

San Francisco International Film Festival 2004

Interview with Paola di Florio, director of *Home of the Brave*

Joanne Laurier
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Director Paola di Florio spoke with Joanne Laurier of the WSWs about her documentary film on the murdered civil rights activist, Viola Liuzzo

Joanne Laurier: Could you elaborate on why you became interested in the Liuzzo story?

Paola di Florio: When I was looking for a film project, my producer Nancy Dickenson—who had been involved in civil rights in Cleveland—brought the Viola Liuzzo case to my attention. She had wanted to attend the Selma march, but was pregnant at that time and decided against it. Nancy had carried Viola's story with her for all this time.

The question in my mind was why had Viola Liuzzo not joined the pantheon of civil rights martyrs? What struck me about Viola's story was: how this could happen? How was it that a woman's murder, taking place just prior to the women's movement, could be buried, and why? What happened to the family that was left behind? I got sucked into the many layers of injustices involved in the case.

JL: The area where Viola was born—near the Pennsylvania coal mines—and where she raised a family—in the auto manufacturing center of Detroit—were key industrial regions in the US. Today these parts of the country are economically ravaged and politically and culturally debased. Do you see any connection to this state of affairs and Viola's life?

PD: The crux of the problem today—and the difference with how Viola felt—is there is a certain helplessness. There is something of an understanding that we cannot effect significant change without a radical transformation. I think that people must have hope that they will be able to effect change. That one

counts as an individual in society. This is very important.

Therefore, we have attempted with the film to bring together the family and human drama and mesh it with the political. In my view, politics are just ideas in people's heads. To be understood, political ideas also have to be personal.

JL: The film forcefully brings out the role of the FBI in Viola's assassination. This is the same outfit that is today being given extra powers under the Bush administration's Department of Homeland Security.

PD: It is surprising looking back now how naïve I was. Of course, I have always been critical. But before making this movie, I would never have believed that things were so sinister. It has made me more responsible knowing that today we are living in a world similar to the one in the story. We as a people can no longer sit back and let things happen. Viola had a comfortable life economically, but she still decided she had to risk everything and fight. And at great cost. This is a timely film. We have to reevaluate what we accept as government power.

We also have to understand what it means to be patriotic—the true ideals of patriotism are so special. Viola represents this. She acted upon her rights as an American. She spoke out and gave her life for not only civil rights but human rights. This is very interesting because in doing so she was branded as a pariah.

In every showing of the film we have seen a strong audience support. The project is also having a positive impact on Viola's children in very concrete ways. They are extraordinary people who are now finding some sort of resolution.

The three daughters attended the film's debut at the

Sundance Festival. Unfortunately, Tony would not get on a plane, but Mary and Tony have recently met in Cleveland. This is very significant. Tommy's ex-wife contacted our publicist—Tommy was tracked down and saw his estranged daughter for the first time in many years.

The film continues on and I believe that there is a strong potential for a wide roll-out, despite the problems we've encountered with distribution. In spite of strong audience response, the buyers are not grabbing. We are negotiating, but it's difficult.



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