

FotoFocus Talks Storytelling With Filmmaker Behind Michelle Obama Documentary Ahead of Her March Virtual Visit

In anticipation of her March 4 Lens Mix talk, Cincinnati's FotoFocus caught up with celebrated director and cinematographer Nadia Hallgren.

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Nadia Hallgren PHOTO: JJ MEDINA

An award-winning filmmaker from the Bronx, New York, Nadia Hallgren directed the Emmy Award–nominated documentary *Becoming* and the Academy Award–shortlisted short documentary *After Maria*—though those are just two recent titles on a CV packed with acclaimed work.

On March 4, Hallgren will join performance whisperer George Mumford for a Lens Mix conversation about social friction, professional barriers, and the pursuit of excellence. (Moderated by FotoFocus's Kevin Moore, the event is free and open to all via [Zoom Webinar](#).)

In advance of the event, we called Hallgren to get the scoop on why she finds film continually compelling, shifting from cinematographer to director, and—yes, obviously—what it was like to spend all that time behind-the-scenes with Michelle Obama.

FotoFocus: Your camera work has appeared in more than 70 documentaries and you've shot in 35 countries. How has that breadth of experience affected your approach, or shaped you into the cinematographer and director that you are?

Nadia Hallgren: The opportunity to have such a range of experiences in the world, through cinematography, has just built perspective. The type of documentary that I make—*vérité* observational—is an opportunity to be present with people through all types of circumstances. Sometimes they are the most horrific circumstances you can imagine. Sometimes they are the most extraordinary, hopeful, joyful situations. And sometimes they are completely mundane; you're with them in their day-to-day.

Experiencing that range of life with so many people in so many different countries and so many different places throughout the course of my own life, from the time I was like 20-years-old to right now, has really shaped the person that I am and how I see the world. And in turn, it got me to the place that I am now in my craft.

I have a deeper understanding of people—but what I also love is that people surprise you every single day. So you also, every day, are like, *I don't know anything!* [laughs] There's this kind of confidence that comes with: *I've done this a million times. I feel good going into a place, trying to observe and see people for who they are and what's happening around them, and tell that story.* And then that will all get turned on its head in the same moment. I think that constant experience is how I see the world.

FF: What brought you to film? And what keeps you going?

NH: I always connected with storytelling, but I had this insecurity around my education and not feeling like I had a deep enough vocabulary to express myself. I came to visual storytelling pretty young: As a teenager, I went to a community arts program on documentary photography. What clicked for me in that moment was that it gave me an

opportunity to express myself without having to do all the things that I felt so insecure about—writing or speaking or anything like that. I felt this real thing in my body. I felt very connected to people watching them and observing them. And I started to realize that the way I was going to learn about myself was through other people. That's been a whole part of the journey.

It was also the sense of adventure that comes with documentary filmmaking. That was the first thing that drew me to it, and then it was all that other stuff after it. It's pretty adventurous. Every day of your life you're like: *OK, what can I get myself into today?* And I have an excuse to do it.

FF: I'm curious about the shift from cinematographer to director. In the vérité style, as cinematographer you can really be the watcher and let yourself blend in and get to observe, and I wonder if there's a trade-off when you're directing. Not that that's a bad thing, of course, but if that's your impulse and background, how do the two inform each other?

NH: That's a great question. That will really play into this [\[Lens Mix\] conversation](#) that we have, too, with George [Mumford]. Part of why I started directing was I felt like I needed a new challenge. With cinematography, I had achieved certain things that I had always dreamed of, and I was like, *OK, what's the next creative and intellectual stimulation that I need? And what circumstance can I create to find that?*

Directing was a natural next step. But I quickly realized a big part of directing was management. It's separated me in many ways from being present in this observational cinematography craft that I had existed in my entire life. Watching people in the way that I had learned how to do was this very meditative space for me, and I loved every minute of it. You're just looking at people 10, 12 hours a day through this very particular lens. I never had to talk a lot. You're observing, and you don't want your presence to be too heavy.

When I started directing, so much of it became managing a team and negotiating with the people that you're filming and pitching ideas and all of these things that, for a minute, I was like, *I hate this*. I thought: *I'm supposed to be thrilled that I made this leap to direct, all these doors opened for me, wide-open, huge opportunities—and I'm so unhappy. Why am I feeling this way?* There was definitely a tremendous trade off in one thing to another.

FF: Are you pretty firmly directing now, or do you shift between the two roles depending on projects?

NH: I am firmly in directing, but I still shoot my own projects as of right now. But I'm also starting to let go of that a little bit.

FF: For [Becoming](#), you were both cinematographer and director. How does it play into the final work to have that combined skill-set in one person? Particularly, with that film, in terms of access.

NH: When I got the call about *Becoming* from Priya [Swaminathan], the woman who runs the Obamas' production company, she said: *Hey, Mrs. Obama is about to get ready to go on this book tour, it's her first time really going out in the world since they left the White House, and we are floating the idea to her—which means they were trying to convince her—to make a film about this, to allow it to be filmed, to make a documentary perhaps. And she's not sure if she wants that. And so we are looking for someone who can have a really tiny footprint, who can kind of do everything. And we think if she is gonna say yes, it's going to be based on that, and you're probably one of the few people who can do that.*

With the background that I have, there are not many women of color that are cinematographers with 15 years experience doing this thing. I did a lot of my own sound, too, because I came up in very low-budget documentary filmmaking, where that's what it was: You had to be able to do everything. So if anything, I knew that I could do that. I could do these technical things that I was being asked to do.

But the real challenge was: Can you intellectually and emotionally be one-on-one with Michelle Obama for this extended period of time? I was like, *OK, I know I can do this technical stuff, but how will I hold up under this other set of expectations?* Just because she is such a powerful human being. She's lovely and she is so nice and generous and kind. And I had an extraordinary experience with her. But it's all the self doubt, the insecurities, the: *Can I do this? Am I good enough? Am I smart enough? There are a million people better at this than I could be...* So for me, a lot of it was just trying to overcome that every day.

FF: What was it like to be behind the scenes with a person whose life was so squarely in the public eye? There are so many people who she resonates with, and so many people who feel like they know her, and who she matters to. She has this whole public presence and persona and life—but there is always still a human, too.

NH: My job was to get at that human element of who she is. Because we all kind of have this public idea. I just went into it with a completely open mind. I had no expectations. I knew immediately, from the first time we met, that she—just like everyone says, it's very cliché [*laughs*—is so down to earth.

She's one of the realest people I've ever met. She works so hard to make people feel comfortable, because she knows there's "the Michelle Obama experience," she has people meeting her and crying or fainting or all of this stuff. And that's not fun for her, either, because she's like, *I love people and want to connect with people, and I don't get an opportunity to meet strangers. So when I do, I want to have a conversation with them. I want to know who they are.* So she works really hard to try to make people feel comfortable and to tamp that down.

I saw all of that within minutes of meeting her, in her body language and in things that I spoke to her about, with my own life experience, that really resonated and made her feel that, if she was going to take this chance of being filmed, that she thought I was the person most suited to do it.

FF: What you were saying earlier, about all of the very understandable self-doubt and questioning that came with it, I did think: *It would be pretty OK to have Michelle Obama on the other end. [laughs] She's probably gonna help make you feel alright!*

NH: I did tell myself that a lot—like, if she believes in me, I have to believe in me. That was the thing: She never doubted that I was capable, she never doubted what I was doing. So I said, if she believes, I need to believe, because she's way smarter than I am.

FF: You've talked about *Becoming* as being about storytelling, too, from the start. How did that guide decisions that you made?

NH: I was given a very specific set of parameters around making a film like *Becoming*: Michelle Obama just wrote this book, she's going out on a book tour, and here are these things that are going to be happening. She's going to be doing these arena shows, and she's going to be doing these community events. She will be in conversation with people on stage, and she's going to go talk to people in smaller settings.

Thinking about my own life, and how storytelling has shaped who I became because I had this front-row seat to so many stories as a documentary filmmaker, it all started to

make sense to me: *She's going out, she's sharing her story, people are sharing their stories. Storytelling is transformative.* If we can tell *that* story about storytelling, that to me was the way to make this film.

FF: When I read that, I thought back to [After Maria](#), too. What really stuck out to me was—in contexts that generally get buried in statistics, like a hurricane—the importance of narrative staying really specific, or human scale, zoomed in. And especially in scenarios that are fundamentally about power differentials, how important storytelling can be.

NH: Totally. What we know is that people remember things through stories. You can throw a bunch of numbers and statistics and a news blurb or whatever. But if you create a narrative around it—people are more likely to connect with it, feel compassion, and retain that. And reflect on it, as well.

FF: What compels you the most in projects that you take on?

NH: I think, now, a lot of what I think about is: *Why does it matter that I tell a story? What is it about who I am, my perspective on life, or my position in the world that it matters that I am the person that does this?* I think about what contribution, or lack thereof, it will have on society. And a lot about how it will contribute to the stories that we know, specifically, about people of color. I'd like to help contribute to reversing some of the negative stereotypes—or just not nuanced storytelling—around people from my community.

FF: And the flip-side of that: What do you think makes film compelling?

NH: The opportunity to identify with people who you don't know, who are not you, who don't look like you, who are from completely different places from you—but that you can share an emotional experience. Whether it's good or bad, that makes you think about yourself or the world around you.

For me, when I'm moved emotionally, that's a good film. Because I'm laughing or because I'm crying or because I learned something new that just shifted something inside of me—that's what makes films compelling. And being able to see that, whether it's the similarities or the differences. That visual connection to the story is what makes film have its own unique power.

FF: To the extent you're able to share what you're working on: What's next?

NH: I'm making a documentary about attorney Benjamin Crump, the civil rights lawyer defending the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor families, who is really at the forefront of this moment and this movement from a legal perspective. I've been deep in the field with him for the last nine or 10 months.

You can look for Hallgren's film about Crump in early 2022, but you can hear more from her, in conversation with sports whisperer George Mumford, much sooner: FotoFocus's fourth installment of [Lens Mix](#) is coming soon to a Zoom near you.

Lens Mix 4: Nadia Hallgren and George Mumford, [Zoom Webinar](#), March 4, 6:00 pm – 7:00 pm.

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