

THE MAGAZINE FOR FILM & TELEVISION EDITORS, ASSISTANTS & POST-PRODUCTION PROFESSIONALS

CINEMAEDITOR

THE EDDIE AWARDS ISSUE

IN THIS ISSUE

THE JUNGLE BOOK

ANIMATION SHOWCASE

Featuring

ANOMALISA

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ZOOTOPIA

THE LITTLE PRINCE

PLUS ...

THE 2016 ACE EDDIE AWARDS

Golden Eddie Honoree

NANCY MEYERS

Career Achievement Honorees

CAROL LITTLETON, ACE

AND **TED RICH**, ACE

...AND MUCH MORE!

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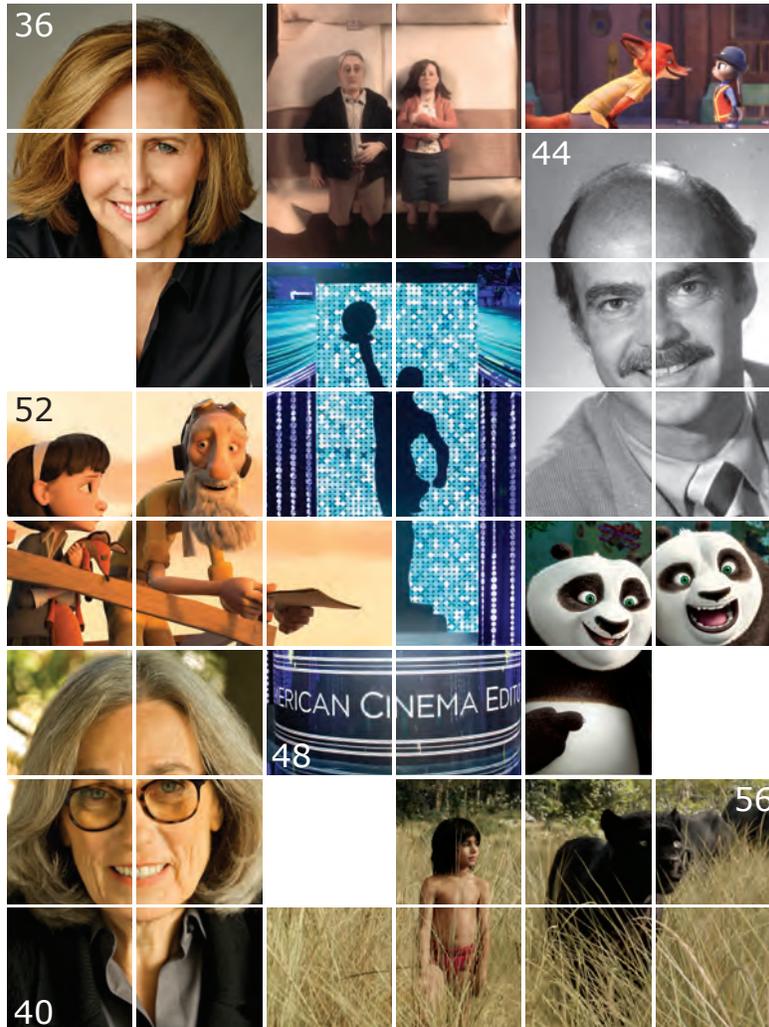
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The 66th Annual ACE Eddie Awards



Carol Littleton, ACE

2016 Career Achievement Award Honoree

BY BOBBIE O'STEEN

When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences recently interviewed Carol Littleton, ACE, for its archives, it was not surprising, given her profound gifts and accomplishments as an editor. What might seem unexpected are the two additions she made to her timeline: “Walked the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain” and “Walked two legs of the Chemin de Saint Jacques in France.” Those who know Littleton understand why she includes those restorative, medieval walks among the 38 films she has edited. Her passion for a life lived meaningfully and her deep appreciation for the arts are inseparable from her work.

Littleton’s devotion to literature and music originated with her mother, who was an avid reader and accomplished pianist, even though they lived on the Oklahoma prairie, miles from the nearest town. She acquired an insatiable curiosity about nature and an intrepid spirit from her father, who would take his children to days-long Native American celebrations or whisk them off in the night to gaze at the stars. For her college junior year, Littleton would set out on her own adventure to France. She fell in love with the culture and – during the summer before returning home – with John Bailey. He would become her adored husband of 44 years, as well as a cinematographer and collaborator with her on many films.

As a graduate student, Littleton won a Fulbright scholarship, spending a second year in Paris at the height of the New Wave movement. She experienced the daring, visionary style of those films and was inspired to become an editor herself after witnessing the vigor and immediacy of *The Battle of Algiers*.

Littleton also trained as a classical musician but decided not to spend her life in dark practice rooms. Little did she know she would soon find herself in another dark space: a film editing room.

After completing her master’s degree, Littleton moved to L.A. and secured an entry-level position at editor Richard Einfeld’s post-production company. One of her jobs was delivering dailies and sound effects to editors, which is how she met editor turned director, Hal Ashby. “He left a deep impression on me,” she says, adding that Ashby generously helped her on some AFI film fellowship projects she was editing. “[He advised,] ‘Let the actors do the work, and when they’re no longer engaged, that’s when you cut. Don’t impose anything on a great performance.’” He was one of many who tried to help her get into the Motion Picture Editors Guild, to no avail. MPEG was, as Littleton called it, ‘ossified.’ The only way to gain admission was through nepotism, so she decided to create her own commercial production company, while never giving up on her dream. “From the time I was a little girl, if someone told me, ‘No you can’t do that because of this, that

or the other,” Littleton says, “I tried to prove them wrong.” She finally did get into the union, when one of her commercial clients, Jerry Sims, signed a union contract; but as a new member, she was thwarted by the seniority rule. Then opportunity arrived: A first-time director told her that he wanted to hire her. Littleton recalls telling a mixer at Todd-AO that it was the perfect time for her to, as she put it, “wrap up my shop, because I’m going to move into feature editing; and he said, ‘Carol, I want to give you some advice. Don’t do it. You’re a good commercial editor; you’ve got a growing company. If you edit features you’ll be taking jobs from men, men who have families and children.’ It was a pivotal moment for me. That conversation distilled in one incident so much of what I was facing as a young woman and aspiring film editor.”

She ultimately got her first union job on the film *French Postcards*, partly because she spoke French, but the hurdles she faced sparked her motivation to make a difference. “There was an enormous qualified workforce in Hollywood, but the union’s closed shop blocked most from joining. It crippled so many people.” Littleton became president of MPEG and, during her tenure from 1988 to 1991, the union drafted an entirely new constitution and bylaws, which dramatically opened up membership; and later, as vice president, she helped set in motion the eventual merging of the Los Angeles and New York locals under a national umbrella.

Around that time, Littleton finally experienced an upside to being a woman when she interviewed with Lawrence Kasdan for his directorial debut on *Body Heat*. Kasdan said he wanted to hire a woman, because, as Littleton explains, “Larry felt that a woman editor would naturally interpret the sexual scenes erotically, knowing that innuendo is more powerful than anything explicit.” In that first meeting, Kasdan was impressed that she picked up on his screenplay’s extraordinary sense of humor and she also keyed into the musicality of his stylish, film-noir dialogue. “You don’t think about the rhythm of language as much as the rhythm of song but it does, in fact, exist,” says Littleton, whose experience as a musician heightens her ability to listen closely. “You have to be very careful how you sound and you practice until you get it right, until it’s effective, until it becomes emotional.” The cutting room, which supplanted her practice room, took on a special meaning,



“From the time I was a little girl, if someone told me, ‘No you can’t do that because of this, that or the other,’ I tried to prove them wrong.”

representing for Littleton a sanctuary where the director could try all kinds of ideas. She and Kasdan bonded right away in that womb-like setting, and they would go on to collaborate together on eight other films over a period of over 30 years. Littleton talks about Kasdan in a way that she could be describing herself when she says, “He has integrity as a filmmaker, and humanity as a person; those two qualities are inseparable.”

After *Body Heat*, Littleton’s next editorial adventure was *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* for director Steven Spielberg, which earned her Oscar®, BAFTA® and Eddie nominations and became one of the most beloved films of all time. Littleton, typically, honed in on the intimacy of the story – and how personal it was to the director. “It was autobiographical for Steven in many respects: a story of sibling solidarity in a broken home, and I think that both of us together were able to keep it deeply personal,” she says. “It was our task to make E.T. believable as a real character.” It was not an easy one, because, Littleton says, “Let’s face it, it was a puppet, a piece of rubber, with a bunch of pneumatic tubes. Steven shot a lot of footage until the puppeteers’ movements were synchronized, and then my primary task was selecting the moments that made the love between E.T. and Elliot ring true.”

The Big Chill, Littleton’s next collaboration with Kasdan, used music – 19 Billboard hits – to represent a state of mind, nostalgia for a group of college students reunited after 15 years for their friend’s funeral. The iconic opening montage not only introduces the main characters, but also evocatively reveals to the audience, bit by bit, that a woman is dressing a man who turns out to be a corpse. The momentum of that sequence, propelled by the song, “I Heard It Through the Grapevine,” is very much a signature of Littleton’s fluid style. She avers, “You make a ‘California stop,’ just nudging the brake, but you keep on going.”



Littleton forged a special bond with writer/director Robert Benton on *Places in the Heart*, which was based on their similar childhood memories. Although Littleton hadn't been born yet, in 1936, and Texas wasn't exactly Oklahoma, she says, "It's closest to a biographical statement about where I'm from. On the surface, you may have thought they were simple country people, but I knew those people and I know what they had most striven for in their lives: to be honorable and to have a meaningful life." She was brave enough to trust the power of the tableau shots, reflecting a time and place where, as she says, "time slows and your pulse lowers." Underneath the quiet rhythms, Littleton showed her sensitivity to nuance in the actors' performances, which resonated with feelings of tenderness and foreboding.

When Littleton admires directors, she often speaks of their courage, which inspires her to take on challenges of her own. In her 38 years as a film editor she has relished the opportunity to work on unique projects in both documentary and narrative form. One example was Spalding Grey's monologue, *Swimming to Cambodia*. "What do you do with one guy on the stage? The only props were a desk, chair, a pointer and a map. It was a wonderful challenge." She describes director Jonathan Demme, for whom she would edit several films, as "full of life. I love working with him because he is an optimist to his very bone marrow. Our styles of execution in editing are somewhat different. I have a tendency to inch up, distill a moment until it is pure, direct; but Jonathan loves to work in broad strokes, to see if they embody a valid idea to pursue and then make refinements. I like his bold approach and have learned to use it effectively."

Littleton chooses directors and films that offer the possibility of accessing authentic experiences. She is currently editing *All the Way* for director Jay Roach, who she says is "a master of comedy. But his innate sense of social justice spurs him to make deeply committed, political films." *All the Way* is an adaptation of the Broadway play starring Bryan Cranston. It takes place over an 11-month period between the Kennedy assassination and Johnson's election. Littleton relishes adapting the play to film, where she feels that Johnson's personal demons and struggles are



more accessible. She explains, "The camera can instantly read an array of emotions in close-up, which you would have to delineate in a totally different way on stage." For instance, she was able to create moving scenes "without using descriptive dialogue, because one experiences the descriptive moment on film."

Littleton's compassion extends unequivocally to those on her crew. She has an acute memory of the obstacles she faced as a young woman editor and her generosity of spirit has made her a mentor to many. As a result, the story of our friendship and her desire to fuel my confidence in career-defining ways might not be unique – but the impetus for our meeting was. Music editor Susana Peric insisted I search out Littleton, who reminded her so much of my late husband, editor Sam O'Steen. Peric told me they both give grace to their profession. It's their security in who they are that allows them to give space and confidence to all around them. And in all the craziness, the essential ingredient is a wicked sense of humor.

In 2010 Littleton was appropriately awarded the Fellowship and Service Award, by MPEG. In addition to holding MPEG offices, she served on the board of ACE and the Board of Governors of A.M.P.A.S.[®]

On that occasion, her acceptance speech included a scenario familiar to editors: She and her crew were working late; the PA came in and said the producer felt they should order a meal that night, it was on the production – and then they threw cold, soggy pizzas at the editors, thinking it was a magnanimous gesture. "But it's not a meal," she declared, "it's an insult!" Laughter filled the room. Such a Littleton moment: Her delivery was witty, but she was also fighting for what was right.

In that evening's program, Kasdan wrote, "I wildly underestimated the influence Littleton would have on me ... She has been my teacher, moral touchstone, slave driver, confidante and friend ... she is the perfect companion. I will never know any better."

Those of us whose hearts have been touched by Littleton and her remarkable work do tend to speak in superlatives – and, no doubt, relish the opportunity to celebrate this exceptional artist and human being. **CE**