The Boy Who Stole the Show

...And the filmmaker's heart

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Documentaries are a notoriously subjective genre, and Beverly Peterson delights in blurring the already unfine line between filmmaker and subject. Since leaving the restaurant industry to attend classes at New York University Film School in 1990, Peterson has been making movies that ask big, existential questions. Her first film, *Defining Life*, was inspired by her father's struggle after a stroke left him paralyzed on one side of his body and able to speak only the nonword bah. "My main question for people is, 'How do you keep going? How do you survive?'" the award-winning filmmaker says. "I got interested in documentaries because I can actually put a camera on people and ask them."

In her most recent film, *The André Show*, she did more than that: She actually put the camera in the hands of her subject -- an 8-year-old HIV positive boy named André -- and let him tell his story. As a result, the documentary is a total collaboration between Peterson and André, who literally steals the show. "When I first met André, he immediately grabbed my camera," Peterson recalls. "He was fascinated by it and wandered off with it. His mom was afraid he'd break it."

The camera stayed in one piece, but the story behind *The André Show* may break your heart: In 1993, at a Long Island shelter, Peterson started making video letters for mothers with AIDS to leave to their children. One mother's story became the basis for Peterson's documentary *Sandra's Web: A Mother's Diary*, which aired on HBO. But it was Velma, another mother in the video, and her son André with whom Peterson became unforgettably engaged. Peterson played with the boy on visits to the shelter and eventually invited him home for weekends. As Velma grew sicker, she asked Peterson to consider adopting her son.

After Velma's death in 1995, Peterson and her husband, Farrell, did adopt André. When Peterson asked if he'd like to tell his story in a documentary that could help other HIV positive children, André qualified his yes. "He wanted his story told. But not until he passed away," Peterson says. "He was very proud that there was going to be a tape going around with him in it." Peterson and André filmed their family life mostly with a home-movie-grade camera. While André's health steadily declined, Peterson stayed vigilant about not exploiting him. "The camera was never primary," she says. "I wanted him to be able to live. I didn't want him to be this dog-and-pony show."

After André died at age 11 in February 1996, Peterson labored to complete her documentary. *The*

André Show first aired in July on New York City's PBS affiliate in the *Reel New York* series. While the experience of watching André's life and death may be wrenching for some, it is cathartic for Peterson. "I can deal with death. I'm not uncomfortable with it," she says. "People get pissed off at me. But I think you cheat things somehow if you get lost in the pain. If I had looked at Sandra every time and said, 'Oh my God, she's dying!' I would have been thinking about me and my pain, rather than just hanging out with her. And the same thing with André. It would just be too painful."

While mulling over the options for her next documentary, Peterson remains fascinated by others who have had brushes with death. "A little boy with AIDS recently asked me, 'How come you like hanging out with kids with AIDS?' He thought I was weird," Peterson laughs. "They're different from other kids, though. They are facing different things. They are very much like adults. I enjoy what I have to offer them, but I also enjoy what they have to offer me. It's not unselfish."

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