

# The New York Times

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November 5, 2008

## Rockaways On Film: Salty Tales And Salt Air

By [ANNE BARNARD](#)



He counts French cinema and [Arthur Miller](#) among his influences, but his muses are the stoic and street-toughened men of the Rockaway Peninsula: a grizzled taxi dispatcher, a lonely sidewalk keyboard player, a young aspiring boxer who died with a bullet in his stomach after scuffling with police.

[Robert Sarnoff](#) was as surprised as anyone when the [Queens International Film Festival](#) — yes, there is one, opening its sixth annual series at a hotel near La Guardia Airport on Thursday — chose him as a [featured filmmaker](#).

Mr. Sarnoff, 70, has had several careers, as a public school art teacher, as a political cartoonist for [The Rockaway Wave](#), and as a painter inspired by the windswept beaches of the Rockaways, where he moved after growing up in Brooklyn — “almost,” as he puts it, “like a lemming to the sea.”

Over the past four years he has turned to film to portray the many worlds of the peninsula: the shabby beauty of a faded resort, enclaves of Tudor houses like his own, housing projects and working-class neighborhoods, and a single room occupancy hotel where he set “No Rooms Lobby,” a day in the life of a mysterious man who lives alone in a bare room and survives on odd jobs.

That 19-minute film won Best Docudrama at the Bare Bones Film Festival in Oklahoma, which tickled the director for two reasons. First, it is entirely fictional, though the character, a poor working man on the edge of society, was inspired by his experiences teaching art in a homeless shelter. Second, Mr. Sarnoff said, “It cost, you know, nothing.”

How much is that? “Under \$1,000,” he said.

Mr. Sarnoff’s entire film oeuvre is shot in the Rockaways, within a few miles of his home.

“There’s an artistic part of me that sees it as beautiful — even, in some sense, ugliness,” he said. “I don’t think of myself as a scribe, but there must be a compulsion that wants me to capture and reveal some truths, some essences. I’m intrigued by the layers, that underneath there’s always more.”

One film, “Irish Ropes,” documents a boxing gym where, until it was shut down for a zoning violation, an Irish coach taught local Rockaway boys to fight. One of the boxers, Rasheem Parrish, warns on camera, “The streets ain’t going to lead but two places, the penitentiary or the cemetery.” Not long after, a report crackles over 1010 WINS that he is dead after a struggle with the police.

“Dispatch” opens with the view through a taxi windshield at night, raindrops refracting the stoplights until the wipers slash them away, then gathering again. It portrays the ordeals of the dispatchers and drivers of the Belle-Rock car service: the boredom, the occasional intensity, the bad tipping, the anxiety of picking up drunks and maybe worse.

Playing with genre, Mr. Sarnoff mixes real-life scenes and documentary-style interviews with re-enactments that are hard to tell apart until they become a bit too wacky to be true — but only slightly.

A woman in a tam-o’-shanter and leopard-print gloves lugs a cat carrier into the cab and immediately starts discoursing to the

camera about feline anal glands. Is this real? No, but the next passenger — a nervous middle-aged man who demands that the camera be turned off but is surreptitiously filmed as he asks the cab to wait at a bank and proceeds to rob it — sort of is.

The scene re-enacts a true story: Belle-Rock once helped catch a would-be robber who tried to use a cab as a getaway car. He was foiled, company legend holds, when a dispatcher warned the driver — in their native Russian — that his passenger had just robbed the bank.

The other day, Mr. Sarnoff gave a tour of his cinematic world, starting with Belle-Rock's tiny kiosk on Beach Channel Drive.

Jim Urban, a dispatcher with previous careers as an accountant and a cabdriver, chain-smoked Parliaments, just as he does in the film. He was unsurprised that his job was worthy of cinema.

"It's not an ordinary job at all," he said. "The phone's always ringing, and nine out of 10 calls is a problem. Some people, you ask where they're going and they say, 'I don't know.' You don't know? Why'd you call us?"

The kiosk faces the mammography clinic where Mr. Sarnoff found an amateur musician to make the reggae-inflected soundtrack, not the magnificent view of Jamaica Bay and the Manhattan skyline just off the parking lot.

Nearby, on Beach 116th Street, the stars of "No Rooms Lobby" sat in front of the Baxter Hotel, the \$150-a-week S.R.O., reading magazines.

The owner, John Baxter, 71, played a tenant in the hotel, living hand to mouth with no bank account or identity papers. Shawn Reeder, a tenant who works as the super, played the super. (In the film he ordered his real-life boss to mop the floor, ad-libbing that it smelled "like a slaughterhouse.")

Their sidewalk, too, is a character in one haunting, random montage: A hungry-looking keyboardist sings a rendition of "Sunday Morning Coming Down," even more mournful than [Johnny Cash's](#), while scruffy street denizens walk by and a restaurant employee accidentally drops raw chicken on the pavement and scoops it back up.

"We all live in this little community, and we don't know what's going on until someone like Bob puts it out," Mr. Baxter said. "He's waking people up."

Next, Mr. Sarnoff walked down to the beach. The sea was iron-gray, with a bright line of gold along the horizon, under a dark cloud moving from New York Harbor toward Sandy Hook. On the Boardwalk, a wiry man in wraparound sunglasses talked emphatically to himself.

"Beautiful hand gestures," Mr. Sarnoff observed, always looking for his next subject. "I would just do an [Andy Warhol](#) — just turn on the camera," he said. "Call it 'Dialogue.'"