



Introduction to Katja Esson. 2:52 min. Interview: Raymond Elman. Camera: Kadesha Floyd. Editing: Karen Morales.

Katja Esson: Filmmaker

By Elman + Floyd + Morales

KATJA ESSON is an Academy Award® nominated filmmaker based in Miami and Havana, who mixes documentary and narrative genres. Esson began her career in Miami as a production assistant for the notorious rap group 2 Live Crew. Since her days of wrangling “booty-shaking babes,” Esson has directed a variety of award-winning documentaries and short films. Born and raised in Germany, Esson brings a European sensibility to the distinctively American subjects she chooses.

Her documentary short *Ferry Tales*, which turns the unlikely setting of the Staten Island Ferry Powder Room into a celebration of sisterhood, received an Academy Award® nomination for Best Documentary Short and premiered on HBO. *Ferry Tales* exposes a secret world that exists in the powder room of the Staten Island Ferry — a place that brings together suburban moms and urban dwellers, white-collar and blue-collar “sisters,” and socialites. For 30 minutes every day, they gather around mirrors to put on their makeup, talking not as wives, mothers, or professionals, but just as themselves. Sassy and honest, they dish on everything from sex scandals to stilettos, family problems to September 11, leaving stereotypes at the door and surprising viewers with their straight-shooting wisdom. Questioned by *The New York Times* about why it took a German filmmaker to discover this story that has been under everybody’s nose for so long, Esson answered, “As an outsider to American culture, I am ‘in it’ but not ‘of it,’ which gives me a distinct perspective.”

Poetry of Resilience had its world premiere at the Oscar-qualifying festival DocuWeeks in L.A. *Poetry of Resilience* is a documentary about six international poets who individually survived Hiroshima, the Holocaust, China’s Cultural Revolution, the Kurdish Genocide in Iraq, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Iranian Revolution. The six poets present us with a close-up perspective of the “wide shot” of political violence. “Each story is powerful, though the film’s strength comes from its collective voice: different political conflicts, cultures, genders, ages, races — one shared human narrative.” For *Poetry of Resilience*, Esson was awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council of the Arts as well the Simons Fellowship for the Humanities at Kansas University in 2007. The film was also nominated for the Cinema for Peace Award® during the Berlin Film Festival.

Esson’s feature documentary, *Skydancer*, is a film about the Mohawk tradition of ironworking. From the Empire State Building and the George Washington Bridge to the World Trade Center, six generations of Mohawk ironworkers have raised New York City’s skyline, built the highways over the boroughs, and crossed the rivers by weaving carpets of steel. They are called “sky walkers” because they walk fearlessly atop steel beams just a foot wide, high above the city streets. The film premiered at the Margaret Mead Film Festival, was screened at the Smithsonian, has garnered many international awards, and aired on PBS and ARTE among other broadcasters.

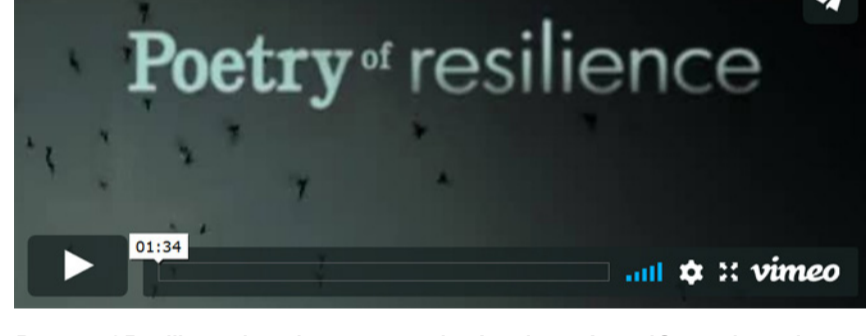
Hole in the Sky: The Scars of 9/11 premiered at Sunny Side of the Doc and received the Gold Award at the World Media Festival.

A Season of Madness is Esson’s narrative short film based on the essay of best-selling author Hanan al-Shaykh. She also directed a narrative episode for the Emmy-award winning mini-series *We Are New York*.

Esson frequently collaborates with the French/German broadcaster ARTE and has created, written and directed two 5-part series for ARTE: *Backroads USA* and *American Rivers*.

Esson is currently in post-production with the documentary short *El Último Cantinero*, a film that reflects on the story of Cuba through the eyes of a bartender. And she is also in production with *Razing Liberty Square*, a documentary addressing climate gentrification by following the redevelopment of a historic African American public housing project in Miami, Florida and its impact on longtime residents, for which she has been awarded a Ford Foundation grant. The virtual reality companion piece to *Razing Liberty City* has won the Knight Foundation Art Challenge in Miami.

The videos below are organized by topic and run between 30 seconds and 2 minutes. Click on any video. You must be connected to the Internet to view the videos.



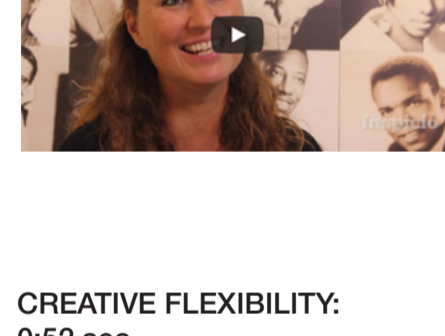
Poetry of Resilience is a documentary by Academy Award®-nominated director Katja Esson about six international poets who individually survived Hiroshima, the Holocaust, China’s Cultural Revolution, the Kurdish Genocide in Iraq, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Iranian Revolution.

UNDERSTANDS ARTISTS' NEEDS: 1:27 min.



What are your thoughts about the Miami film community?

DEVELOP A VOICE: 0:27 sec.



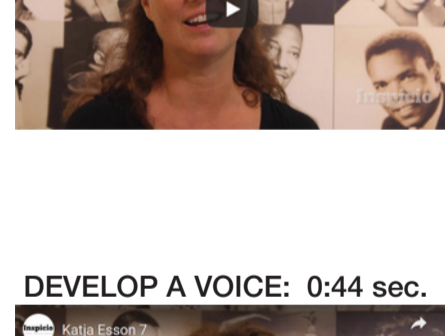
What's your earliest memory of movies or any other form of art?

CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY: 0:52 sec.



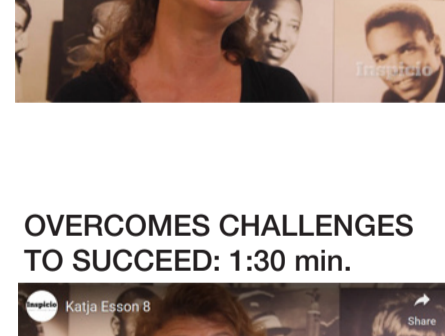
Talk about your transition from theater to fiction films to documentary films.

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION: 1:19 min.



On your website there is a list of close to 20 films that you have made. Can you talk about some of those films and lead us through the arc of your career?

DEVELOP A VOICE: 0:44 sec.



Maybe we need to produce a Katja Esson film festival.

OVERCOMES CHALLENGES TO SUCCEED: 1:30 min.



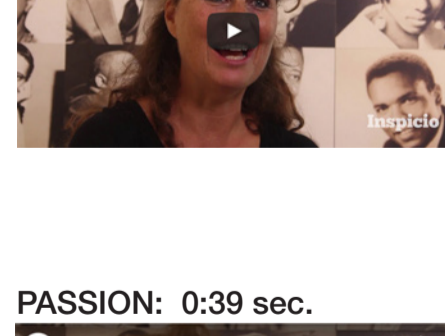
Talk about the challenges of funding your films.

SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES: 1:39 min.



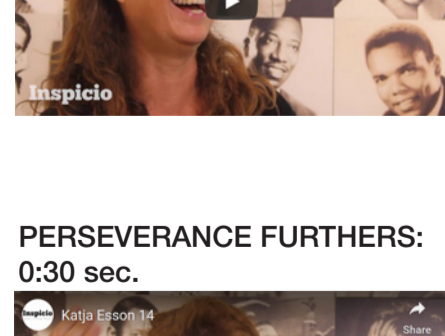
What was your inspiration for making the film Ferry Tales?

SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES: 1:29 min.



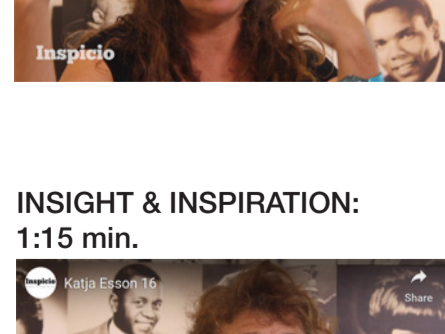
What are you working on now?

PASSION: 0:39 sec.



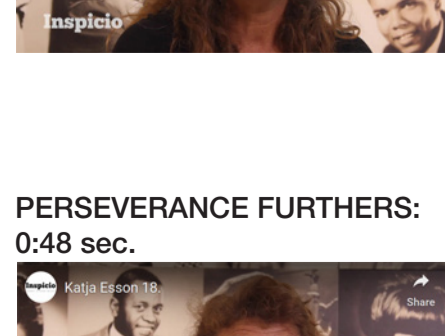
What are your criteria for taking on a project?

PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS: 0:30 sec.



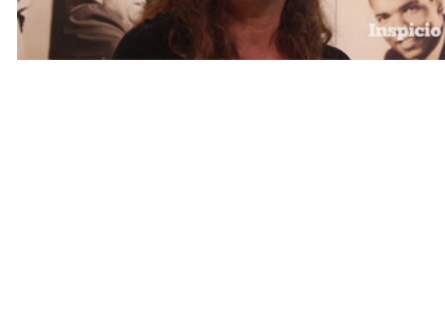
Are you engaged with any other Miami art community besides the film community?

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION: 1:15 min.



Who are your primary role models and influencers?

PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS: 0:48 sec.



What motivates you to invest years in a film project.?