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Newark filmmakers ask, "Where's the renaissance?"

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For six days in July of 1967 the deadliest racial disturbance in recent New Jersey history broke out in Newark when John Smith, a black cab driver was arrested and beaten for a minor traffic violation. Twenty-six people were killed, 725 were wounded, and the New Jersey National Guard occupied black neighborhoods with tanks and checkpoints while crowds rampaged and destroyed white-owned businesses.



Newark residents clean up the aftermath of the 1967 riots (Corbis-Bettmann)

In 2003, husband and wife film makers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno, in preparation for the full length narrative feature they are creating for Spike Lee, set out to make a short research film about the 1967 Newark riots. When they started interviewing key players and eyewitnesses -- from police officials, Newark residents, a core of historical experts on the city, and urban commentators -- they realized they had uncovered an account of the riots that had not been reported in newspapers or recorded in textbooks.

They had material that looked beneath the violence of the six days riot sparked by this single violent incident, but just as much driven by the racial, political and economic forces that

had been destroying the city since the 1950s.

"We wanted to show why Newark is suffering right now, why it's not in a renaissance and that the same elements that created the July 1967 riots are repeating themselves today. Poverty is our biggest issue," Jerome Bongiorno, co-director of *Revolution '67* said. "The riots were not Newark's downfall, that's not true. Industry was leaving since the 1950s, which resulted in white flight."



Through a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, *Justice: A Dialogue Through Film*, the Bongiorno Production filmmakers are screening the film at the Highland Park Public Library, 31 North Fifth Avenue, on Saturday, March 27 at 2:00 PM.

After the screening of the 90 minute documentary that has already been part of an award winning PBS series, Marylou and Jerome will lead a discussion along with Chris Rasmussen, associate professor of History and Political Science at Fairleigh Dickinson University. This historian, who is also a Highland Park resident, will be on hand to place this deadly racial disturbance in the context of twentieth century urban development and African American history.

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Professor Rasmussen will also talk about New Brunswick during the summer of 1967. Young mayor Patricia Sheehan, then a 33 year old widow, had just started her term in May.

"Mayor Sheehan took to the streets, talked to the people with a megaphone and calmed tensions," Rasmussen said. "She had already started to use the police as a liason to the people, which was not the case in Newark."



The crowds of residents dispersed peacefully and there were no fatalities in New Brunswick.

According to the two filmmakers, who started their filmmaking company ten years ago, most of Newark's neighborhoods are still at the poverty level.

"Newark is one big pocket of poverty," Jerome said. "The East Ward is the only section that is doing well,.At 5:00, when work ends, the middle class leaves."

Marylou and Jerome live in Newark, in the brick house her family built in the North Ward during the 1950s.

"It was the Italian section in Branch Brook Park area," Marlou said. "Newark was a great place with its location to Manhattan, with a surburban feel, but we see the probelms living here now."

The two have have been married for 24 years and while Marylou was completing her graduate filmmaking degree at New York University for three years, a decade ago, Jerome was teaching high school by day and sitting in on her film classes at night. For 10 years they have been making all kinds of films together through their Newark film company, including recently a six minute short for the Newark Museum, celebrating Newark; this documentary; and the Spike Lee feature , which will create fictional characters and story lines around the events of the Newark riots.



The two have shown *Revolution '67* throughout Europe and this country. They have received numerous awards, including the American Historical Association John O'Connor Film Award and the Erik Barnouw Award.

If you ask the two why Newark still has been denied its renaissance while other cities seem to thrive, they have a simple answer.

"The answer is one word, jobs," Jerome said. "If you give people jobs they have pride and ownership, they'll want their schools and neighborhoods to do well. If you have all poor people living together there'll be no renaissance. People are the possibility."

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