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Author(s)	David Sterritt
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[Belfast, Maine]

Penetrating 'Belfast, Maine' gets inside a small town

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BYLINE: David Sterritt, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Nobody knows what a new **Frederick Wiseman** documentary will be like until it's finished - including the real-life people who appear in it.

Criminal-justice workers who saw themselves in his "Juvenile Court" must have been pleased with the conscientiously professional image they conveyed. By contrast, teachers who appeared in "High School" were distressed when critics found the movie a searing indictment of their methods. His first film - the devastating "Titicut Follies," which exposed the awful truth about a Massachusetts mental institution - outraged authorities enough to have it banned from exhibition for 25 years.

All of which points to the honesty, spontaneity, and free-thinking candor that have characterized Wiseman's career. He has completed 30 nonfiction films since 1967. While his work has been celebrated for its diversity, three ongoing factors have given it unity and consistency: interest in American society; curiosity about the relationships between institutions and individuals; and an abiding concern with the hopes and fears of ordinary people.

"Studying institutions is Wiseman's way of getting in touch with individuals," notes film programmer Kent Jones, a longtime admirer. "It allows him to listen more closely and be more aware of what's happening in their lives, rather than approaching them [directly] and imposing his own vision on them. Then, like a great novelist, he shapes his material into forms that can communicate [his discoveries] effectively."

The films also reflect Wiseman's importance as a pioneer of cinma-vrit, a type of documentary that avoids using narration to coach audiences on how they should think and feel about the material they're watching. Wiseman helped develop this approach in the 1960s, and made a unique contribution through his use of mosaic-like structures.

Wiseman has earned numerous honors over the years, and another is coming to him starting today: the first complete retrospective of his documentaries, presented by Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, which is also giving him a lifetime-achievement award this weekend. His latest film, "Belfast, Maine," begins the retrospective, organized by Jones.

Of all Wiseman's movies, none is more probing or intelligent than "Belfast, Maine," a four-hour-plus film that ranks with his greatest work. On its most obvious level, it's a portrait of a small New England city on the Atlantic coast, complete with eye-catching shots of fishermen on the swelling sea, homes nestled at the forest's edge, and some of the most sky-filling sunsets you ever saw.

On a deeper level, it's a study of "a community in flux," as Wiseman describes it. A notably scenic area with many poor residents, Belfast is making a complicated transition from blue-collar hinterland to service-economy center.

Still deeper below the surface, "Belfast, Maine" takes on meanings even more fascinating. To detect these, it's necessary to consider two major threads. One is a series of assembly-line scenes that show raw materials being processed by sophisticated machines and meticulous workers into packaged foods and other consumer goods. The other is a series of person-to-person scenes presenting heartfelt conversations between troubled individuals and others - social workers, health-care authorities, and the like - who sincerely want to help.

These two categories seem unrelated, but connections become apparent as the film proceeds. Wiseman has always been interested in systems and organizations that help people face daily challenges.

As many of his movies demonstrate, the best of these institutions are invaluable places where earnest, compassionate folks come together to support those less privileged than themselves. Yet people on both sides of this arrangement - those helping and those being helped - pay a price for their participation, since such interactions can only take place in bounded, structured circumstances where the full range of human possibility is limited by rules and conventions. Our physical and psychological well-being may benefit, but our deepest selves may suffer from being squeezed into socially approved molds - symbolized by Wiseman's shots of the "processing" that living plants and animals go through when smoothly running factories get hold of them.

This idea is crystallized late in the movie when we visit a Belfast high-school teacher, who sounds like French philosopher Michel Foucault as he articulately lectures his students on Herman Melville's pessimistic attitude toward social and cultural organizations. A similar message is conveyed when we visit a church at the end of the film. It's a wonderful church with a loving pastor who obviously cares about every member of her congregation. Yet the church is far from crowded - younger folks seem especially unenthusiastic about the place - and the people listening to the sermon don't seem much livelier than the stones in the "Our Town"-type cemetery just outside the door.

At these moments, both strands of Wiseman's filmmaking philosophy come to the fore. We see the Wiseman who untiringly seeks out admirable institutions (the school, the church) so he can celebrate their contributions. And we see the Wiseman who finds institutions falling sadly short of their aspirations when they fail to touch the deepest needs of the people they want to serve.

Interweaving these threads with a glowing artistry that suggests compassionate ideas without ever manipulating his audience, Wiseman reaches the peak of his powers in "Belfast, Maine," a modestly titled masterpiece that deserves to be seen by the widest possible audience.