
May the Best Man Win

Portraying “Great Men” and the Drama of Living History

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Being George: The Real-life Drama in the Contest to Re-enact Washington Crossing the Delaware. Nyier Abdou and Adya Beasley, Writers and Directors; Bumper Dejesus, Producer; Steve Liebman and Seth Siditsky, Co-Producers. Produced by NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, 2013. 38 minutes.

Being Napoleon. Jesse Handsher and Olivier Roland, Writers and Producers. Bywater Films, 2018. 88 minutes.

Being George follows the five men auditioning to portray George Washington in the 2013 annual Christmas Day reenactment of the crossing of the Delaware River. *Being Napoleon* tells the story of two men competing to portray Napoleon at the two-hundredth anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Waterloo in 2015. Both documentaries give audiences a look at the inner workings of historical reenactments through portrayals of prominent military figures and the trappings surrounding the events in which they feature.¹

To tell the stories of the selection processes, both films focus on their respective “great men,” following the presentation model many re-enactors claim their work disrupts, an ironic twist on what living history and reenactment means for those portraying soldiers, artificers, and camp followers in military contexts. Ultimately, the films present means of commemorating the past rather than telling history and provide a background view at what *Being George* calls the “cutthroat world of reenactment.” Both are enlightening.

Being George depicts the ritualistic and performative aspect of living history, in which annual events follow scripts written decades ago, to present familiar stories drawn primarily from founding myths. In full disclosure, I participated in these kinds of events for several years, traipsing to battlefields to sleep on straw in canvas tents, cook over a fire, and engage the public on the arcana of the American War for Independence. Recently, I have sought increasingly obscure events that focus

¹ *Being George* is currently available at <https://vimeo.com/81225382>, and *Being Napoleon* is currently available on Netflix.

on ever-smaller details and use ever-growing stacks of research, and the close reading of primary sources and material culture. To me, an event like the annual Christmas Day crossing embodies everything troubling about reenactment: women serving in the ranks; machine-sewn clothes fitted with modern ease; facial hair, modern glasses, and the singing of sea shanties by land-lubbing middle-aged infantry. *Being George* provides glimpses of all those deficiencies, along with a large helping of ego on the part of some contestants. Sam Davis, along with John Godzieba (the incumbent George), Patrick Jordan, and two other men, display their self-described expensive uniforms and describe years of preparation for the role.

For most reenactors featured in *Being George*, reenacting has been a life-long hobby; for Jordan and another, their interest began in 1976, when, as adolescents, they were captivated by the Bicentennial celebrations. More recent hobbyist Sam Davis spends less time describing researched attempts to inhabit the eighteenth century and more time touting his five-year attempt to “become” George Washington, and his confidence that the role will be his. Because the film focuses on the competition, we get a better sense of the contestants’ egos than we do of their research process and personal adaptations to, and desire for, the role of George. In only thirty-eight minutes, we cannot expect more. The whole of human craving for status is laid bare, for what is ultimately an anti-climax: high waters on the Delaware mean there will be no Christmas Crossing in 2013, and the winning George can only float past the assembled crowd, a water-borne tableau. In the end, we get a sense of the competition, and develop sympathy for some of the losers (Jordan, for example, displays none of the bitterness of Davis, and Jordan emerges unscathed by the process, if somewhat overlooked by the filmmakers). But the film closes without giving a real sense of why anyone would want to participate in what seems like a shallow ritual, in which the triumph is akin to being elected prom king.

The premise of *Being Napoleon* is similar: who will portray the emperor at the two-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo? A Belgian committee must decide between Marc Schneider, an American museum professional who works at Colonial Williamsburg, and Frank Samson, a French lawyer and historian. Unlike *Being George*, this partially crowd-funded film unfolds against the backdrop of the larger reenacting community, following French, British, and American reenactors as they prepare for the ultimate event. A group of French infantrymen train with a march through the French Alps. The portrayals of the ordinary men (and women—a *vivandière*, or a woman who helps supply troops while on campaign, appears) of the Napoleonic era provide insight into why people take up this sometimes grueling and always expensive hobby. These everyday men use the march—one calls it an “adventure challenge”—to more fully inhabit the lives of the men they portray, wearing re-created clothing and (sometimes) shoes, carrying replica equipment, and walking the same paths men walked nearly two-hundred years earlier.

They speak of “going through what [the men of Napoleon’s army] went through,” in an attempt to honor the dead, and to revive their memory. Most

pointedly, Martin Lancaster (Commanding Officer of the 9th Infantry) says that this kind of history allows reenactors to “touch the tiger” of the ephemeral past. Lancaster admits to hating history in school, the rote learning and the “questions that weren’t mine,” but finds that in reenacting, he can ask his own questions. Experiential history is what the reenactors in this film seek: history beyond the book and the story—history you can touch.

This context makes the competition between Schneider and Samson more interesting than the competition presented in *Being George*. For Schneider and Samson, it was not just a contest between two egos, but also a contest between two approaches to portraying Napoleon, both grounded in research. Schneider is arguably more artistic in his method-like attempt to embody Napoleon; Samson, on the other hand, takes the view that details matter—for example, he knows the proper color of the ribbons. Plus, he is French. Samson reminds me of the ways that some museum professionals miss the point of *Hamilton: An American Musical*. It’s not the content—it’s the interpretation. It’s the means, the media, and the method. For all the effort and research we put into exhibition labels, uniform recreations, or articles, none of that work will matter if we are not engaging in a way that’s relevant to our current audiences.

Ultimately, Samson wins: the Waterloo Committee discovers Schneider’s 2009 felony DUI, and he withdraws. Did the better man win? It depends on what you mean by better. Schneider was, to me, more convincing, despite Samson’s critique of his choice of medals. How we interpret history is as important as the history itself. Both films explore reenacting as a means of interpreting and presenting history, but *Being Napoleon* gets closer to explaining why living history matters to the people who do it: not just for the great men, but for the experience.

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