is that perhaps a subject you might consider taking on in a new film?

CF: No, I keep trying to get out of politics. I moved down to Puerto Rico and I thought I'd just concentrate on my writing and my art. But now I'm incredibly politically involved in a local level. I thought I moved to paradise -- and physically, it *is* paradise -- but it's owned by this incredibly evil corporation. From the day we were here they've been dumping raw sewage in the ocean. They closed down the school. The sea turtles are endangered; people just build right on the beach. So I've been politically active down here, but I thought I was escaping.

R: So what *have* you been up to since 1974?

CF: After I did *Attica*, I made three documentaries that were on PBS: *South Beach*; *Mountain People*; and *Retirement*. I got a really great distributor who was going to start a 16-millimeter division, but then he died and gave the films over to the worst distributors in the world. Then I got really, really sick for about eight years. People said they thought it was because of *Attica*. After I got well and I married my husband, I did a lot of writing and got very involved in children's theater, a lot of scholarship work and counseling at the school I fought to keep open. But I've done quite a lot of writing that I want to get out now. I have a musical coming to Broadway called *Family Fortune* -- a comedy-murder mystery partially based on my family. I had to water it down a little bit because no one

would believe it if I told the truth. I have a screenplay I want to get out about Madam C.J. Walker, the first black female self-made millionaire.

R: Wow. So you do plan to return to filmmaking in some way.



Director Cinda Firestone at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival

CF: Well, my son is making a biography of me.

R: A documentary?

CF: Yes. And I may get sucked back into documentary because he's interested in documentary. But I'm more interested in screenwriting, even though I know it's a frustrating, terrible occupation. But it's really what I want to do. And I'm also writing my autobiography, which is fun.

R: Throughout all of that, did you keep any tabs on *Attica*, particularly its influence or reach among filmmakers?

CF: I just thought *Attica* had fallen off the map. At these screenings, though, people were saying, "No -- everyone's seen it." There are pirated versions and people are showing it in community groups. I found out the library has been showing it every year to commemorate *Attica*. One of my stepsons had an old copy and an old projector, and when he and his friends were bored, they'd just get together and watch *Attica*. I'd always meet these people, and they'd say, "Oh -- you made *Attica*?" And I'd think, "How did all of these people see it?" It played in

like three or four theaters in the United States, and London and Paris. I just never thought that many people saw it.

R: I have to say I'm stunned. It's been huge all these years. Are you going to re-release it on DVD?

CF: Yes, but I want a good deal. I don't want anything like *Star Wars*, but I want it in at least a few theaters, because my experience when it first came out was that it's reviewed and people talk about it. That really helps the DVD sales. I've talked to a lot of different distributors; I'm just waiting for the right one. One of them was a huge disappointment. They weren't going to put it in a single theater; their terms were horrible. Thirty percent of the net? I turned that down for *Mountain People* and *South Beach*, and those were shorts. I was really shocked. I talked to another one who was really psyched, and then she said this gang of accountants came in said to just put it in the catalog. She was really upset. But that's OK. I just talked to her today; I said: "I know it's not your fault. Come to the screening anyway." I just got a call from Lionsgate. They're coming. Who knows? **R**