IT WOULD TAKE A LOT TO FLUSTER VETERAN CINEMA
TOGRAPHER BUDDY SQUIRES, WHO HAS SHOT AND
PRODUCED SCORES OF AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARIES.

One assignment, though, with that potential took him to
Gombe National Park in Tanzania. There he spent
a couple of weeks with Jane Goodall, the world’s foremost
chimpanzee expert, for Chimps: So Like Us, an Oscar-nominated
1990 documentary short that aired on HBO.

Squires grew discouraged as weeks went by and there was little chimp
activity to shoot. One morning, in hope of better luck, he and Goodall set
off on a daylong hike, sweating through fifteen miles of dense and hilly ter-

rain. Squires kept his camera in his hands at all times, poised to shoot at the
slightest rustle. But the chimps remained aloof.

As the pair was returning to camp, they stopped at a large termite mound,
“and all of a sudden, these chimps came rampaging down the trail at us,” says
Squires, who found himself smack in between two battling alpha males.

He lifted his camera to his eye while the chimps screeched and charged,
only inches from his lens. “They didn’t care about me,” says Squires, who
would finish one roll and quickly slam in another. “I was scared of not get-
ing it right.”

Over the course of his career, Squires has hung out of helicopters, shot
underwater and from the towering crow’s nests of heeling ships. He melted
For Ken Burns’s 2009 film The National Parks: America’s Best Idea, Squires braved the rapids with producer Dayton Duncan to capture the grandeur of the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River.
Squires is among the few who’ve gone nose-to-nose with New York’s most famous lady. He worked with both Ken Burns and his brother, filmmaker Ric Burns, on the 1985 documentary *The Statue of Liberty.*
his boots while crisscrossing hot lava erupting from a Hawaii volcano. And he once asked a comrade to grip his belt as he leaned over the edge of a steep waterfall in Yosemite National Park for the best camera angle.

His equipment was taken from him at gunpoint in a Philadelphia housing project, and he was detained by the Khmer Rouge following a clandestine border crossing. He’s also shot interviews with numerous luminaries, including the Dalai Lama meditating at 4 a.m. and Ethel Kennedy on a wet and windy sailboat surrounded by a clamor of grandchildren.

“He’s unflappable,” says Rob Epstein, an Oscar–winning documentary filmmaker who has worked with Squires. “He never gets rattled.”

But it is Squires’s cinematography for Ken Burns’s historical PBS documentaries for which he is probably best known.

“He is the best documentary cameraman around, in my view,” says Burns, who has been collaborating with Squires since they both attended Hampshire College, even before their first PBS project, Brooklyn Bridge.

For that documentary — which aired in 1982, the same year it was Oscar–nominated — Burns had intended to shoot an interview with historian Lewis Mumford, with Squires assisting him. After he set up his camera, though, he realized that whenever he slid his eye off the special spring–mounted eye–piece to ask Mumford a question, light would enter and fog the film.

As Burns recalls, he turned to Squires and said, “I think you should do this now.” And I have not shot another interview for the next thirty–six years.”

Brooklyn Bridge was Squires’s first big opportunity to demonstrate his painterly eye, indefatigable energy and risk–taking spirit. He climbed hundreds of feet up a cable footbridge for shots that captured the structure’s majestic scale. To obtain a dramatic time–lapse shot of the moon rising over the bridge, he used an old Arri–S camera that happened to have a short in it.

“I had to lean over a railing to frame it,” he says, “and every time I touched the camera to my eye, I got shocked.” He got the shot anyway.

“Buddy was, by far, the most resourceful of us, the most technically capable of us. And then he added over the years this extraordinary eye,” says Burns, who founded Florentine Films with Squires and Roger Sherman.

The trio dissolved their formal partnership following the completion of Brooklyn Bridge. Since then, they’ve shared the company name but work independently. Squires, however, has continued to work on nearly every film Burns has made, shooting a major portion of the spectacular cinematography in such influential and acclaimed PBS documentaries as The Civil War, Jazz, Baseball, The National Parks, Dust Bowl and The Central Park Five. To date, they’ve collaborated on eighty–eight projects.

“There is not a project that I do that Buddy’s not automatically signed up for,” says Burns, pointing out they are currently working on a film about baseball great Jackie Robinson, a series on the history of country music and another on the Vietnam War, for which they’ve traveled twice to Vietnam. “We’ve collected nearly a hundred interviews,” Burns says, “from North Vietnamese soldiers to American soldiers to nurses to draft dodgers to generals.”

He half–jokingly laments that Squires — who has been nominated for ten Primetime Emmys, winning one in 1998 for an NBC National Geographic special, America’s Endangered Species: Don’t Say Goodbye — has become such a sought–after cameraman that “sometimes we have to wait in line. Or we have to hear the bad news that Buddy is not available. And that’s part of the wonderful monster we created.”

ON A RECENT MORNING, SQUIRES WAS HOME IN NEW YORK CITY, preparing coffee in the Soho loft he shares with his wife, documentary filmmaker Kerstin Park–Labella, their three– and six–year–old sons and a profusion of children’s toys. He nimbly sidesteps any obstructions. His body is agile, compact and strong from years of carrying his own equipment in arduous situations.

“When my first son was born,” he says, “I took him on production all the time.” One time he placed his son in an Ergo baby carrier on his chest and his...
camera on his shoulder and hiked to Delicate Arch in Utah’s Arches National Park for shots of the setting sun. Or perhaps it was the sunrise. There have been so many shooting expeditions at this point that they sometimes run together.

Friendly and unassuming, it’s easy to see what other filmmakers say about him: that his open manner relaxes interview subjects.

“He’s at ease with himself and that makes others at ease, including my mother, who is not very comfortable sitting in front of cameras,” says documentary filmmaker Rory Kennedy, who hired Squires for her film, Ethel, about her mother. “He has a sweet laugh and such a wonderful smile, and has such warmth about him,” Kennedy says. “It can make a world of difference.”

Squires recently shot a scene for the Vietnam series with a group of vets, many of whom are still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. “I made a point of letting everyone know that I wasn’t there to exploit them. And that I work very close. Often I’m right here,” he says, extending an arm. “But if you don’t want me, just look at me. Give me half a glance. Let me know. You have the power.”

When lighting interview subjects for The Central Park Five, he took the same care with the men whose rape convictions were vacated as with former New York City Mayor Edward Koch. “What I try to do in all the work,” Squires says, “is to give people their dignity.”

While Squires loves shooting the historical documentaries for Burns, those films require a different mindset and skill set than his cinema vérité projects. “We all know what happened at the end of the Civil War,” he says. “There’s something about being in situations where you have no idea what is going to happen. You just have to react instinctively. And you have to use all your senses to be on top of it — whether that’s the chimps or a war zone or someone’s family while they are eating dinner.”

Turning on his TV and DVD player, he shows a favorite clip from Compassion in Exile, the 1993 film biography of the fourteenth Dalai Lama that he shot for director Mickey Lemle. In the clip, the Dalai Lama greets Tibetan refugees who have just arrived in Dharmsala, India, his place of exile. They’ve trekked for days across the Himalayan Mountains to reach him. Some break into tears at his feet.

Another clip, this one from the 1997 HBO documentary, Heart of a Child, shows four-year-old Amy LaBarbiera waking up after heart and lung transplant surgery, much to the relief of her anxious parents sitting by her. “You’re not just going for some tear-jerk moment,” says Squires, whose voice softens as he recollects that project. Amy’s story did not have a happy ending. “You get to be with people in the best and worst of circumstances,” he says. “I’d go to my English teacher and say, ‘What if I made a little film about it instead?’” Once he tackled a film about pollution. His father, an amateur pilot, took him up in his single-engine plane to shoot a bird’s eye view of the pol

“Which stayed with me,” says Squires, who has subsequently shot aerials for many of projects, including the American Experience documentary New York, one of dozens of documentaries he’s shot for that long-running PBS series. He also reveled in getting permission to take the first aerials in and over the Grand Canyon in roughly twenty years.

“His hand-held work is unparalleled,” says Rob Epstein, recalling a scene Squires shot for “Gold Rush,” an episode of Ten Days That Unexpectedly Changed America that Epstein directed for the History channel. “We were filming this wagon train re-enactment of setting up camp at sunset, so we had literally seconds to get the shot,” says Epstein, who was watching the monitor as Squires captured campfires being started, horses being fed and a bustle of other activity against the beautiful fading light.

“It was magnificent. It looked like a scene from Days of Heaven,” he says, referring to the Terrence Malick film noted for its visual poetry.

Epstein and Kennedy both say that Squires has the ability to laser-focus one eye in the camera and train the other on the periphery. “He not only has a great eye,” says Kennedy, “but a tuned-in ear for what’s going on.”

In preparation for Epstein’s 2010 film, Howl, Squires shot an interview with poet Peter Orlovsky, who was ill and tethered to an oxygen tank. Orlovsky unexpectedly rose from his chair and beelined to a photo of himself and poet Allen Ginsberg, his longtime lover, hanging on a wall. Squires neatly collared all the action in one take, including the glimmer in Orlovsky’s eye.

“What was important was getting the reaction of Peter to the picture,” Epstein says. “That’s what Buddy understood and that’s what he always understands — what’s really going on in terms of the story.”

Over the decades, Squires has shot interviews with so many remarkable people, including the artists Bill T. Jones, Wynton Marsalis and Julian Schnabel for the HBO Masterclass series. He recently shot much of the cinematography for Shane Salerno’s look back on the reclusive author, J.D. Salinger, which will receive a theatrical release before it airs next year on the 200th installment of American Masters.

“I’ve met a huge range of extraordinary characters,” Squires says. One recent meeting was with FDR biographer Geoffrey Ward, who described the president’s struggles with polio for Burns’s documentary, The Roosevelts: An Intimate History, coming next year to PBS. “To have that distillation handed to you from five feet away is phenomenal,” Squires says. “To sit with some of the intellectuals of the world and have them in an hour or two download the essence of their knowledge is a good space to be in.”

The Roosevelts also features still photos brought stirring to life, a technique featured in all of Burns’s documentaries that has come to be known as “the Ken Burns effect,” which Squires mastered alongside Burns before it became a digital scanning and animation process.

“We would treat an archival image as if it were a live scene,” says Squires, recalling the many weeks he and Burns spent at the Library of Congress years ago deconstructing Civil War archival images — panning, tilting, zooming and finding the most microscopic details, “as if I were standing there with a camera and filming at that moment in time.”

For Burns, the result was so lifelike that he could almost “hear the troops marching and the distant rumble of battle.”

Among the many indelible images that Squires has shot during his career are the arresting super-slow-motion clips that launched one episode of Burns’s Baseball series for PBS: the pitcher’s wind-up, the crack of the bat, the runner’s cleats hitting first base and forcing a puff of dirt from the bag. Squires nabbed those shots in one afternoon with a Red Sox farm team. He used film, so it would be days before he’d see the developed images, but he felt pretty confident that he’d nailed it. “There’s something,” he says, “about making that brushstroke and making that image and putting all of one’s faith and belief in that image.”

He also filmed the falling snow that proved a salient feature of Ric Burns’s The Donner Party, which aired on American Experience in 1992. For the film about pioneers who became trapped in the snow in the Sierra Nevada in 1846 (with some resorting to cannibalism), he seized on an idea while walking his dog during a snowstorm at his Massachusetts retreat. As he shimmered his flashlight against the falling flakes, “I said, ‘That’s for The Donner Party.’ It was as simple as that.

“I like storytelling,” says Squires, who insists that his abilities are more interpretive than anything else. “I’m not a painter. I can’t sit down with a blank canvas. But I know how to wait for light, for action. Same with humans. I enjoy interactions. I like the sense of figuring it out on the fly.”
Top, from left: Burns and Squires in the Grand Canyon; Squires films from a plane over Alaska’s Denali National Park and back at ground level in Colorado’s Mesa Verde National Park; Middle: Squires hangs from a raft, with an assist from producer Dayton Duncan, in Grand Canyon National Park; the crew gets soaked. Bottom: in Utah’s Canyonlands National Park.