

AMSTERDAM STORIES USA / 2012

CO-DIRECTED WITH ROGIER VAN ECK

A portrait of ordinary America

The second film in the trilogy devoted to all the places, towns, islands and sometimes people bearing the name “Amsterdam” around the world, *Amsterdam Stories USA* benefited, like its predecessor, from very particular production conditions, at once restrictive – the crew and the technical means were reduced to the bare minimum – and expansive: twenty weeks of shooting in four periods spread over two years (a luxury for a documentary film) and a very great freedom of creation, which made it possible to invent new forms of cinematic expression. The producers Hubert Toint and Jean-Jacques Neira, for Saga Film, and Wilbur Leguèbe, for RTBF, enabled the two filmmakers to make their film outside all the traditional straitjackets of a production subject to the demands of the television channels, which are the main potential sources of revenue. The film, wholly out of the ordinary as much in its length (a total running time of six hours divided into four parts of ninety minutes each) as in its original form, had a very limited broadcast on the airwaves (only RTBF programmed it, for three years running) but a very wide showing at the festivals.

Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck made Amsterdam the McGuffin¹ of the three films they directed together. *Amsterdam Stories USA*, the central part of the trilogy, is the one in which the arbitrariness of the Hitchcockian narrative device is most interesting. The two filmmakers, playing themselves, drive right across the continent and stop in the fifteen or so American towns, villages and hamlets that bear or once bore the name of Amsterdam, from the largest – New York, formerly Nieuw Amsterdam – to the smallest – New Amsterdam, Indiana, twenty-seven inhabitants, and Amsterdam, California, two ranches – and even ghost towns that have been wiped off the map – Amsterdam, Georgia, for example. These towns have nothing in common, except their origin: all of them were founded by Dutch pioneers in places watered by rivers or streams that recalled their native land.

1. Alfred Hitchcock had invented the word McGuffin in order to designate a narrative “device” that he used in most of his films. The McGuffin designates something that obsesses the protagonist (a ring, a lighter, vertigo, a man named Kaplan, a chapel) and moves the story forward but which is not really of any importance to the viewer and is not what is fundamentally at stake in the film, to the point that the McGuffin sometimes turns out not even to exist (Kaplan, in *North by Northwest*).

However, like the Hitchcockian McGuffin, the American Amsterdams are a pre-text. What is really at stake in the film goes far beyond them.

This *road movie* across the North American continent traces, as the New York poet Edgar Oliver puts it at the start of the film, an “imaginary geography” that links, from Amsterdam to Amsterdam, landscapes and the faces of those who live in

them, both of them remarkably filmed by the American cameraman Benjamin Wolf. Some places are still wild, in the Rockies of Montana and Idaho; others, the majority, bear the marks of human activity: ploughed fields stretching as far as the eye can see, long, straight roads, power lines, railway lines, disused factories on the outskirts of small towns, old wooden houses and opulent villas, farms and metal silos glinting in the sun. The film reminds us that the landscape does not evolve according to natural laws but is the product of a collective labour carried on over centuries by the community that occupies it and draws from it the means of its subsistence². In this immense country, crossed from east to west and from south to north, the film makes us see how vernacular every landscape is and how it bears the signs of those who have shaped it over time. At the same time, inspired by the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, the Hobbemas and the Ruisdaels, the filmmakers give a large part of the frame to the *big sky* that crowns the whole of the American territory and symbolises the unity of the cultures fused in the *melting pot*.

“Only the people make a place interesting,” says Derek, a former English sailor who has sailed all around the globe and has settled in Amsterdam, Texas. Following



A film in four seasons.

2. On this subject, see John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *À la découverte du paysage vernaculaire*, French trans. Xavier Carrière, Actes Sud-ENSP, 2003.

the arbitrary thread that takes them to the most unlikely of places, Rombout and Van Eck set off to discover what is known as “deep” America. Deep because it is indeed an America that would be, in a manner of speaking, invisible, hidden behind the screen-image of it presented by television and by Hollywood cinema, and in which, according to Russell Banks, even Americans do not recognise themselves. In each town where they stop for several days, making the acquaintance of the inhabitants, chance as much as necessity leads them to meet certain of them, who go on to become the characters of their film and whose destiny, neither great nor small (a recurring theme of Rombout’s films), is always unexpected, out of the ordinary, surprising. They tell the story of their lives, a memory that is dear to them or an experience they have lived through, at times happy, at times tragic, like those of the Vietnam War or the struggle for civil rights. Of the fifty or so stories they have gathered, not one is commonplace, not one is sensational, each is of an absolute singularity. And these people, who live so far from us, speak to us, touch us, move us because they express what we have in common with them, the small joys and the great miseries, the gladness and the tears, the regrets and the hopes, the wants and the hollows of life.

The treatment of this film was the object of fundamental choices, of formal constraints that Rombout and Van Eck imposed on themselves *a priori*, in the form of a protocol to be followed, somewhat in the manner of the constraints of Oulipian literature (minus the mathematics)³. First of all, the choice of a Canon 5D digital camera, which many camera operators reject because of its very limited depth of field at close range. The filmmakers decide to play with the limits of the device and to introduce blur into their images. Thus, at the end of each fragment devoted to an Amsterdam, they decide to take leave, in a way that is each time the same, of the participant with whom they have had a long interview: a close-up of the face, then a reverse tracking shot from the car as it drives away, at once drowning the character and his surroundings in blur. These *good-bye shots*, as they call them, perfectly express the twofold play of presence and absence that characterises a departure, a farewell.

3. Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) designates a method of poetic writing developed in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François Le Lionnais, in which arbitrary formal constraint, outside any meaning, constitutes the basic creative principle. *La Disparition*, by Georges Perec, based on a lipogram (the absence of the letter “e”), is the most famous novel written in this way.





The second constraint, which is strictly observed throughout the film, concerns the lighting and the mise en scène of the participants during the interviews. The character is placed in half-darkness very close to the camera, which films him in close-up. A lateral light illuminates only half of his face, creating a chiaroscuro that recalls the painting of Caravaggio as much as expressionist cinema. The framing and the lighting have the effect of isolating him completely from his surroundings and of creating around him a dark atmosphere that may make him ill at ease and give rise to moments of silence that the filmmakers retain in the editing. But the half-light is also conducive to reflection. It favours the expression of deeper, sometimes transcendent thoughts, prompted by the questions (cut out in the

editing) of the filmmakers, who question the witness about his story, his conception of life, his vision of America. Several interviews are conducted with two participants placed one behind the other. The face of the first, in the foreground, is sharp, while that of the one in the background is blurred. When the person in front falls silent, the one behind begins to speak, but remains blurred. The viewer is then able to see in the foreground the reactions of the first character to what the second is saying. Something unspoken can be read on his face, which puts into perspective the words of the one speaking behind him. An edit without transition then switches their positions. Such a mise en scène, which plays with light, blur and close-up, creates a perceptible tension between the participants, who may disagree without expressing it openly. The unspoken becomes one of the givens of the film [QR28].

These constraints, which reduce mimesis, stimulate the aesthetic renewal of documentary. As Perec writes in *La Disparition*, they lead to “a product as original as it is instructive, a product that would have, that could have a stimulating power over the construction, the narration, the plotting, the action, let us say, in a word, over the fashioning of the novel of today”. I add, pastiching the ambition of the work: “of the film”. Just as Perec builds his novel on the absence of the most frequently used letter in the French language, so Rombout and Van Eck base these sequences not on a disappearance but on a withdrawal, an effacement, a diminishing of the powers of the camera, which gives less to see: the faces thus surrendered to blur and darkness retain a share of mystery and strangeness, the very opposite of the

traditional conception of documentary cinema, which is supposed to shed light on the shadowy areas of reality.

The shots of faces having been thus determined, the filmmakers make the opposite aesthetic choice for the shots of landscapes, whether natural or urban, for which the field of vision is widened as far as possible. This option, less restrictive but systematic, favours the wide-angle lens, which distorts perspective, the long shot (going as far as the extreme long shot), the moving sequence shot, long accompanying tracking shots, 360° pans, shots taken from a great height, filmed with a crane⁴. The soundtrack, highly elaborate, completed by Foley work that amplifies sound details (footsteps, the roar of engines, natural sounds, etc.), answers to the same aesthetic principle of perceptual widening, which accentuates the realism of the images, including in the sequences of archive photographs. A very beautiful original score, which imposes its slow, sometimes oppressive rhythm, heightens the impression of strangeness given by certain sequences. On top of all this are added the *voice-overs* of the various participants, and of the filmmakers commenting on their own film.

Faces and landscapes, each of which has a photogenic quality of its own, are thus treated aesthetically in a radically different way. The film is built on two opposing cinematic styles, one founded on the narrowing of the frame and on subtraction (of light and of sharpness), the other on the widening of the visual field and on the addition of sound. Between these two clearly demarcated poles are inscribed the very many shots showing the filmmakers themselves in their car, in the bars, in front of the landscapes they are contemplating, in the towns they are visiting, with the people they are meeting. All these sequences, accompanied by their commentary in *voice-over*, constantly reassert the hold of the authors over their work and the subjectivity of their point of view. By staging themselves, by imposing different sizes of shot on faces and landscapes, by reducing the lighting so as to leave its place to shadow, by playing on the blur that drowns certain areas of the image, by controlling the rhythm of the long sequence shots with music that is at times light, at times muffled, slow and anguished, by directing the witnesses as if they were actors, by steering their narration so that their ordinary destiny, told in this way, moves the distant viewer, Rombout and Van Eck do nothing more, in short, than treat reality as a fiction, not in order to falsify it but to distil its atmosphere from it and to bring forth the radiance that will transform these stories of ordinary life into a work of cinema.

If, through the reality it captures without distorting it, the film remains a documentary, it is also shot through with the imaginary. Many shots, innocuous in appearance, awaken our old memories of Hollywood films, from the western to the

4. Not having had the means to have a crane at their disposal throughout the whole of the shoot, the filmmakers were able, on a few occasions, to benefit from the generous assistance of the local fire brigades or of companies that owned this kind of equipment.

fantasy film. A bare-chested Native American, feathers in his hair, face daubed with paint, runs through the woods and then slides his canoe onto the Hudson River – the film does not say that the man is an authentic Mohawk Indian, an aca-



ademic with a doctorate, who, for his own pleasure, lends himself to the game of historical re-enactment. On the prairies of Amsterdam, Idaho, a real cowboy has traded his horse for a motorbike to round up the cows [QR39]. In *Selma*, the cast shadows of the two filmmakers contemplate the old hotel where the brothers Frank and Jesse James stayed. As it leaves the frame, the Union Pacific train crossing Amsterdam, Missouri, clears the perspective of the main street, deserted, where Rombout and Van Eck, some distance apart, legs astride, seem ready for a duel. The textile mill of Amsterdam, New York, is disused, all its windows are broken, but, at the very top of the façade, a woman is looking out of a window. In the next shot, inside the mill, the same woman, filmed in superimposition, paces up and down the immense empty floor, like a ghost. In the same town, a dark castle in medieval style built by the army in 1894 calls to mind Dracula's castle. In the half-light, visitors walk beneath the gleaming gaze of the stuffed animals that decorate its many rooms [QR28]. To the slow rhythm of anguished music, the camera advances cautiously into a vast dark hall. Suddenly a ball bounces across the frame, a child in a red T-shirt comes bounding in on a pogo stick, another rides past on a scooter in front of the low-slung camera, which precedes him in a fast reverse tracking shot: *The Shining* forces itself upon our memory and comes to disturb our viewing of the film.

Besides the referential play with film history and the touches of humour that lighten the tone, these incursions into fiction do indeed have a function: to underline the hold that cinematic clichés have on the perception of reality, to awaken the viewer's critical spirit, to prompt him to reflect on the snares of illusion. A sequence concerning the work of an amateur painter illustrates this necessity in another way. The artist takes as the sole subject of his many paintings the daily life of the Native Americans at the time when the first Europeans arrived. He informs himself, reads, accumulates historical data, then "puts all that in order" so as to obtain the most faithful possible reconstruction of a world he has never seen but of which he wants to obtain, he says, "the perfect representation": "I want the viewer to feel the emotion as if he were living the experience himself." The filmmakers refrain from commenting on the artist's pipe dream and on the very kitsch execution of his works, but when the camera approaches one of them and enters the scene depicted, sounds can be heard: horses whinnying, the lapping of the river's water. Reinforcing the fiction in this way has the effect of accentuating the artificiality of the painting and of underlining the fantasy of the painter's illusion, in which the film itself participates.

As often in Rombout's cinema (and even more so when he collaborates with Rogier van Eck), the film reflects on what it is, on the limits of documentary cinema, which it never ceases to push back, on the indiscernibility between the real and the imaginary – a major preoccupation of the filmmakers of modernity (Resnais, Antonioni, Bergman, Rouch, Godard, Cassavetes, Marker, etc.), who made reflexivity a crucial issue. In the third part of the film, the two filmmakers discuss their undertaking with each other. Until then, they have been listening to stories. Why not invent one themselves? Taking their cue from what Alain Robbe-Grillet did in *Trans-Europ-Express*, they put together a scenario: on the road, a young girl, alone in the rain, soaked to the skin, would be hitchhiking. They would stop and pick her up. While the two of them are imagining their story, it comes true before our eyes. The young girl climbs aboard the big 4x4. The camera mounted on the bonnet films the two filmmakers in the front of the vehicle and, between them, in the back, the girl, who begins to undress. "A vagabond, *sans toit ni loi*, maybe a junkie," says Rob, with a wink at Agnès Varda. "All the ingredients of a story are there. True or false. Are you with me?" he asks just as the girl takes off her T-shirt



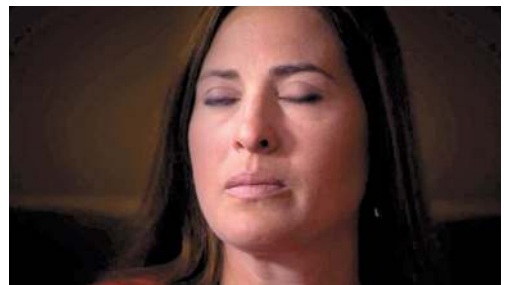
and bares her breasts. The question is addressed as much to the dumbfounded viewer, who no longer knows what film he is watching, as to Rogier, who replies: “No, not really. What are you getting at?” “When you watch something, on TV for instance, you never know whether it’s true or false. We project our own imagination. Here, we’re in the Midwest, it’s raining, but there’s no hitchhiker. There’s a young woman, an extra. [...] Her name is Sabrina.” After a quick clapperboard snapped in front of the girl’s face, there follows an interview with this extra, who talks about her dream of becoming an actress in Hollywood. For Rombout and Van Eck, exposing the conditions of the film’s enunciation in this way was necessary in order to avoid the most commonplace clichés about America but also to show that *mise en scène* is not incompatible with documentary, to get off the beaten track, to open up new roads, to clear new ground and to broaden the expressive possibilities of cinema [QR36].

Rombout and Van Eck gave themselves a mentor, a tutelary figure, “the conscience of the film”, they say: Russell Banks, whose novels, as well as an essay on America, they had read and who agreed to receive them at his home in Ohio. Russell Banks knows his country well, having criss-crossed it in the 1960s. He knew Jack Kerouac at the end of his life and wrote an adaptation of *On the Road* for Francis Ford Coppola, who never made it. The writer understands the two filmmakers’ cinematic project, “the impulse behind it” and, he hopes, its “usefulness”. He senses that so ambitious a film could change their vision – and perhaps ours – of America, and also their personality, for, “for Americans,” he says, “to move, to go from place to place, is to change your life, your character, your destiny, your future, your identity. [...] It’s a large part of our national identity.” These words hardly concern the characters of the film, most of whom have never left the Amsterdam where they live. They are addressed rather, implicitly, to the two travelling filmmakers, whose vast journey might call their identity into question and change the way they look at America: “I can understand a project like yours. The arbitrary approach of following the various Amsterdams across the United States is intriguing. But obviously you are using it as an opening, as a door through which you enter rooms that seem to you shaded and dark, and when you go through that door, you will then be able to understand who you are and what you are doing there.” The criticism is subtle, implying that the filmmakers do not know what they are letting themselves in for, why they are there, or even who they are. Since, according to the writer, to move is to change (character, destiny, future, as was the case for Kerouac in 1947), their long journey ought to transform them and lead them to look at America differently. However, unlike the *beatnik* writer who took to the road at the age of 25, Rombout and Van Eck are no longer of an age to question their identity. Their project is mature enough to avoid claiming to film America “as it is”, with the deceptive innocence of someone who has never looked at it. On the contrary, they will never cease to affirm and display their point of view as French-speaking Dutch filmmakers discovering a “strange” country (“it’s the

only word that always comes to mind”, says Rob at the end of the film) and will devote many sequences, during the long car journeys, to exchanging their impressions of the America they are crossing, whose astonishing diversity they in no way reduce and which proves to be far removed from all the clichés that are in circulation about it [QR30].

Despite his muted criticism, Russell Banks has fully grasped what is at stake in the film and throws down a real challenge to the filmmakers: “I think it’s important to find images that reveal the nature of these lives, as well as the shape their desires, their needs, their fears take”, and to succeed in filming “what people really live through”. The challenge is immense, but it is met. Needs, desires and fears form the substance of the fifty or so life stories gathered. Each rests on a more or less variable balance between information and emotion. I shall take two examples, among the many others that chance allowed the filmmakers to meet.

Nicky does not like golf, which her husband and a large proportion of the community of Amsterdam, Virginia, play. A criminologist by training, but with no occupation, she has founded a reading club for women because, she says, “a book makes you question yourselves” about “those things that make you grow”. In this small town reduced to nothing but a golf course lined with opulent houses – detached, with a lawn and a double garage for big cars – nothing moves on the *greens* that stretch as far as the eye can see, apart from the electric carts transporting players as colourless as shadows. Boredom is written all over Nicky’s face. The flatness of the golf course represents the emptiness which, with her friends, she seeks to escape by taking refuge in books. When, in a very long take on her face, she tells how a lady whom she had helped and put up because of the





snow, on Christmas Eve, had sent her a card in which she called them, her husband and herself, “her Christmas angels”, she is unable to hold back a tear. Her story, as banal as it could possibly be, leaves us indifferent, but her tears say a great deal about the emptiness of her existence [QR32].

Chesney is 19 and works as a waitress in a bar in Great Falls (Montana). She dreams of going to Dubai to see the tallest tower in the world because “you don’t see anything like that around here, just the sky” and because there are moments when “you look out of the window and you’d like to be somewhere else”. Her parents are divorced, her mother went to live in Texas and never came back, her father went bankrupt, she watched the banks take possession of her house, she has nothing left of her past, only five photos of her childhood. She hates her parents’ generation, which “thinks only about money”. While she goes on speaking in *voice-over*, she walks along the snowy banks of the Missouri, her rapid step setting the pace of a long accompanying tracking shot. Chesney would like to go to Africa to “meet someone who was born into that, who knows what it is to walk for an hour to get drinking water [...]. There are Americans who don’t even drink tap water.” She does not understand the policy of the United States: “Our country is a magnificent country. We are a free people, but at the same time [there is] everything we do to be free, [...] going into other countries, in-

vading them and telling them: ‘You don’t do things the way we do in America. Why don’t you do it like this?’ You can’t go on doing that forever without consequences.” Filmed from a distance, in a fixed shot, Chesney wanders alone in the middle of a snowy field, beneath the cables of a high-voltage line, then little by little disappears, like a ghost, in a dissolve that lets the whiteness of the snow reclaim its rights over the image [QR37].

The portraits of these two women create links between their being-in-the-world – boredom, solitude, dreams, the relationship with others, the relation to the past or to the future – and the microcosm in which they live, from which they cannot escape and which determines them. It took the golf course, its superficiality, the shadows of the players in their electric carts for us to understand that a mere Christmas card could make Nicky cry. It took Chesney walking through the snowy countryside and a dissolve that “ghostifies” her to give meaning to her dream of Dubai. Both seem prisoners of their destiny, shut away in their little world from which nothing seems able to release them.

Destiny and freedom. A philosophical obsession that Rob Rombout never ceases to question in most of his films. For certain American Protestant communities, destiny is decreed by God and is called “predestination”. Pastor Jack explains the meaning of this concept: “For me, predestination simply means that the final destination is already determined, but that we have complete freedom to write the chapters of our lives, the ones that will lead us to that final destination. God puts things in my path that push me in a very specific direction, but he never forces me to take that road. He gives me the freedom to take it of my own accord.” The pastor officiates in Amsterdam, Montana, where a shopkeeper has built in front of his shop a wooden windmill that recalls the Dutch origins of the little town’s founders. Roots of which the inhabitants are proud and to which they refer. Carly too is proud of her ancestry. She has taken over the garage founded in 1937 by her grandfather, a good man in whom his customers placed their trust. The inheritance was not merely a commercial one. The garage has preserved its good reputation. From generation to generation, values have been handed down which still guide Carly’s conduct. Rob says that she was “predestined to take over [the] business”. But she does not really believe in it: “Yes, in a certain way, but I have the absolute freedom to screw it all up.” Carly drives an old car dating from the 1930s which no doubt belonged to her grandfather. The car goes round the windmill several times and then fades gently away and disappears like a ghost [QR38]. This mise en scène symbolically illustrates the filmmakers’ critical point of view on this little world that goes round in circles and from which there is no way out: “All these places we have passed through are the fruit of the past, of the pioneer spirit, founded behind closed doors, far from the world.



Living in comfort and in isolation in a geographical space where the centre no longer exists. The individual alone is responsible for his choices, before God. Trusting only in the concrete, material world, what one sees, what one touches. Everything that lies around is unknown, threatening, strange.” [QR35]

The American dream is another form of belief in the omnipotence of destiny. Can one still believe in it? Is it still possible to rise above one's condition, to escape social determinism or divine predestination, to experience an adventure and perhaps to become someone other than the person one is? These questions the directors of *Amsterdam Stories* never cease to put to their witnesses. Some, like Carly, have stayed where they were born; others have left everything behind to realise their dream. Veronica clandestinely crossed the border from Mexico to come and live in California, where she was hired by Peter Calf, who, for his part, had left Vancouver with his family to build his farm and grow almond trees. Two trajectories that met in Amsterdam, California, but where Peter remains the boss of his own business and Veronica his employee. The American dream has not yet broken through the glass ceiling. When the boss goes off to inspect his plantations, the camera rises very high into the air and shows him very small, tiny in the midst of his blossoming almond trees [QR40]. Adrian Cronauer, the former presenter of the famous radio programme “Good Morning Vietnam”⁵, thinks that Americans share this same *can do* spirit, this optimistic feeling that they are able to do anything, even become President of the United States. According to him, the idea “that you can do what you want, that you can achieve what you want, provided you work hard” is

deeply rooted in the American mentality [QR31]. Russell Banks qualifies this view: “It’s easy to use that belief to get people to sacrifice themselves for a result that isn’t always positive. As long as it works, it really is a dream. But when it doesn’t work, when it hasn’t been possible for millions of Americans, as it is impossible today for millions more than in the past, then it becomes a nightmare.” A good number of the stories told in *Amsterdam Stories* bear out his words and remind us that not all Americans have the same chance of escaping their social and above all their racial condition. Sheriff Wiley Griffin’s wife is a teacher at a primary school. Of the thirty pupils in



5. A programme made famous by Barry Levinson's film, in which Cronauer is played by Robin Williams.

her class, she knows that ten or so will slide into criminality and end up in the prison that her husband runs. The camera follows the sheriff and his African-American colleague as they make the round of the glass-fronted cells in which prisoners in striped uniforms wave to the visitors. The majority of them are Black. The sheriff may not know Victor Hugo's famous sentence ("Open a school, you will close a prison"), but he knows that, if they had obtained a diploma, the former pupils of his wife would not be in his house of detention. "Believe me," he says, "it's harder to be a teacher."

From the slave traders who carried off their ancestors to all the George Floyds who, even today, are victims of racism and police violence, the destiny of African Americans is a long tragedy that perpetuates itself over time. To understand that the American dream is a myth and that destiny is a matter not of God's will but of men's, *Amsterdam Stories* had also to be a journey through time. Rombout and Van Eck preferred to have recourse to photographic documents rather than to film or television archives in order to anchor certain personal stories in the history of the United States, which they illuminate with a living light. Charles, facing the camera, holds in his hands the photograph of his brother, Medgar Evers, the celebrated civil-rights activist murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963. While Charles grew old, Medgar remained young for all eternity. Sixty years now separate these two faces, with such different destinies, brought together before the camera. Today, Charles runs a public-service radio station that aims to be the voice of Black and white people, of rich and poor and of all minorities. Like his brother, Charles went into politics and became the first Black mayor in Mississippi since Reconstruction. While he tells the story of his life, photographs roll past of Medgar's funeral at Arlington Cemetery, near Washington, where he is buried not far from John F. Kennedy. Medgar died young, but his struggle and his assassination contributed to the adoption of the *Civil Rights Act*, desired by Kennedy and voted through by Congress. Charles lived a long time – he was ninety when Rombout and Van Eck filmed him – but his life in the shadow of his dead brother has not left its mark on history. Of these two different destinies, the film keeps the trace of what binds them together [QR33].

Despite the law on civil rights, certain states of the South continued to multiply discriminatory practices so as to prevent Black people from exercising their right to vote. Passing through Selma, Alabama, the filmmakers meet Ellen, who, in 1965, had taken part in the first march calling for an end to the discrimination. While she is speaking, the photographs show the long line of marchers who are trying to reach Montgomery, the capital of the state. After the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which crosses the river, the police, lined up in ranks, bar the road, fire tear-gas grenades, charge on horseback and violently beat the demonstrators with their batons. Eighty-four wounded people lie stretched out on the roadway. Held in someone's hands beneath the eye of the camera, the photographs pass one after the other, like so many moments



frozen in the past that Ellen's words bring back to life. Television too filmed the scene. Kevin, an archivist in Selma, explains that television audiences were horrified to see the way in which Americans were treating other Americans. Several months later, after two more marches and murders perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan, a new law prohibited racial discrimination in the exercise of the right to vote. It was a great victory for African Americans, who succeeded in changing the course of their tragic destiny. But then, says Kevin, the white population left Selma, taking their businesses and their money with them. The shops closed. Even today the town still suffers from the lack of work.

The association of the living words of the witnesses with photographs of a distant past that concerns them sometimes creates moments of intense emotion. Dennis Gallagher, a veteran of Vietnam, where he was sent at the age of eighteen, weeps as he remembers his anguish, when he wondered every day whether it would be his last. He did many things of which he is ashamed: "I think war is the biggest blunder a human being can commit." Over his words, photographs taken in Vietnam by great photojournalists roll past. A drone of helicopters and bursts of machine-gun fire heighten the hold of the images. One of them is the famous photograph by Horst Faas showing the face of a very young soldier with pale eyes who has written on his helmet "*War is Hell*". These words have the effect of a gash across the an-

gelic beauty of this face that looks at us, smiling. This young man has never been identified, but the viewer cannot help thinking that this hypnotic gaze surging out of the past could be that of Dennis, forever haunted by his memories of the hell that burned up his youth [QR29].

Alongside the photographic images that the witnesses' words restore to the continuity of time, other recurring motifs in *Amsterdam Stories* synthesise the conjunction of past and present, of life and death. Taxidermy and stuffed animals return on three occasions. Long tracking shots linger over the heads of stags, hinds and roe deer that decorate the medieval castle of Amsterdam, New York. In Amsterdam, Ohio, the house of a safari enthusiast is cluttered with the heads of buffaloes, giraffes and elephants. The motif and its symbolism are developed when the filmmakers meet Steven, a hunter and taxidermist in Amsterdam, Missouri. In the camouflage gear that makes him look like Chewbacca in *Star Wars*, Steven practises bow hunting. The animals he kills become trophies in his taxidermy workshop. His business attracts his fellow hunters, who bring him their kills. The deer is his "daily bread". "The hardest thing is to make them look real," he says, showing some glass eyes to the camera. "I create nothing that God hasn't already created," forgetting that he has had to give death to the creature to which God had given life. Death, for Steven, is something unthought, which goes well with his aberrant justification of hunting and his ignorance of animal life: "One of the most important things for me in the United States is our rights and our freedom to bear arms. No guns, no hunting. No hunting, no way of preserving the animals, which will suffer more if they're left alone to starve without a habitat." Stupidity or slyness, the remark poorly conceals the real pleasure that Steven takes in shooting game: "You have to get close to the animals to kill them," he says. "It's much more thrilling." His workshop is a menagerie put to sleep for all eternity. In long, slow tracking shots, the camera reviews the animals keeping watch in the half-light, out of which emerges the faint gleam of their glass eyes. In a disquieting atmosphere, sustained by the slow music, heads of hind, roe deer, partridge, grouse, pike, wolf and hare pass by in extreme close-up. The last head filmed is that of Steven himself, motionless, his eye gleaming in the morbid darkness, as though embalmed by the camera. These mummified animals that give the illusion of life, these living dead frozen for eternity, accentuate the effect of strangeness sought by the filmmakers but also symbolise, implicitly, the idea that those who transform and collect them themselves live in a world that seems to have become immobile.

Rombout and Van Eck share a particular attraction to a place that they visit in





every Amsterdam: the cemetery. For the Romantic writers and painters, the old windswept cemetery expressed the melancholy state of mind of the poet drawn to death and to the mysteries of the beyond. Nothing of the sort here: the lawns are mown, the graves decked with flowers and small flags. Here one finds the graves of the first Dutch pioneers or headstones recalling a past tragedy, such as the mining disaster that plunged the whole town of Amsterdam, Ohio, into mourning in 1910. Sometimes the oldest headstones are beginning to sink, the gates no longer close, the grass has grown long and the abandoned cemetery is all that remains of a vanished town, as in Amsterdam, Pennsylvania, where a bagpiper takes advantage of the peaceful spot to practise his art without disturbing his neighbours. The cemetery is a meeting place between the dead and the living, between past and present, between the landscape and the faces of those who lived there, a place to which destiny will lead all the characters in the film and where they will rest alongside those who went before them. The cemetery is the emblem of *Amsterdam Stories USA*.

Rombout and Van Eck are not the first to have taken to the road to set off and discover America and bring back writings or images of it. Some of them are cited in the film (Kerouac), others not, depending on whether the filmmakers must have drawn inspiration from them or distanced them-

selves from them. The arbitrary thread that structures the film recalls that of *Route One/USA* by Robert Kramer (1989), who had set out to meet the Americans living along Route 1, which runs the whole length of the east coast of the United States. This *road movie* accompanies a fictional character, Doc (played by Paul McIsaac), the filmmaker's alter ego, who, after ten years of absence, rediscovers his country while asking questions of himself. All along the 5,000 km of his journey, he passes

through landscapes, suburbs and sites that speak of the history of the United States (from the Civil War to the Vietnam War) and meets highly varied communities with often opposing ideas. *Amsterdam Stories* is also a journey through the space and time of America, but one undertaken by two filmmakers of Dutch origin who set foot in a foreign country and play their own roles as filmmakers listening to the stories that are told them by the people they meet. The comparison ends there, for Kramer's America is industrial and suburban, nature there is destroyed, chopped up, ravaged, and many of its inhabitants are excluded, marginal, undocumented, in distress – the whole amounting to a desperate portrait of a rust-coloured America in decline. Rombout and Van Eck are more intrigued by the strangeness of a country they are discovering, but also more filled with wonder at the natural beauties that it harbours and more drawn to ordinary Americans, neither rich nor destitute, neither pretentious nor outcast.

Their journey also recalls that of Robert Frank, a photographer of Swiss origin who had settled in the United States in 1947 and who, with his family, criss-crossed the whole country for a period of two years, in 1955 and 1956. In *Amsterdam Stories* we find many of the motifs photographed by Frank: the road and what lies alongside it, automobiles and the people who drive them, petrol stations, bars, customers and waitresses. In his book, which has since become famous, *The Americans*⁶, Frank arranges his photographs in a scattered order, as a way of underlining the fragmentation of an unequal society in which loneliness and exclusion hold sway. Rombout and Van Eck have in common with him the primacy of a subjective gaze upon an America that differs from the positive, community-minded image that it wishes to give of itself, but they do not adhere to his dark, pessimistic and melancholic vision. Their images, framed with great precision and from a distance, are closer to the photographs of another master of American photography, Walker Evans, who surveyed the territory of the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Working for a variety of magazines (*Fortune* principally) and for the Farm Security Administration, Evans made a contribution to the greatest photographic inventory of American society and culture ever undertaken in that country. His "documentary style", as he himself calls it, which lays claim to the double heritage of Gustave Flaubert (for style) and Eugène Atget (for the document), is characterised by a cold neutrality in the face of the places he photographs, from which all life is very often absent: houses, bars, petrol stations, factories, cinemas, shopfronts covered with advertising signs, deserted streets with electric wires strung above them, rows of identical dwellings, façade ornaments, dilapidated or abandoned old wooden houses, posters for shows pasted on the walls. Each of Evans's photographs must be seen as an ensemble of signs which, indirectly, speak of the people whom one does not see but who live in these places

6. Initially turned down by American publishers, the book was published in France, by Delpire, in 1958 and has since gone through numerous reprints.

and inscribe them within a history, a culture, a society. Conversely, when he photographs a person, he comes close to the face, which he frames soberly and frontally, with a certain coldness, devoid of any particular expression. It is an equivalent work on the signs that associate people with places that we find in *Amsterdam Stories USA*, with the same concern for neutral framing, the same division between close-ups of faces and wide shots of landscapes, the same attraction to the traces of the past, the same taste for vernacular architecture, advertising signs and house façades, in short, one and the same “documentary style”. In 1930, Walker Evans stopped off in Amsterdam, New York, where he photographed a street lined with textile mills. This photograph is shown in the film, in front of the same street as it is today, the whole of one side of which has been destroyed. Stephen Haven, a poet who is spending some time in this town, reproaches Evans for having taken no more than a single image in Amsterdam, for not having photographed those who worked there, for not having understood that the mills were soon going to close. But Haven forgets that a photograph never stands alone, that it forms part of an ensemble which is not limited, in this precise case, to one single town, that Evans’s entire oeuvre, taken as a whole, speaks of the America of the Great Depression as *Amsterdam Stories USA* speaks of the America of today [QR27].



1. Walker Evans. – 2. *Amsterdam Stories USA* / South.

From 1930 to 2012, America became a world power. One might think that this imperialism would have changed it. Yet, looking at all the images taken from generation to generation by photographers and filmmakers who have crossed it from end to end, despite the differences in their means and their projects, something persists: the vague but painful impression of an inexorable destiny. The small towns, the countryside, the suburbs and those who live there with difficulty, between small joys and great miseries, have not known the golden age of the great industrial groups and of the metropolises with their haughty architecture. If the American Empire is today in decline, the deep America seen by Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Robert Kramer, Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck does not seem to have changed a great deal. From an old abandoned shack photographed by Evans to another filmed by Rombout and Van Eck,

both of them flanked by an advertisement for Coca-Cola, the shortcut is no doubt a hasty one, but the impression remains that this America has never known the American dream.

Why film? Every documentary filmmaker, provided he is motivated by something other than money, asks himself this question. All the more so when his project takes him far from the sensational events that make the news or the illustrious people who draw the crowds. On this subject, Rombout and Van Eck questioned Russell Banks, who, like any writer, must also have asked himself: “Why write?” The novelist did not know what to answer and turned the question back on them: “And you, who are you? What are you doing here?”, obliging them to reflect and to answer in their film. On the road, the filmmakers met people infinitely less famous than Russell Banks but who, indirectly, brought elements of an answer to their question. In *Selma*, Ellen speaks of the oral tradition, of her grandparents who used to tell stories. “Now it’s the job of museums and history books. It’s up to them to pass on this heritage, [...] to make sure that these stories and History are not forgotten.” Passing on stories in order to fight against oblivion: that is what *Amsterdam Stories USA* does.

Cindy Kelly publishes a poetry review. She has written a text about her town, Amsterdam, Ohio, a former mining town now devastated by drugs. She says this strange sentence: “The town is full of people who know that storytellers are better at growing gardens than chemists.” The storytellers she speaks of are the ordinary people who tell stories as they tend their vegetable patches. Rombout and Van Eck have heard them, gathered their seeds, made them germinate, thinned out the seedlings, then planted them out in the deep soil of their film and trained them against the great wall of History. They too are gardeners and storytellers. The flowers they have sown between the vegetable beds tell other stories, their own and that of their American garden. Between all the flowerbeds they have laid out paths and, at the turn of a path, they have opened up a vista onto a beautiful landscape. In *Amsterdam Stories*, the viewer strolls as he pleases. He can follow the main avenue that runs through it from one end to the other or stray from it, step over a flowerbed, smell the flowers, taste a fruit, then go off to gather other stories a little further on. The gardeners will not reproach him for following another route. Even if the sun does not shine there at every hour, their garden is vast, luxuriant and beautiful in every season.

COMMENTS

□ When Rogier and I presented *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* in the United States, where the film had won a few prizes, we realised that there were fifteen Amsterdams in that country. If you put them all in a line on a map, you get a route that goes from one coast to the other. We decided to continue the adventure by shooting a *road movie* (*Amsterdam via Amsterdam is a sea movie...*).

It was something of a pretext for filming an unknown America, the America of the small towns (*Small Town America*), where there's nothing to see.

□ We started from an initial idea, a geographical one: to begin in New York, the former New Amsterdam, and to finish in California. For my part, I scouted locations around New York, and Rogier visited the little Amsterdam in California.

There were four shoots of about six weeks each. First we filmed the beginning and the end, the East and the West. A third shoot in the South, and the Midwest to finish... the strangest part.

During the third shoot, we went back to New York, because we felt that some things were missing in the first part. It is the only city that we ended up visiting twice in this way. Because New York is huge, and because the beginning of a film, just like the end, is something important.

At the beginning of the first episode, in the East, the departure with Edgar Oliver takes place in the dark. Something you cannot imagine on television, because the viewer might zap to another channel. Especially if the voice he hears is strange. Edgar Oliver speaks slowly, in a voice that makes you think of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

□ The strangest episode is the third, in the Midwest. It was the last shoot, in an unusual region. With the dialogues in Dutch, we gave ourselves permission to be more personal [QR34].

□ All the work stretched over more than two years, without any pressure, in total freedom,

with pleasure at every moment, and I had a feeling of great harmony throughout the whole shoot.

□ We had no idea how long the film would be. The initial project, with RTBF, was two hours at most. When we finished the first cut, having already cut a great deal of material, there were... six hours left! The head of the documentary unit, Wilbur Leguèbe, was determined to defend the film, and scheduled it in four chapters of ninety minutes. And despite its length, the film was screened at festivals and won awards there.

The premiere took place in Amsterdam, at the International Documentary Film Festival.

□ The portraits: when we arrive somewhere, we have not scouted the place; sometimes chance steps in, sometimes there is a little more strategy. In Indiana, we were told about a former soldier, rather authoritarian, almost a hundred years old, named Junior. Whatever you did, you were not supposed to talk to him. So we went to see him to talk to him. The people of the village did not like him. Junior has arranged to be cremated and to have his ashes scattered from a plane over the village. It is a tiny story, but a brilliant one: once he is dead, he will still inflict his presence on the villagers.

□ One sequence is based on the film by Robbe-Grillet, *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966). We tell a story with a character, and then this character appears, as in a fiction. Is it true or not true? The viewer no longer knows who is manipulating whom. We play with him. Just when he thinks the character is fictional, she seems real. An actress talks, facing the camera, about her life, her ambitions. Then we unsettle things with an interview in profile; we put the character on the left, on the right, in the centre, left profile, right profile... "cubist", as van der Keuken used to say. The sound is continuous.

It is also a demonstration that you can play with forms in a documentary.

□ In Montana.

The film starts, like the others, in the dark. We hear the voice of Russell Banks. An

analysis of contemporary America. Then for five minutes, with his commentary, we move forward, in a sequence shot, along a snow-covered road (the Canon 5D camera is attached to the car).

A little later we meet Chesney, a waitress in a coffee bar. An American woman who would like to go where there are tall towers. To Dubai. She analyses America starting out from a detail, a banal story, her parents' divorce, and she arrives at something important: her country, which is heading in the wrong direction. Her analysis becomes more and more merciless.

The two views of America complement each other, but in the end I have the feeling the waitress made me understand the USA better.

❑ Another time, in Montana, we found ourselves in a little backwater by the name of Amsterdam.

It was Sunday. We were looking for characters. So we went to church.

The best was the pastor: a unifying figure, he is used to talking to people. Then a girl, who is actually the boss of a garage that sells cars. She is obliged (it is her destiny) to preserve the honour of the family business; her grandfather is entrepreneur of the year. It is a burden for her.

What links these two characters? The key word will be "predestination".

A double interview on this theme, a real *mise en scène*. The village is reduced to just two people. A cohabitation of visions within a single shot.

❑ *Amsterdam Stories*: as the title indicates, for each of the Amsterdams we have "a story", like a little film of its own. This creates a structure that is discontinuous, with films within the film.

In Amsterdam, Montana, it will be *Car dealing and ethics*: the pastor stepped in to stop the girlfriend of a young soldier away on a mission from using the car he had just bought to get it on with other men.

❑ Another little story: that of a dentist named Robert (what a coincidence!) Amsterdam. A man who has done well and whom everybody

likes thanks to his surname: Amsterdam. It goes down better than his Jewish origins, which are not always appreciated by his patients.

❑ A method borrowed from fiction cinema. In post-production, we redid a dialogue in the car: we sat in half a car with a steering wheel, facing a screen onto which the sequence was projected.

It is a far cry from the idea people have of making a documentary.

CREDITS

Screenplay, visual concept, direction, editing supervision: Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck.

Camera: Benjamin Wolf.

Interview sound recording assistants: Colin Bannon, Matthew J. Menter, with the collaboration of Trevor Cohen.

Commentary: Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck

Interview translation: Paula Cook.

Translation of the poems: Johan Frederik Hel-Guedj.

Picture editing: Fanny Roussel, Alice de Matha, Frédéric Dupont.

Sound editing: Guillaume Berg, with the help of Nasrine Sadraee.

Foley: Marie-Jeanne Wyckmans.

Original music: Hughes Maréchal, performed by Fabrice Alleman (saxophone) and Isabelle Dumont (vocals). The song *I'm alone* was composed by Hughes Maréchal, and its lyrics were both written and sung by Victoria Rummmler.

Additional music: *Clarinet Concerto II*, by Robert Livingston Aldridge; *La traviata*, by Giuseppe Verdi; and *Greenfields*, performed by The Brothers Four.

Mix: Rainier Buidin.

Colour grading: Mike Joris (Lustre / Studio L'Équipe).

Production: Saga Film (Hubert Toint and Jean-Jacques Neira) – RTBF Documentary Unit (Wilbur Leguèbe).

Co-production: Wallonie Image Production – Pieter Van Huystee Film (Amsterdam).

Associate co-producers: Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck.

With the support of VOO and the Centre du cinéma et de l'audiovisuel (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles).

Broadcast: RTBF 2013, 2015, 2017.

Festivals: Official selection at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (2012) – Audience Award at the 10th IndieLisboa International Independent Film Festival (Lisbon, 2013) – “Dragoslav Antonijevic” Grand Prix at the 22nd International Festival of Ethnological Film (Belgrade, 2013) – Official selection at the “Étonnants Voyageurs” International Book and Film Festival (Saint-Malo, 2013) – Official selection at the Mois du film documentaire (Paris, 2013) – Official selection at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF, 2014) – Nominated for “Best Feature-Length Documentary” at the Magritte du cinéma awards (Brussels, 2014) – Invited to the Studio national des arts contemporains (Le Fresnoy, France, 2015) – Official selection at the Tiburon International Film Festival (USA, 2016) – Official selection at the 11th Annual KAFFNY Infinite Cinema (New York, 2017) – Special screening at the John Adams Institute (Amsterdam, 2017) – Official selection at the Short Long World Festival, Corrientes (Argentina, 2018).

Format: HD digital video.

Running time: 360 minutes (4 x 90 minutes).







Amsterdam Stories USA / East.

Amsterdam Stories USA / South.



Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest.

Amsterdam Stories USA / West.



Amsterdam Stories USA / East.





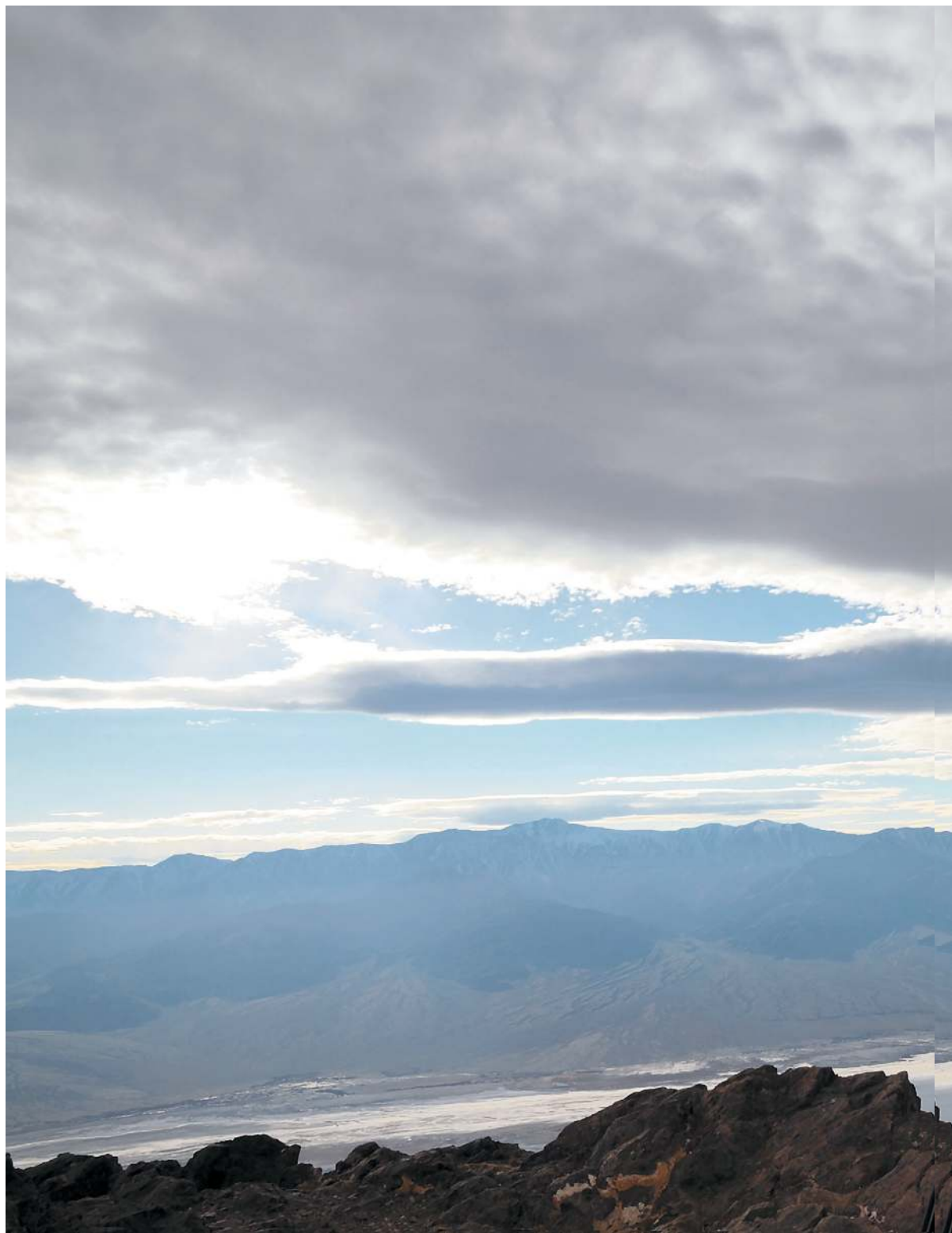




Amsterdam Stories USA / West. Idaho

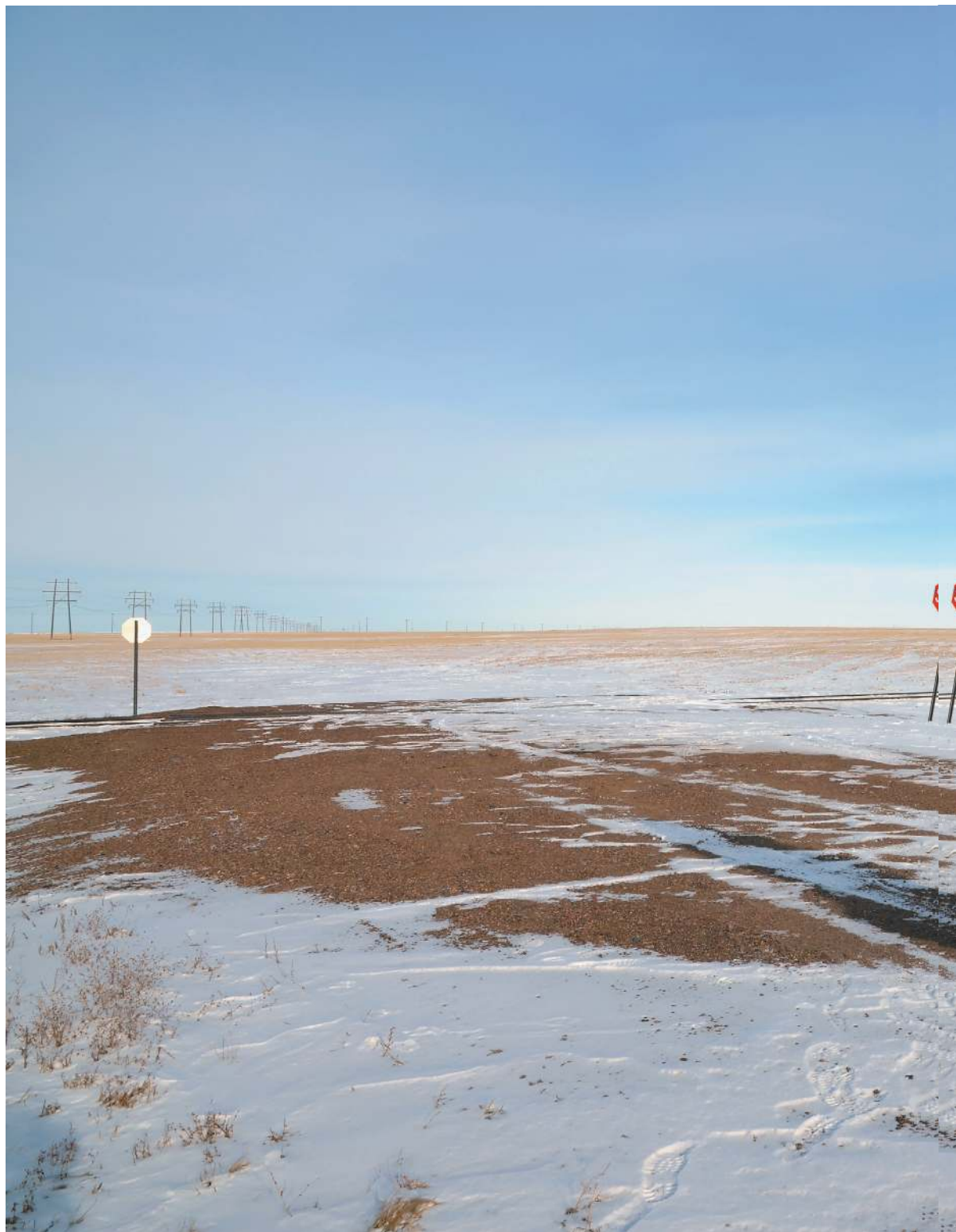


Amsterdam Stories USA / West. 1. Montana – 2. California.



Amsterdam Stories USA / West. California.



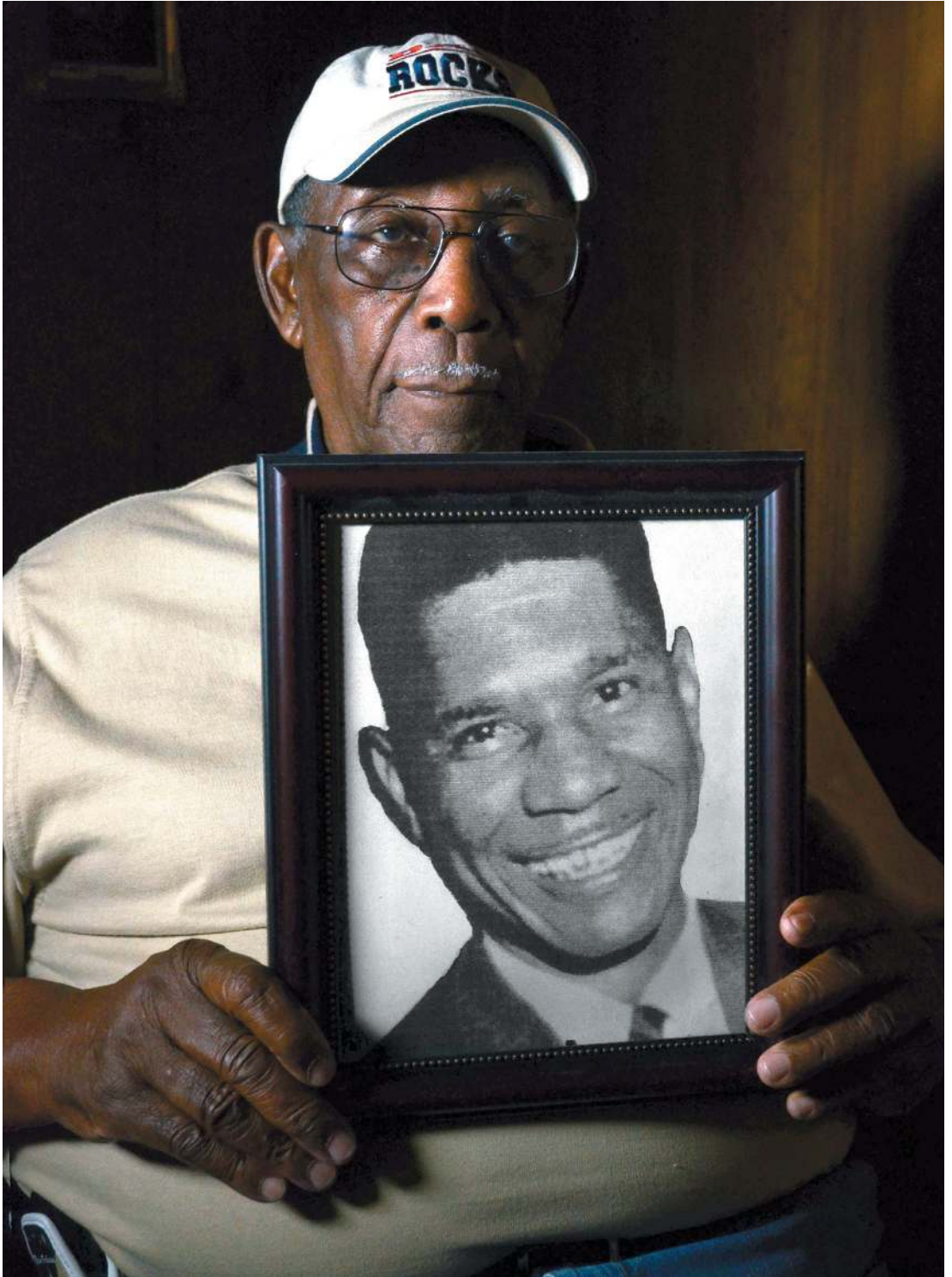


Amsterdam Stories USA / West. Chesney Sherman.

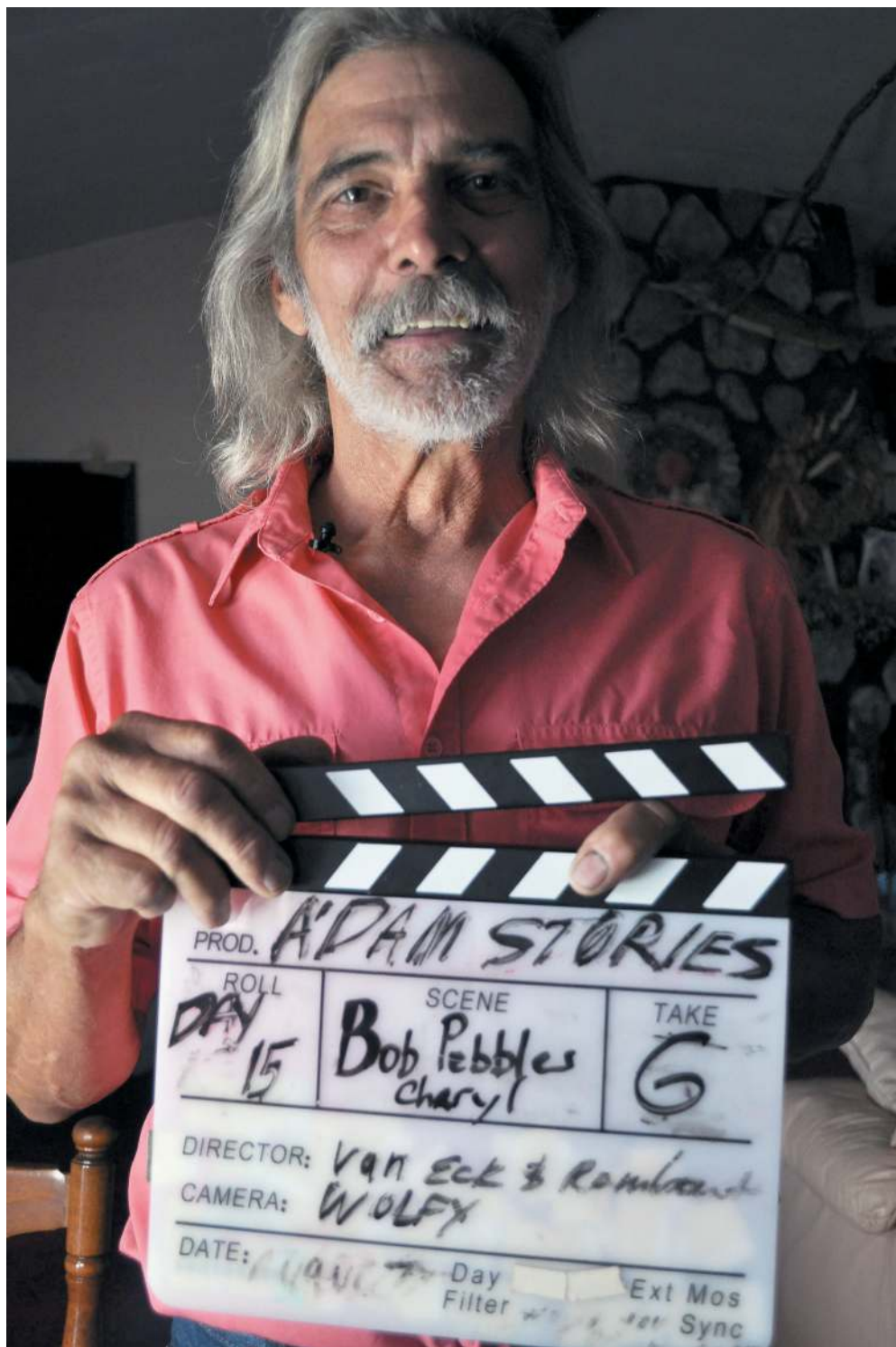




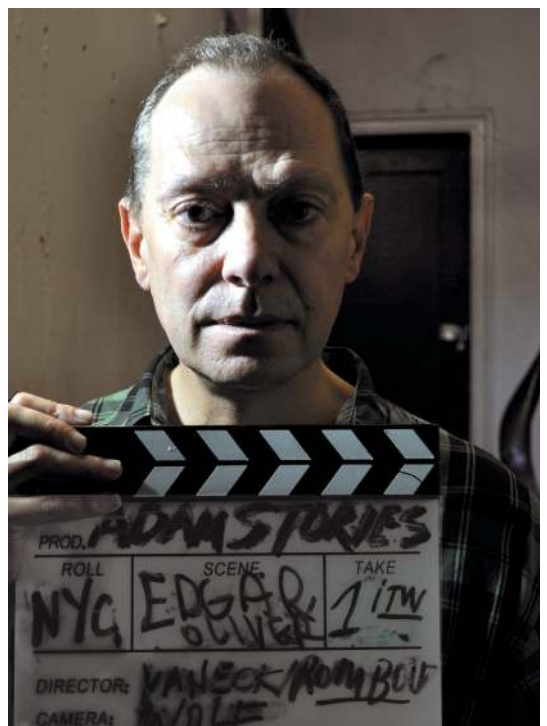
1. Elinor Tatum. – 2. Jack Wingate.



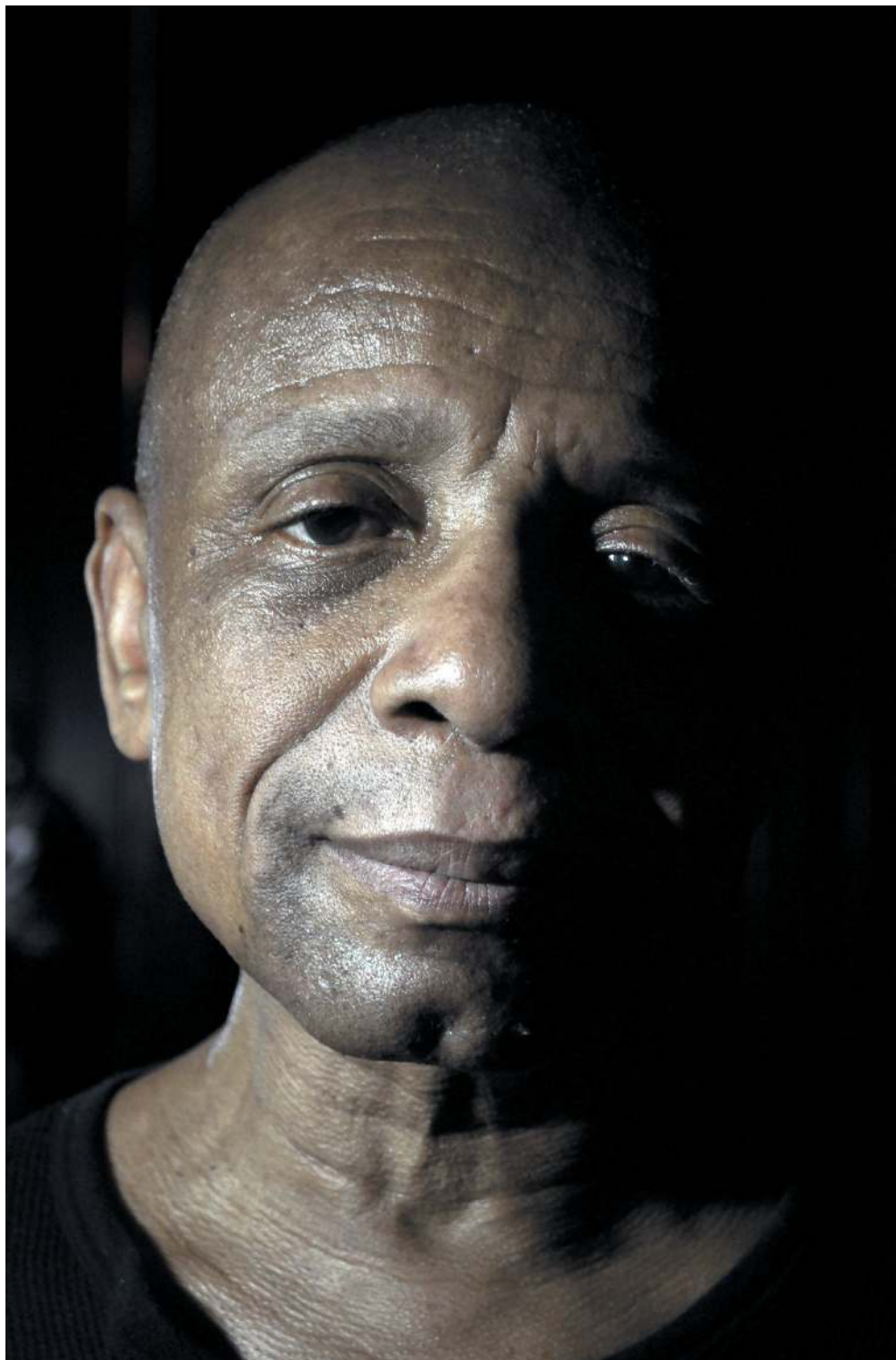
Charles Evers.



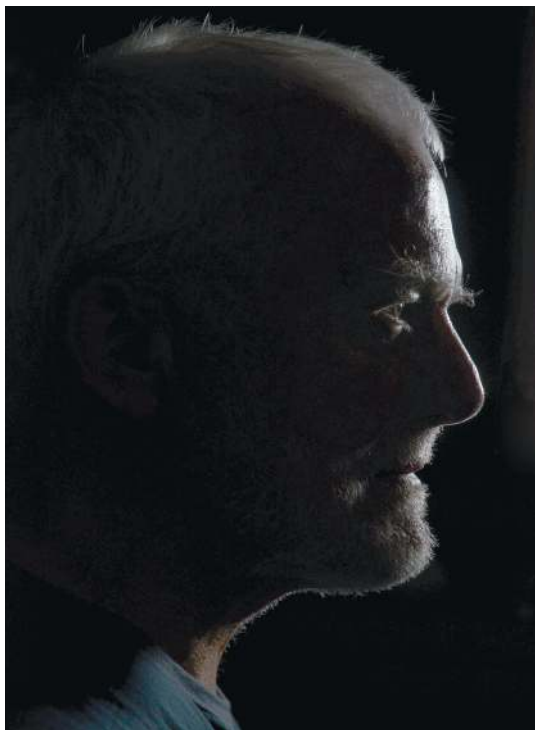
Robert Pebbles, Jr.



From left to right and top to bottom. 1. Len Tantillo. – 2. Andy Shaffer. – 3. Russell Banks. – 4. Edgar Oliver.



Tony Ndogo.



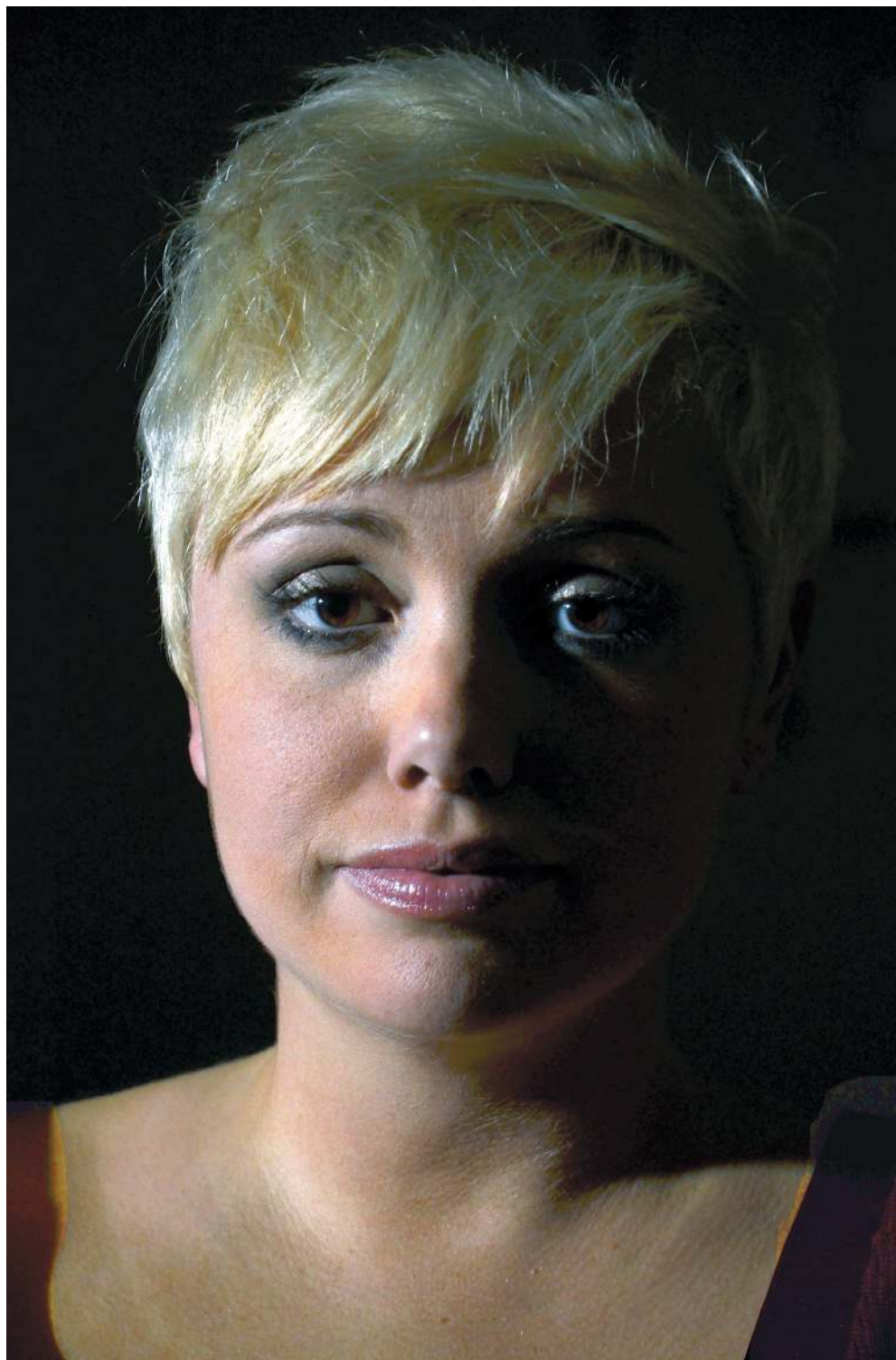
From left to right and top to bottom. 1. Russell Banks. – 2. Jack Wingate. – 3. Ray Bassett. – 4. Myron Mixon.



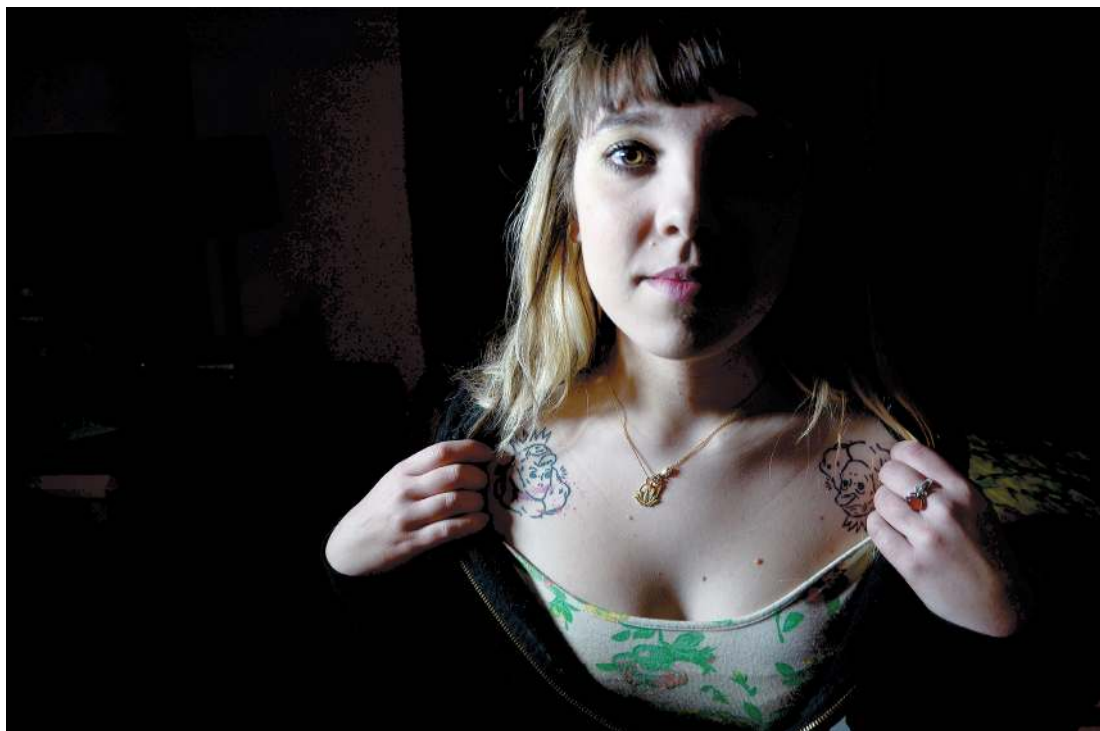
1. Stephen Haven – 2. Susan Phemister and Stephen Haven.



Steven Thomas.



Sabrina Hendersen.



1. Tanya Moon. – 2. Chesney Sherman.



Rick Salazar.





JUDGE DEE SAW THAT THE GIBBON WAS WATCHING HIM

Drawing by Robert van Gulik illustrating his short story *The Morning of the Monkey*.