



Scotty *Vérité*: An interview with filmmaker Matt Tyrnauer

By Patrick McGilligan

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Interviews

Although familiar with the Scotty Bowers legend from sources for my 1991 book *George Cukor: A Double Life*, I didn't know what to expect from Matt Tyrnauer's *Scotty: The Secret History of Hollywood* (2018). I was woefully ignorant of Tyrnauer's earlier work, which includes *Valentino: The Last Emperor*, shortlisted for an Academy Award in 2009; now I plan to catch up with as many of his documentaries as possible. His new film tells the life story of Bowers, prolific 'trick' to the stars and cheerful celebrant of sexual freedom. Tyrnauer mixes a patient *vérité* approach with bracing home movies, archival footage and surprising interviews with Scotty's numberless extended circle, all of it framed by film capital experts including William J. Mann (whose 2006 biography *Kate: The Woman Who Was Hepburn* was a similar shock of fresh air). With Scotty, Tyrnauer joins the first echelon of American documentarists; his film is at once a brave corrective to Hollywood fairy tales and a mesmerizing human portrait.

Patrick McGilligan (PM): How did you convince Scotty (and his wife) to accept such an intimate portrayal of their lives? Your hard work really shows in the *vérité* footage and research. You obviously don't pull punches with the details of his life, then or now. How did the decision come about to use the clip of him masturbating, for example, which is really a startling and brave moment in the film?

Matt Tyrnauer (MT): I met Scotty through Gore Vidal, whom Scotty met at his gas station in 1946. Given that they had such a long friendship and we had an important mutual friend, Scotty was predisposed to let me into his life to an extent that he might not have otherwise. One of the tricks of shooting *cinéma-vérité* film is becoming part of the wallpaper, as it were. You and your crew become semi-invisible as you slowly embed yourselves into the lives of the subject. Lois, Scotty's wife, in fact, was resistant at the beginning, but the presence of the film crew became soothing



to her in a certain way. We were kind of like friends and family after a while, even taking her on the occasional trip to Chico's to go clothes shopping. So, as Scotty might say, you work your way in. Eventually, we were all very welcome at the house on Kew Drive and it became a very good experience for everyone.

I was astonished to find film footage of Scotty in the act. This came about on a *vérité* shoot one day with the choreographer, Tony Charmoli. In the course of rambling through his house, discussing all things Scotty, Tony mentioned that he had Super 8 footage of Scotty at an orgy that took place at the Charmoli house in the 1960s. Of course, I asked to

see that film and Tony was at first resistant, but then we arranged a private screening with Scotty in attendance. The film contained a drag parade around Tony's swimming pool (also in the film) and scenes from a sex party in Tony's guest room featuring Scotty and a couple other people. We eventually acquired the rights to the film from Tony. For me it was important to show Scotty in his prime doing what he did best. We had many shots to choose from. In the end we chose two; one of them features Scotty masturbating. It wasn't such a hard decision, the harder decision was whether or not to pixelate the footage, which we ended up doing. Although little is left to the imagination.

PM: You have many close friends of Scotty's in the film as a testament to his good character. Without using names, can you tell me anything about the stars or people you tried to get into the film who declined – and why?

MT: The longtime boyfriend of Raymond Burr declined to appear on camera. We had a long, very pleasant visit with him at the Raymond Burr vineyard in Northern California where he lives. And he confirmed everything about Scotty and his relationship with Raymond Burr and other people in Hollywood from that period. This particular individual did not feel comfortable appearing on camera and cited a particular fear

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of homophobia as a gay business owner of a winery. I was sad to hear that he felt he had been a victim of homophobia from potential customers, but of course he respected his decision.

Another former sex worker, one of a pair of identical twins who were on Scotty's roster, declined to be on camera because he simply didn't feel comfortable. However, he confirmed for a great deal of information, including many names of famous figures with whom Scotty frequented.

PM: What legal concerns do you have about stories involving people, not just stars? I know that at one point Scotty told the names of friends of his who were in his community of friends and says that some of them are still alive.



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Another former sex worker, one of a pair of identical twins, who were on Scotty’s roster also declined to be on camera. He simply didn’t feel comfortable. However, he confirmed for me a great deal of information, including many names of famous figures with whom Scotty fixed him up.

PM: What legal concerns did you have about stories involving real people, not just stars? I notice that at one point Scotty tells us the names of friends of his who were in his community of ‘tricks’ and says that some of them are still alive.

MT: I didn’t have a great deal of concern. Much of this happened so long ago. I was more struck by how virtually everyone we visited with the camera was willing to speak and how freely they spoke. A lot of the gentlemen interviewed did not live gay or openly gay lives. They in fact, lived largely heterosexual lives. In some cases, we interviewed them while their children and grandchildren were in the room. But they seemed to have no shame, no regret; in fact, quite the opposite. There seemed to be a great deal of pride about having been an object of desire at one time, of having helped people out. There was also a real pride in their association with Scotty, who clearly is a beloved figure among all of his friends. I never heard anyone say a bad word about him and I met scores of people he has known since the 1940s. Ultimately, everyone on camera

signs a release, so there’s never any concern about people feeling they’ve been inappropriately recorded.

PM: There is some explicit footage in the film, and there’s the occasional explicit dialogue, such as ‘Charles Laughton liked to suck dick...’ But the film seems to shy away from more physical details of lovemaking that people might be curious about where the big stars are concerned. After all, when people are engaged in sex they reveal different or other aspects of their character... For example, there is more than one reference to Scotty’s threesome with Cary Grant and Randolph Scott. Or Scotty’s long relationship with Spencer Tracy, which I heard about over 25 years ago, so I take it to be true enough, but still I would have liked more detail. I wanted more! Was there



more that you were reticent to use, or was Scotty reluctant to go into detail?

MT: Scotty frequently went into greater detail about physical and sexual acts with people he tricked. I found he tended to elaborate or single out particular sex acts or details about sexual relations with particular people, Spencer Tracy among them. With Tracy, he frequently mentioned, and I quote, 'he would chew on your cock'. It was, in many cases, an editorial choice to eliminate specific details for one reason or another. For example, sometimes it just seemed to cross a line that might alienate a general audience or even push the movie into 'X-rated' territory. On other occasions, it slowed the sequence down and we were aiming for a film not much more than 90 minutes in length. So there just wasn't room for everything.

PM: Two of the more startling moments in the film are when Scotty talks about sex as a youth with farm animals and also his relationships with Chicago priests – defending both of these episodes in his life (including saying very nice things about the priests who paid him for sex when he was young). Both really take one aback. I haven't read Scotty's book yet [Full Service: My Adventures in Hollywood and the Secret Sex Lives of the Stars by Scotty Bowers and Lionel Friedberg, Grove Press, 2012] though I want to, and most people reading this interview – or seeing your film – will not have read his book either. Are these elements in his memoir? Did you have any qualms about including them?

MT: Those elements are in the memoir. Scotty doesn't shy away from discussing them. They're definitely a key part of his narra-

tive as he likes to tell it. I didn't feel it was my duty to excise major chapters of his life as he sees fit to tell it. I did my best to include all of the major passages that he deemed important and to explore them in as meaningful a way as possible.

PM: Going back to his wife for a moment. She is such a compelling character in the film. Starting out, did you know she was going to play such an important role? How hard was it to get those difficult scenes between the two of them? She is as willing as him to bare her soul... what did it take to get them comfortable with you and to capture those scenes?

MT: Lois was at first resistant to the idea of being filmed, if not resistant to the idea of the film in general. At first, she chose not to appear on camera. Eventually, she was willing to be interviewed though she requested that we not film inside the house, which is very cluttered and shows profound evidence of Scotty's hoarding. I don't think Lois wanted that aspect of their lives to be revealed. Eventually, we filmed her singing at a Los Angeles nightclub. I think she enjoyed that experience. Part of the process of *cinéma-vérité* filmmaking is working your way in, and the film crew and I, by virtue of showing up so frequently, ended up being almost a daily fixture in Scotty's and Lois's lives. The difficult scenes just 'happened' in the course of some long shoot days. This is the joy – and frustration – of *cinéma-vérité*. You have to log the hours and shoot or overshoot to get the gems. Eventually, I think she felt comfortable with all of us, though as she has not yet seen the movie, I don't know how she feels about the final product.

PM: What was the budget for the film and where did the money come from?

MT: The film was made with private equity financing and the budget was modest, as you can imagine.

PM: I always wonder about films like this one; what was the most expensive piece of footage in the film – either in terms of money spent for rights, or money spent on the time and effort in getting the shot?

MT: The most expensive piece of archival footage was the BBC clip of George Cukor at his home.

This film was made with a small crew, which is the way I like to work when shooting *cinéma-vérité*. I find that large camera crews and especially boom microphones for sound, destroy *vérité* shoots because they make the subjects feel self-conscious. As a result, most of the scenes in the film were relatively inexpensive to shoot because the crew wasn't expensive.

PM: How will the movie make its money back? Can a documentary filmmaker make a living in the United States – and if so, how?

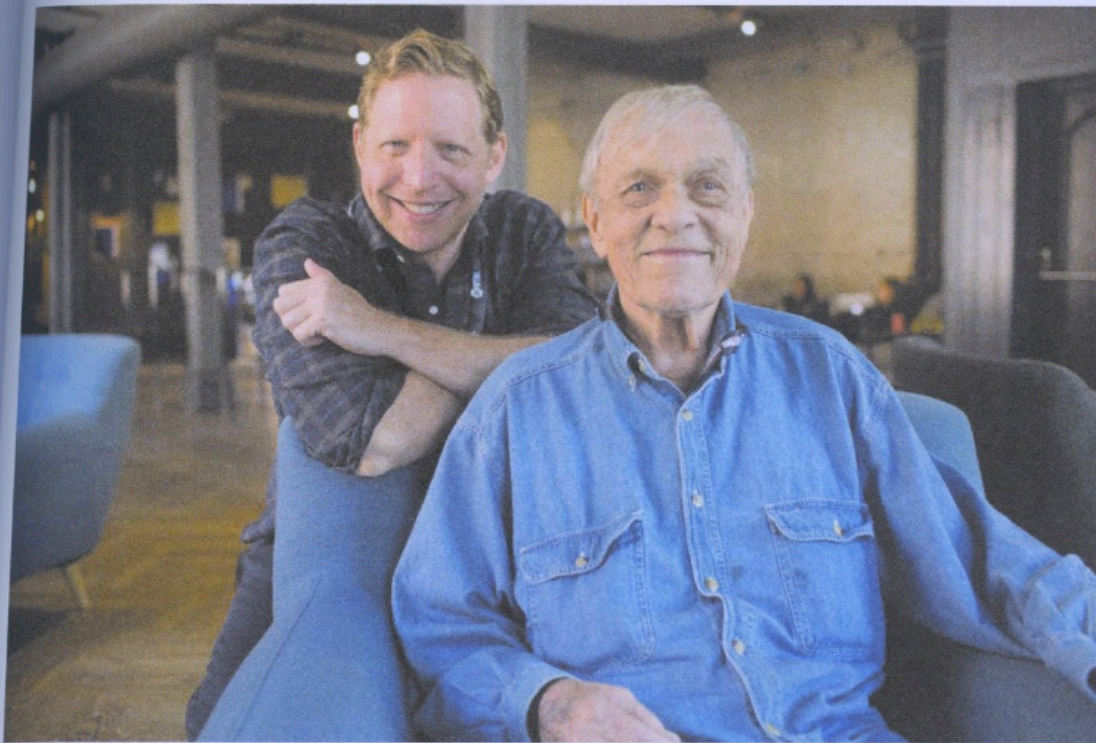
MT: The movie has been doing very well at the box office and foreign sales are very strong, as well as TV and all other ancillary sales. It's very possible to make money on documentaries, and there are now more ways than ever to do it. The model with this one involves preserving rights and then splitting rights, and the revenue streams are plentiful. The film has been a huge critical hit and has had massive success in the press worldwide. So to quote Scotty: 'That's what you call business, baby.'



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PM: The film operat... eral levels, which I lo... thing, it is great fur... wood lore that has b... ignored in other book... But certain lore abou... den Hollywood is... audiences to accept... it seems to me. Cary... Randolph Scott as a... While Spencer Tracy... life with Scotty, fo...



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The audience for nonfiction film and television is bigger than ever and growing by leaps and bounds. I think this is a great time to be making documentaries and even making money off of them, which in the past was an oxymoron.

PM: The film operates on several levels, which I love. For one thing, it is great fun as Hollywood lore that has been all but ignored in other books and films. But certain lore about this hidden Hollywood is harder for audiences to accept as truthful, it seems to me. Cary Grant and Randolph Scott as a couple - OK. While Spencer Tracy's secret sex life with Scotty, for example,

upsets some film buffs. Why, do you think?

MT: There have been rumours about Cary Grant for years, and Cary Grant's marriages never captured the public's imagination and were never immortalized by the press in the same way that the supposed (adulterous) relationship between Hepburn and Tracy was. The mythmaking behind the Hepburn-Tracy on-screen/off-screen romance was industrial-strength, abetted by the studio publicity machines seeking to promote George Cukor's classic films in which they starred; and by Hepburn herself, who in her later years did everything possible to promote the myth that she and

Tracy lived as a romantic couple all those years. This supposed romance survives as perhaps the most famous of all from that classic Hollywood period. It captured imaginations around the world and as is quite clear from the reactions of horrified fans whenever the myth is debunked, it has taken very firm root in the human psyche. For this reason, Scotty's refutation of the Hepburn-Tracy myth is the most disputed of all of his counter-narratives.

PM: The film gradually becomes an intimate portrait of Scotty as a one-of-a-kind human being. Much of his uniqueness (if that is the right word) comes from his sexual identity, of course,

but there are also remarkable scenes of him doing things – like climbing ladders (at his age) for home repairs, or sorting through his piles of letters and magazines – that deepen our feeling for him. Did you know, starting out, that the film would eventually become such a contemplative character study?

MT: No. I didn't expect to be able to spend so much time with Scotty, but when I met him I soon saw what a complex character he is and it became clear to me that this was much more than a production that would seek to debrief him on his ribald tales of old Hollywood. I didn't know that he was a hoarder. I didn't know a lot about his relationship with his wife, Lois, or his previous wife, Bette, and I only knew the basic outline of his biography that is recounted in his memoir. To get to the deeper meaning of Scotty and his story, it became clear that I would have to spend quite a bit of time with him shooting *cinéma-vérité*, because he's not a naturally analytical or contemplative sort. He's a natural man of action who lived in the moment, which I admire greatly. But this kind of character doesn't give you a lot of insight into their inner life in the course of interviews. I got it through observation with the camera.

PM: Finally, it seems to me that the film builds to a philosophical defence of sexual freedom. This is explicit in Scotty's own view of himself, in the interviews, but it is implicit throughout the film in the respect you pay to all of his ideas and experiences. Was this larger theme always part of the plan or did it partly evolve in the filming and editing?

MT: I saw in Scotty's memoir some evidence that he was a sexual outlaw and rebel. As I began

to interview people who knew him in the old days and began to understand better the environment of gay Hollywood in the old days, it occurred to me that Scotty was extraordinarily brave and had helped a lot of people find their footing in a time of great uncertainty for anyone who did not identify as heterosexual. I've never met anyone so universally admired by all the people who know him, and many of the principal players from his life, decades ago, were able to express to me their deep admiration for him, not only as a friend, but as a uniquely well-adjusted man who longs to make people happy and has fewer sexual hangups than maybe anyone ever to live. He was sexually free in a time when most people were not. He's a very brave man for being willing to live a life on his own terms.

Contributor's details

Patrick McGilligan's *Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane* (HarperCollins, 2015) was reviewed by *Film International* here: <http://filmint.nu/?p=17540>. His new biography, *Mel Brooks: Funny Man*, was published by HarperCollins in March 2019. His interview with Clancy Sigal appeared in issue 15:1 (2017) of *Film International*.

The History of Women in Silent Film: What is it really? An interview with Jane Gaines

By Anna Weinstein

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