

A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

Oscar-winning student film added to National Film Registry

When the Library of Congress added the 1954 short film *A Time Out of War* to the National Film Registry, its official roster of “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant films,” you could almost hear a collective cheer going up from the School and its alumni. Although there are several other Bruin-related movies in the Registry — notably the first two *Godfather* movies made by Francis Ford Coppola MFA '67 — the addition of *Time* this year had a special resonance. Fifty-three years earlier, *A Time Out of War* had become the first student film ever to win an Oscar.



Terry (left) and Denis Sanders during the filming of *A Time Out of War*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRY SANDERS

The young filmmakers were two brothers, both in the fledgling UCLA film program: **Denis Sanders '52, MA '55,** and **Terry Sanders '54, MA '67.**

Terry had attended Caltech for a year before being lured to UCLA by big brother Denis's stories about the exhilaration of making movies. Before turning their hands to for-credit student work, the brothers had actually completed one professional assignment — a short training film for police officers entitled *Subject: Narcotics*.

The two found the inspiration for their first personal work in a nearly forgotten short story from the 1890s by Robert W. Chambers, “Pickets.” In this naturalistic Civil War tale, two Union soldiers standing guard on a riverbank negotiate a fragile one-hour truce with a Confederate soldier across the way. The film was made for just \$2,000, \$700 of which was loaned by the University. There were three actors and a crew of eight, all UCLA students.

The film was shot along the banks of a sluggish section of the Santa Ynez River outside Santa Barbara. “The river only looked like it was flowing when there was some wind, which wasn't often,” recalls Terry Sanders, whose brother passed away in 1987. “We carefully excluded from the frame everything that couldn't pass for the Deep South. And all but one

scene had to be shot MOS, because the experimental battery-powered tape recorder we'd rented from Paramount failed almost immediately.”

The film began to attract attention as soon as it was finished. Entered in the Venice Film Festival on the spur of the moment, it surprised the brothers by winning first prize in the Live Action Short Film category. Just a few months later, Terry and Denis were accepting an Oscar for their work. The dazzled brothers were congratulated backstage by a “puzzled looking” Walt Disney, whose lavish travelogue *Siam* was an upset loser in the same category.

Despite the honors *A Time Out of War* received, recent film school graduates — even Oscar-winning ones — did not get studio directing jobs in 1954. But on the strength of the visually sophisticated imagery in the film, Terry was hired by Charles Laughton to be the second unit director of the actor's legendary directorial debut *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Later, both brothers were hired by Laughton to write the screenplay for a film version of Norman Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead*, which never came to fruition.

This disappointment, says Terry, was in fact a blessing in disguise for him, as his career went on to take many interesting turns. With Denis directing, Terry produced and shot two celebrated low-budget

features — *Crime and Punishment USA* (1959), with George Hamilton, and *War Hunt* (1962), starring John Saxon, Sidney Pollack and Robert Redford.

Eventually, the brothers parted company professionally. Denis went on to direct television and made the pioneering concert documentary *Elvis: That's the Way It Is* (1970), as well as the cult sci-fi classic *Invasion of the Bee Girls* (1973). Terry and his wife, Freida Lee Mock, formed a company to make documentaries. Alternating producing and directing chores, Sanders and Mock made the Oscar-winning documentary *Maya Lin: A Strong, Clear Vision* (1994). They also made the celebrated documentaries *Return with Honor* (1998), about American fliers imprisoned in Hanoi, and *Wrestling with Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner* (2006). Terry is currently producing and directing *Fighting For Life*, a feature documentary about military medicine which he shot in Iraq and Germany. The film premieres in May at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum before its theatrical release this fall.

Of the addition of *A Time Out of War* to the National Film Registry, Terry Sanders says, “It's very gratifying to see the first film I worked on in the Registry, beside the work of famous fellow Bruins like Francis Coppola. And it's a nice memorial for Denis.” ★