



JAMES SANDERS

A Story From New York

BY CONOR BERRY

New York City is an anomaly. Trying to capture the essence of this vibrant, ethnically diverse, polyglot place gives new meaning to the word *challenge*. To speak in generalizations of a city with so many voices and so many meanings, few of which are universally shared, is next to impossible. Romanticized, criticized, but never replicated, New York is perhaps the most misrepresented city in the world.

But James Sanders, a Manhattan-based architect and writer, has come close to doing the impossible — harnessing three and a half turbulent centuries in a striking, coherent portrait of a city in perpetual motion, throbbing with ambition and emotion.

Companion Volume

Mr. Sanders, a longtime resident of the Georgia section of East Hampton, said he had to set his architectural duties aside for most of the seven years it took him to research and write “New York: A Documentary Film,” a 12-hour Public Broadcasting System television series that makes its nationwide debut on Sunday evening.

Five of the six two-hour episodes will be shown through Nov. 18, the final episode slated to air sometime in the spring of 2000.

In addition to the PBS series, there is a thick, five-pound companion volume, “New York: An Illustrated History,” co-written by Mr. Sanders and Ric Burns, a writer and documentary filmmaker who directed and produced the series.

Satisfying Project

Even though this was the first time Mr. Sanders had ever been involved in a film project, it was not his first time writing about the city’s archi-

ture and the urban milieu; over the years, articles of his have appeared in the pages of The New York Times, Vanity Fair, and the Los Angeles Times, among others.

Writing, he said, is “not dissimilar to designing a building.” Although he still enjoys watching designs leap from his sketchpad, the film and

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book project have been an equally gratifying yet totally different sort of experience.

“The satisfaction is enormous,” Mr. Sanders said in a phone interview the morning after the film’s Friday night opening party, held at Rockefeller University on York Avenue on Manhattan’s East Side. It’s “like nothing else I’ve done.”

Rise Of New York

And, he added, the reaction of several hundred guests who attended the premiere was very encouraging. Mr. Sanders attributed the audience’s strong response to the “powerful selection of images” in the film, which charts the evolution of New York as a world-class city.

“This has been one of the hardest [projects] any of us has been involved in. It was truly an overwhelming task,” said the writer, adding that he hopes the film will someday be used as a learning tool in classrooms across the city.

Earlier this decade, Mr. Sanders and Mr. Burns, old friends since their days at Columbia College, “hatched up the idea” for a definitive history of New York “over one too many

cocktails at the Algonquin [Hotel].”

The 12-hour series and the 480-page book, with some 500 full-color and black-and-white illustrations, chronicles New York from its earliest days as a Dutch trading post to the days when it was the nation’s first capital to its rise as America’s premiere port city.

Onscreen Commentary

In between are detailed accounts of epochal moments in the city’s history, from the Civil War draft riots of 1863 to the massive waves of European immigration at the turn of the century to the formation of ethnic ghettos, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the construction of the Empire State building, and the great northward migration of blacks and the ensuing Harlem Renaissance.

In each of the six episodes, onscreen commentaries are supplied by dozens of well-known New Yorkers, natives and transplants alike, including Kenneth T. Jackson, the noted Columbia University historian and the author of the “Encyclopedia of New York City,” and the writers Peter Quinn, Luc Sante, Robert A. Caro, Philip Lopate, Pete Hamill, Brendan Gill, E.L. Doctorow, Fran Lebowitz, and Alfred Kazin.

Family Stories

Also appearing are the playwright Tony Kushner, the historian David McCullough, the noted history professors Marshall Berman, Daniel J. Czitrom, Carol Berkin, and Thomas Bender, Robert A.M. Stern, the architect, the Rev. Calvin O. Butts, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, even the Donald — Trump, that is.

One of the highlights of the film, Mr. Sanders said, was getting “70 New Yorkers together” to talk about

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FAMOUS IMAGES such as this — Margaret Bourke-White’s photograph of Manhattan’s skyline in 1934 from one of the Chrysler Building’s famous eagles — are among the 500 photographs in Mr. Sanders’s book, “New York: An Illustrated History.”

Sanders

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New York. “The passion with which they speak of their city,” he said, was nothing short of remarkable, recounting their own families’ stories as they relate to the moments that have changed the course of New York City.

“Brilliant Talk”

One of the hardest tasks of all, he said, was attempting to “cull down acres and acres of brilliant talk.” He said that the companion book was easier to write since it allowed them to “go into greater depth.” Even so, he said, he hopes that his and Mr. Burns’s project is just the tip of the iceberg.

He also credited his co-writer’s brother, Ken Burns, with “reinvigorating the genre.” Mr. Burns’s PBS series on the Civil War was met with near universal praise when it debuted a few years ago. “I don’t think any of us could be doing what we’re doing without what Ken did.”

The Factory Fire

Mr. Sanders said that episodes such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the worst factory fire in the history of New York City and a seminal event in the history of unionized labor, hit close to home. His own grandmother had worked there before it burned to the ground.

New York’s turbulent history is not exactly new material for Mr. Sanders, who has worked on a number of related projects over the years, including exhibits on the architectural heritage of 42nd Street for both the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Municipal Art Society.

He is now working on another major public exhibit for the latter as well as for the Museum of the City of New York. He’s also putting the finishing touches on his book “Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies,” a look at the century-long relationship between the cinema and the city. The book will appear this time next year.