

The Last Great Gentleman

A Tribute to Doug Edwards

By Eric Sherman

Doug Edwards, long-time Board member and driving force behind Filmforum and so many other of Los Angeles' film-oriented activities, died almost exactly a year ago; his friends and colleagues have, according to what they have said to me and my wife, been virtually unanimous in one perception—Doug doesn't seem to be gone.

This is not a platitude designed to soften the blow of death. Rather, it is an actually palpable sensation that Doug has somehow pervaded and permeated our lives and environment to such an extent and in such a way as to make his physical presence but one of the values we relish and admire and desire. His viewpoint and manner are as vivid for me right now as they would be if he were sitting in the chair next to me.

I met Doug in the early 1970s when he was programming "experimental" films at Theatre Vanguard, the bastion for the avant-garde during that era. We had come together thanks indirectly to Stan Brakhage. Doug had decided to exhibit a series of Brakhage films, including some of the Regular 8mm works and, as I recall, some of the relatively rare Super 8mm works as well. He knew that I had a relationship with Brakhage and access to notes and prints, and he contacted me for assistance with his program.

The first thing I noticed about Doug was his utter professionalism. I believe he even wore a jacket at our first meeting, which was unheard of at the tail-end of the high '60s. Yet Doug's sensibilities were as visionary as most any that I had encountered. He was actually taking seriously—at the level of a major Hollywood premiere—works that for the most part were championed by alienated and embittered critics or entirely disaffected makers. I was astonished, and I realized that Doug had the right idea: don't worry about being an elitist or proving yourself right; make the films available for all who heard about them and got to the theater. The respect he showed to Brakhage's achievements, for example, elevated them in my eyes—I already knew the works were great, but I had not yet gained the viewpoint that everyone deserved to see them, not just a small, elite group.

Soon thereafter, Doug and I coordinated a two-day Brakhage tribute at the Los Angeles International Film Exposition (FILMEX), along with a three-hour survey of the great works of the avant-garde cinema. Doug matter-of-factly told me that these programs "need to be done—we're going to need some money." Again, without wasting any time with rancor and idle natter about how difficult it is to fund serious events in the arts, Doug's entire viewpoint seemed to be oriented toward what step we needed to take next in order to keep walking. Within a few short weeks, we had applied for and received two decent-sized grants, including one from the NEA. It almost seemed easy.

At one of the FILMEX screenings, though we warned audiences of the non-narrative nature of the work, we had a heckler sitting in the back of the theater, making finger silhouette shapes against the projection window. I was livid, and I told Doug I was going to put a stop to it. Doug accepted my exaggerated emotions, though he did not seem overly concerned himself. He was watching the movies. I ran to the back of the theater, angrily curtailed the miscreant's activities, then rejoined Doug. Without taking his eyes off the screen, Doug whispered to me, "Thank you."

The next year, Doug arranged an invitation for me to join him and nine or ten others on the FILMEX Feature Selection Committee. Therein began the most glorious eight years of my life. From November through February, we watched all or parts of hundreds of films, determining their suitability for our audiences. Each committee member had a strong, though differing, viewpoint. It was the most democratic group with which I have ever been associated. Doug's position on which films we ought to show was always situated between a combination of excellent filmmaking and the significance of exposing Los Angeles audiences to a particular film. Doug was truly outside of the art-versus-commerce dichotomy which so characterizes the rest of our industry.

It seemed that since Doug had decided not to be a maker of film art, but a presenter of it, he wore his hat with nobility and absolute tenacity. By staying outside of certain frays and polemics, he was able to get a lot of work done.

Through our time together on the Filmforum Board, I saw Doug continue to apply his principles without wavering. Whether he was restoring great Hollywood feature films, writing articles, programming tributes, or fighting for grant money, he maintained a position so strong that most nay-sayers quickly stepped aside.

Stan Brakhage has said that Doug was "the last great gentleman." I and my family are honored to know him. I'm glad he's still here in terms of viewpoint and manner—but it would be nice to sit next to him again.

Doug Edwards died on February 2, 1993.

**Scratching the Belly of the Beast:
Cutting-Edge Media in Los Angeles, 1922-94**
is dedicated to the memory of Doug Edwards.



At the FILMEX 2003 party, May 7, 1978