

# Who rules America?

The **American Ruling Class**, the world's first "dramatic documentary musical" satire, explores the sensitive topics of class, power and privilege in America. The film follows author Lewis Lapham and two Yale graduates as they make the rounds of Pentagon briefings, the World Economic Forum, philanthropic foundations, law firms, corporations, banks, and New York society dinners, as they ask, "Who rules America?" The impressive list of people who ponder this question include Robert B. Altman, James A. Baker, Bill Bradley, Walter Cronkite, Joseph S. Nye, William Howard Taft IV, and Kurt Vonnegut.

The film is the feature directorial debut for John Kirby who entrusted veteran Mark Benjamin with the film's look. Benjamin's recent cinematography credits include **Protocols of Zion** and **Going Home** for Cinemax, which he also produced and directed.

The challenge that faced these filmmakers from the start was determining how to successfully bring Kirby and producer Libby Handros' idea for a new genre to the big screen.

"Having worked on documentaries in one capacity or another for a long time, Libby and I were frankly bored with the format," says Kirby. "We wondered how we might invent it anew, at least for ourselves. What slowly emerged was the dramatic documentary musical."

"John always needed classic framing and never, ever, wanted us to fall into the current genre style of reality television," says Benjamin. "John knew what he wanted and I was his creative tool. I am used to having a lot of freedom with directors but on this shoot I was the loyal hand of the director. He directs in the

"The decision to go film was a natural for John," says Benjamin. "Film being the gold standard for capture, it was the only choice on the table for John. If tape is like Formica and film is like natural wood, John needed the textural real grain of wood. Keeping the frame tripod fluid and compositionally clean was a mantra on the shoot, and unusual for a documentary. We shot (Eastman EXR 50D) 7245, (Kodak VISION2 250D) 7205, and (VISION2 500T) 7218 films. All of these are great emulsions in Super 16."

As with most documentaries, location options were limited as well as the time they had with each interviewee, but there was some flexibility with the narrative portion. "The people we met included top government types to corporate titans, so getting it in the can pronto was

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important," says Benjamin. "The narrative documentary portions took on a much more controlled improv style with an interior monologue coming from the two main characters. This made for the hybrid trompe l'oeil on who was putting on who in a John Kirby narrative."

Benjamin says the movie is clearly avant-garde. "John was successful in doing a picture, which crossed over into new territory for a documentary," says

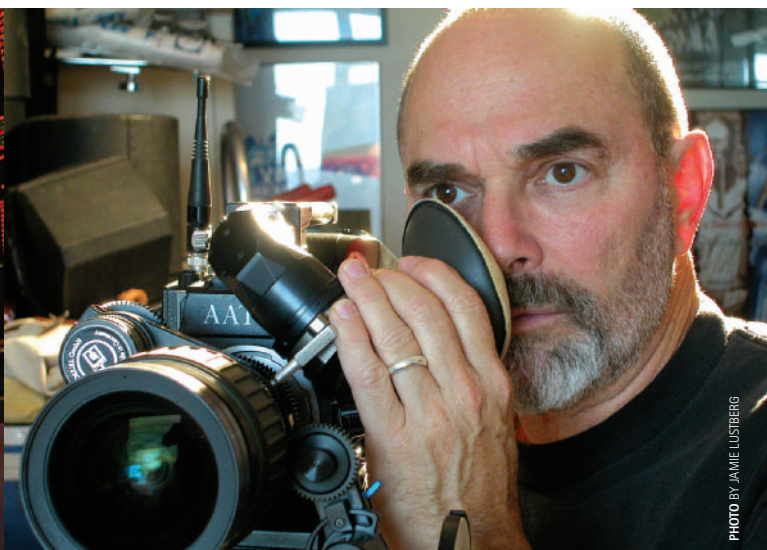


PHOTO BY JAMIE LUSTBERG

"John was actually my second camera assistant on Marc Levin's **Slam**, which won the Camera d'Or at Cannes and the grand jury prize at Sundance in 1998," explains Benjamin. "He was very good and made the 10-day shoot possible with his unending energy and intelligence. He has also done some wonderful editing on some HBO documentary films I shot."

Sidney Lumet style – 'put the lens here and at this millimeter!'"

The crew was very small, with Benjamin filling the role of gaffer as well. He used his own Aaton production package, and his lighting kit included an ARRI Pocket Par, Dedolights, and a 1K Chimera. Most of the documentary was shot in available light on Kodak films.

Benjamin. "When you have the strong editorial chops John has you are very clear in what you want and I hope I helped get that on film." ■

**Above left:** The opening of *The American Ruling Class* shot by DP Mark Benjamin (above).