

Program Title: Paul Bowles: The Cage Door Is Always Open
Program Subject(s): Literature; Music; Gay and Lesbian;
Bowles, Paul, 1910-1999; Bowles, Jane, 1917-1973
Year Produced 2012
Directed by: Daniel Young
Produced by Valentin Greutert
Distributed by: HesseGreutert Film
Reviewed by: Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time: 93 minutes
Color or B&W: Color
Awards Received: Best Documentary, Torino International Gay & Lesbian Film
Festival, 2013
Audience Level: College – General Adult
Review:

Late in *Paul Bowles: The Cage Door Is Always Open*, the titular expatriate writer and composer talks to an interviewer about the difference between travel and tourism: “Travel is real,” he says. “You may get bogged down in a place for years, or the rest of your life. You’re not on your way anywhere, and you don’t have any home to go to when you’re finished. So you keep going.”

Bowles knew whereof he spoke. Born and raised in New York, he spent less than twelve years in the United States after the age of nineteen. He first moved to Paris, where he wrote poetry and kept company with Gertrude Stein. (He also trained her standard poodle, though he disliked the dog.) He traveled around North Africa with Stein and Aaron Copland, who taught him music composition. He returned to New York for a decade, where he composed music for theatre productions, reviewed world music and jazz for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and married his wife, Jane. He settled more or less permanently in Tangier, Morocco in 1947, where he remained until his death in 1999. In the interim he continued to write music, poetry, short stories, novels, and travelogues. He recorded traditional Moroccan musicians for the Library of Congress and translated Moroccan stories and other literature into English. His great artistic achievement came with the publication of the novel *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949, a *New York Times* bestseller that brought Tangier to tantalizing life for a generation of young Americans, including William S. Burroughs and the Beat writers who idolized him. (Burroughs wrote much of what would become *Naked Lunch* during his years in Tangier.) He had an unusual relationship with his wife; the two lived on separate floors in the same apartment building, each taking same-sex lovers. (One critic notes that Bowles lived an “international gay lifestyle,” although he never came out as gay and wrote that he considered sex with men or women “repulsive.”) Bowles consented to occasional interviews throughout his long life, provided his interviewers were willing to make the trek to Morocco.

Daniel Young was one of those interviewers, filming his conversations with Bowles in the year before the author’s death. Propped up in bed and obviously ailing, Bowles does not make for a great interview subject, so Young keeps these segments to a minimum; in the interview pieces Young chooses to show, however, Bowles is candid and un sentimental about his life and work. “Those things you wanted to say,” asks Young,

“do you feel like you said them?” “No,” Bowles replies, adding, “but slowly it came not to matter.”

The Cage Door Is Always Open traces Bowles' story more or less chronologically from birth to death, using voiceover narration, interviews, and photos and film of the author, his wife, their social circle, and the Moroccan landscape so important to him. Interviewees include Gore Vidal (who visited Bowles in Tangier and who wrote the introduction to a collection of his short stories in 1979,) John Waters (a fan of Jane Bowles' novel, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943),) Bernardo Bertolucci (who directed the 1990 adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), starring Debra Winger and John Malkovich,) and various writers, critics, friends, and acquaintances. (One of the more amusing sequences involves an interview with Gore Vidal, who denounces the Beats as “lazy” and “hicks.” Fortunately, Young has the good instincts to show that same interview segment to beat poet Ira Cohen, and to film Cohen's reaction.) Another highlight is the clever paper-cutout animated sequences which Young uses to illustrate the history of Tangier, the connections among Bowles' social circle, and, late in his life, his paranoid obsession with black magic. Much of the film is also scored with Bowles' own compositions for piano or his recordings of North African tribal musicians.

The film's only minor stumble occurs when recounting Jane Bowles' declining health following a stroke, which, in a weird fit of paranoia, her husband took to be evidence of black magic, or poisoning, or both. Young combines a heavy-handed montage with excerpts from the film adaptation of *Naked Lunch* (to which director David Cronenberg added Paul and Jane Bowles as characters and the black magic/poisoning incident as a subplot.) By mixing straightforward interviews and narration with these invented film sequences, Young creates a segment that seems to be trying to make something confusing and mysterious out of what was, most likely, a straightforward illness. Overall, however, Young weaves an engaging story that makes a convincing case for Paul Bowles' importance to literature and culture.

Reviewer Rating Recommended