

YOU CAN BE MAGNIFICENT.

The true story of
Donna
Personna



A film by Jay Bedwani

2022 | 75'

For sales and distribution enquiries, please contact producer: dewi@truthdepartment.com

TRUTH
DEPARTMENT

MISFITS
ENTERTAINMENT

FILMS DE FORCE MAJEURE

LOGLINE

Ecstatic lip-synching in downtown bars is a far cry from Donna's Baptist upbringing; now in her seventies, she reconnects with the siblings who have never even seen her in a dress.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Donna is an intimate and candid portrait of an inspiring trans woman learning to live authentically as herself. Bedwani's trademark style of quiet observation yields powerful and mesmerizing moments. DONNA is a film that shows the strength that can be drawn from your community and proves that it's never too late to find your voice and truly blossom

LONG SYNOPSIS

Directed by award-winning filmmaker Jay Bedwani (*My Mother*), *Donna* is an intimate and candid portrait of the inspiring trans activist, artist and performer Donna Persona. It follows her journey to live authentically as herself and to reconnect with her family.

Donna Persona first hit the stage with the legendary Cockettes. Ecstatic lip-synching in San Francisco's downtown bars is a far cry from Donna's Baptist upbringing in San Jose; now in her seventies, her siblings have never seen her perform or meet her authentic self.

The documentary begins when Donna is offered a chance to co-write a play about an overlooked episode in queer history, the Compton's Cafeteria Riot, in which transgender women Donna knew stood up against police harassment. She writes a character to be played by a young transgender activist. Praised for her writing and emboldened by her new friends, she heads out of the city to be reunited with her sister, Gloria.

This revealing and uplifting film is beautifully observed by Bedwani and features mesmerising moments recalled by Donna in her emerging writer's voice. *Donna* is a film that shows the strength that can be drawn from your community and proves: it's never too late to find your métier and truly blossom.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first met Donna at a pool party in San Francisco almost ten years ago. She stood alone in a beautiful red sequin dress, deep in thought. I liked her straight away. We would spend time together, grabbing coffee and taking walks around San Francisco. She would talk to me about poetry, Marilyn Monroe and her family, who she rarely saw at the time. It was during her performances in the downtown bars at night that her indomitable spirit really revealed itself. But I saw Donna truly begin to blossom when she began writing the Compton's Cafeteria Play. Through learning more about these transgender women of 1960s San Francisco, and through remembering her own stories, she found comfort, and courage. Then, after hearing the transgender actresses read her lines, there was no stopping her. Reconnecting with her sister Gloria on her own terms and claiming her transgender identity from the podium in City Hall are only the first lines of an exciting new chapter in Donna's life.

Donna's is a very San Francisco story. And having come out as gay in San Francisco in my early twenties, fully embraced by the wonderfully varied LGBTQ+ community of which Donna is a part of, I have my own special connection with the city and its dwellers. It has been a wonderful experience shooting this film and getting to know the city even more intimately.

On watching the completed film I remember the words of a tutor some years ago. She said a documentary film should give away a small secret that can teach us how best to live. Donna's little secret of courage and authenticity emboldens me as I hope it will inspire others.

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

I am a firm believer in the power of documentary films to make deep and emotional connections across social divides. All too often, we have only the sketchiest idea of 'other' people; in the media, we are invariably shown people defined by type or issue, rather than as fully realised souls like 'us'. It seems only the famous are given the airtime to exhibit their contradictions, quirks or depth.

Feature-length, observational documentary films can be different, if you can get them to screen. However, if making a film about a single protagonist, you must be ready to venture into the unknown. At the outset, you can only guess what will happen in that person's life, or how long it will take to shoot: one can only rely on an instinct that a relatable narrative will emerge.

In making Donna, we demanded of all concerned a huge leap of faith and the patience of Job, but we asked more of Donna than of anyone else. Without seeing any rushes, she had to stick to her instinct about us and hope for the best, only guessing at how her story would be told. The grace and forbearance Donna has shown us throughout really is the most generous gift and also a massive responsibility. Jay Bedwani's great achievement is to have kept Donna's faith alive throughout, allowing him to keep filming intimately over the years.

It is with great satisfaction that we can now repay all those that put their faith in us and share Jay's touching and beautiful film. Overcoming all the odds and finally bringing Donna to the hearts and minds of the audience is truly a thrill to savour.



CREW BIOGRAPHIES

Jay Bedwani - DIRECTOR

Jay Bedwani is a self-shooting Welsh filmmaker working in the UK and California, specialising in character led documentaries. His short films have played in over 50 international film festivals, with MY MOTHER being awarded Best U.K. Short at Europe's largest LGBT film festival, the Iris Prize. His 2018 film OVERSHARE premiered in the O2 Arena in London, before completing a sold out theatre run in the U.K. His last short, STRETCH, premiered at Edinburgh International Film Festival and was awarded Best Short at the Wales International Documentary Festival.

Jay has trained with The Scottish Documentary Institute, Ffilm Cymru, the British Council, BFI and NFTS, and was a member of BAFTA Crew 2018-2020. In 2020 he received a John Brabourne Award for Film. He has a passion for teaching film and workshopping ideas with students and mentees. His first feature DONNA will premiere at Frameline International Film Festival in San Francisco, and he is in production with his second feature FRIDAYS WITH BARRY. He is currently working on an AR documentary project with StoryFutures Academy at Royal Holloway University of London, in conjunction with BBC and the British Film Institute.

Dewi Gregory - PRODUCER

The premiere and release of DONNA mark the culmination of many years' diligent progress for its producer. Welshman Dewi Gregory first got a taste for documentary storytelling as a researcher of BBC television programmes in the early 1990s. The privileged access to real people's lives and the seemingly infinite possibilities of the craft were a revelation. He was hooked and in the following years amassed a great deal of production experience in various roles and genres.

Developing a new documentary treatment in 2005, he discovered the exciting possibilities offered by the feature-length documentary form. Silver screen audiences expect experiences in the dark that are more epic, intimate, complex or surprising than television audiences have learnt to expect. This project spurred the formation of Truth Department; a vehicle for the development and production of feature-length films.

Over a decade and more, Gregory learned the ropes as co-producer for established filmmakers and producers, graduating as an EAVE producer in 2015. Now an established producer and experienced international co-producer, his next challenge is to bring his next film to market and to finance the development of a slate of exciting new films, thereby increasing production and establishing Truth Department as a regular producer of truly cinematic documentary films.

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

Alice Powell is a London-based film editor with an enviable track record in feature-length documentary films, including *Bank Job*, *Game of Thrones: The Last Watch*, *Seahorse: The Dad Who Gave Birth*; *Freedom Fields*, *Even When I Fall* and *The Closer We Get* which won HotDocs Best International Feature. A graduate of the National Film & Television school (UK), her films have screened at numerous prominent festivals, including Sheffield Doc/Fest, South by Southwest, HotDocs, the Berlin International Film Festival and Tribeca Film Festival.

Anne de Mo edits award-winning documentary films, such as *Massaker* by Lokman Slim and *Monika Borgmann* (2005), *Yamo* by Rami Nihawi, and *Red Blue Yellow & Sound of the Sea* (Nujoom Alghanem).

Antoine Bédard is a composer and musician from Montreal (Canada) also known for his solo electro pop project called Montag (Carpark Records). He started working as a sound designer for theatre and dance in 2005 while living in Vancouver. Since moving back to Montreal in 2008, he has scored over forty theatre and dance productions presented throughout Canada. He has composed music for a variety of artistic productions for companies such as The National Ballet of Canada, The National Film Board of Canada, and Robert Lepage's *Ex Machina*. He has contributed to major projects by Montreal's Moment Factory for the Boston Science Museum and the Tokyo transit company. More recently, he wrote the original score for acclaimed dance films by Beatriz Mediavilla and created a permanent soundscape for Québec City's newest theatre building called *Le Diamant*.

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

Prior to helping form the award winning, industry leading restoration, post production and digital delivery facility Dragon, Paul was a senior engineer at Quantel (now Grass Valley), based both in the UK and in the US. At the age of just 26, Paul was one of a handful of lead engineers constructing and commissioning what was at the time the largest single video installation worldwide. Whilst still a specialist in electrical and digital applications for video and film, for the last sixteen years, Paul has worked at Dragon in applying this knowledge to digital film, working with clients and suppliers alike as well as developing our own in-house technology.

As the in-house colourist, Paul's many accolades include colour grading films that span the history of cinema. Projects include the Focal Award winner, Napoleon (Abel Gance,1927), the fastest selling silent film The Battle of the Somme (1916) and the more recent BAFTA winners, Eternal Beauty and Last Summer as well as the recent nominee Six Minutes to Midnight and forthcoming releases Burial and The Almond and the Seahorse. Paul is one of the most experienced DI, digital film and video technicians working in the industry today.

After graduating from the Newport Film School in 2006, and winning a BAFTA Cymru for his graduation film "Mummy's Boy", Nick began his career as a location sound recordist and has worked across cinema, TV productions for major broadcasters, and commercials for some of the biggest household names. Nick's passion for sound led him into sound design and dubbing mixing. He's mixed feature films, including "The Toll" (2021), short films, including the BAFTA Cymru winning "My Brief Eternity" and BAFTA nominated "The Arborist" and "Creepy Pasta Salad", TV documentaries for BBC, ITV, and S4C, and commercial work for clients including Google, Starbucks, Waitrose, BBC, and Visit Wales. After many years working as a freelancer, in 2020 he founded Meteor Sound, a high-end dubbing studio based in Cardiff. Donna is the first feature film Nick mixed at Meteor.

PRODUCTION

Ian is a two times BAFTA nominated director and producer for MCQUEEN, a feature documentary on Alexander McQueen the iconic fashion designer. RISING PHOENIX is Ian's second documentary which he has co-written and co-directed alongside Peter Ettedgui. The film covers the story of the Paralympics from its humble beginning to becoming the third biggest sporting event in the world. RISING PHOENIX won Outstanding Long Sports Documentary and Outstanding Music Direction categories at the 2021 Emmy awards.

Ian's directorial debut, ALLEYCATS, was distributed internationally by Universal pictures in over 25 territories and by Filmmode in the US/Canada. Following this, Ian co-founded MISFITS ENTERTAINMENT alongside Andee Ryder, the producer of Alleycats. In 2018 Misfits Entertainment produced VIKING DESTINY, an action-adventure film starring Terence Stamp.

Prior to this, Ian co-founded PULSE FILMS in 2005 alongside Thomas Benski and Marisa Clifford. Pulse Films recently produced GANGS OF LONDON and AMERICAN HONEY (2016 Jury Prize Cannes Winner). The company is now a part of the VICE MEDIA GROUP. Ian has also directed international campaigns, music videos and fashion films for clients such as Puma, Nike, Pepsi, Mumford & Sons, Tom Jones, and fashion designers Matthew Williamson and Hussein Chalayan.

Andee (Dee) is an Emmy award-winning and BAFTA-nominated film producer. In 2020 Dee was an executive producer on the double Emmy award-winning documentary RISING PHOENIX. In 2018 Dee produced the double BAFTA-nominated documentary MCQUEEN. In 2016 Dee co-founded the London-based film production company MISFITS ENTERTAINMENT. In the same year, Dee produced her debut feature, ALLEYCATS. Dee produced her second feature, VIKING DESTINY, in 2018.

Prior to this Dee accumulated extensive experience within the TV and film industry working on major Hollywood blockbusters, documentaries and multi returning documentary series aired on NAT GEO, DISCOVERY CHANNEL, HISTORY CHANNEL, PBS to name but a few. She also produced countless music videos, commercials and boasts a significant amount of experience as a VFX producer. Dee is the first transgender producer to be BAFTA-nominated. She is a filmmaker first and foremost and to produce the best creative work she believes in close working relationships and solid foundations

PRODUCTION

Suzanne Alizart is a film professional with over a decade's experience of working on the financing and business affairs of fiction and documentary films. She has a particular affinity for documentary films that aim to shift perceptions, open doors to new ideas and change the world one person at a time. She has worked for public UK film financiers, independent producers, creative start-ups and universities. Following some years of freelance work on various film projects including Donna, she is currently working for the Doc Society as its BFI fund business affairs executive.

Kim heads up Ffilm Cymru's Development, Production and Skills departments, as well as playing a key role in the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Kim was formerly the Head of Acquisitions at documentary sales agent and distributor Mercury Media and before that the Head of Acquisitions at Journeyman Pictures. Her producing credits include Claude Lanzmann: Spectres of the Shoah which was Grierson, Cinema Eye Honors, IDA and Oscar-nominated in 2016.

Kimberley hails from North Wales and has an MA in English Language and Literature from Oxford University. She is a former BAFTA Cymru Committee Member and a regular delegate at international film festivals such as Cannes & Berlin.

FULL CREDITS

Cinematography & Sound

Jay Bedwani

Editors

Anne de Mo
Alice Powell

Original Score

Antoine Bédard

Sound Designer

Nick Davies

Colourist

Paul Wright

Additional Cinematography

Frazer Bradshaw
Vanessa Carr
Avery Hudson
Mike Seely
Josh Self

Addition Location Sound

David Silverberg

Driver

Lorenzo Cirelli

Stylist

Martirio Guerra

Camera Assistant

Luke Lasley

Production Assistant

Marie Alyse Rodriguez

Security

Javon Grey

Assistant Editors

Nora Bertone
Stuart Fisher

Editor (development trailer)

Victor Ede

Music Supervisor

Amelia Hartley

Additional Drums

Guillaume Éthier

Additional Guitar

Gabriel Lambert

Piano Arrangements on "If it ain't love"

Arnaud Spick-Saucier

Additional Sound Editing and Music Production

Simon R. Tremblay

Additional Original Music

John Hardy Music
Nick Davies

FULL CREDITS

Donna's Memories

Cinematography Jay Bedwani
Frazer Bradshaw

Studio Sound Recordist Bret Parker

Writer Donna Persona

Ffilm Cymru Wales & Screenskills Film Trainees

Trainee Director Liam Martin

Trainee Editors Jason Barnes
Meggie Morgan

Dragon Digital

Post-Production Liaison Mylène Bradfield

VFX Oanis Rawbone
Yannis Valkaniotis

Meteor Sound

Dubbing Mixer Nick Davies

Sound Effects Editors Owen Peters

FULL CREDITS

Featuring Donna Persona
Kimberly Rodregues Lavan
Inez Miranda-Medina
Jeannie Miller
Gloria Villarreal
Shane Zaldivar
Vivian David
Matt Goodfellow
Collette LeGrande
Sin Le Roux X
Mark Nassar
Gem N’Aye
and Kay Roberts

Performances Pina Busch
Cruizin D’Loo
VivvyAnne ForeverMore
Thee Pristine Condition

Compton Cafeteria Riot

Presented by Tenderloin Museum
Conceived by Mark Nasser & Katie Conry
Directed by Aejay Mitchell
Co-writers Collette LeGrande
Mark Nasser
Donna Persona

Cast Jaylyn Abergas
Pleasure Bynight
Lavale Davis
Clair Farley
Kelly J. Kelly
Stephen William Menasche
Mandela Msanii
Drew Olvey
Joseph Paul
Barbara Pond
Jacob Ritts
Per Sia
Shane Zaldivar



TRUTH
DEPARTMENT

FILMS DE FORCE MAJEURE

MISFITS
ENTERTAINMENT



RÉGION SUD  PROVENCE
ALPES
CÔTE D'AZUR

CNC centre national
du cinéma et de
l'image animée

PROCIREP

Société des Producteurs
de Cinéma et de Télévision

ANGO A

FILM ASSOCIATES
INTERNATIONAL
MARKETING & SERVICES



Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru
Arts Council of Wales

**ARIENNIR GAN
Y LOTERI
LOTTERY FUNDED**



 Noddir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Sponsored by
Welsh Government