

## Nashville Scene

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# Southern Belle: Old Times Here Are Not Forgotten

by RON WYNN

Filmmakers Kathy Conkwright and Mary Makley thought they had a dynamite subject when they were granted permission to spend a week filming at Columbia's 1861 Athenaeum Girls School. Terms like "throwback" and "retro" don't come close to describing the events that occur here, where young girls take lessons for a week in the traditions of the Old South.

But now, in the wake of national controversy over the celebration of "Confederate History Month" and ensuing arguments over whether these observations complement the historical record or gloss over past outrages, the world premiere of *Southern Belle* at 4:45 p.m. Saturday, April 17, at the 2010 Nashville Film Festival is certain to raise eyebrows. Without comment, the film depicts a tightly corseted world where nostalgia for Dixie reigns and slavery is quickly dispensed with.

Conkwright, who has won awards and acclaim for documentaries on subjects ranging from Deford Bailey to Rachel Jackson, says she and Makley wanted to take a traditional documentarian's posture in examining the 1861 Athenaeum Girls School.

"There's no question that when you're discussing or evaluating something as controversial and divisive as anything linked to the Civil War, you will stir passions and anger people no matter what you do," Conkwright says, fully aware that the film's non-judgmental stance will anger some viewers. "Certainly we recognize some of the key issues that this film raises, but we felt it was critical that we not impose our own views as filmmakers on the work."

During the shoot, Conkwright and Makley, a maker of documentaries for NPT, were given wide access to the school. They were allowed to ask and film virtually everything they desired, except for one meeting held before the final ceremony. The school takes only students ages 14 to 18, providing instruction in etiquette, penmanship, art, music, dance and social graces. The young men who accompany the girls to the climactic ball are members of the Jackson Cadets, who could be considered the male equivalent of the 1861 Athenaeum Girls.

Among the film's virtues is a superb soundtrack featuring evocative cuts from vintage recordings, an accomplishment that Conkwright credits to supervisor and principal composer Neilson Hubbard. "He really understood what we wanted to do with music, and how we wanted that to provide a contrasting and complementary voice to other things that were being presented," Conkwright says.

Above all, Conkwright says, she hopes people find *Southern Belle* both even-handed and thorough — while acknowledging the subject matter will make that difficult.

"Any topic that relates to or deals with the Civil War is so loaded that trying to present a complete picture inevitably will make you a target of one side or the other," Conkwright says. "I feel our film really tries to explore all the issues and do it in a manner that doesn't demonize anyone or isn't unfair, yet also shows all the problems and issues that come into play. We'll leave it to the audience to determine whether we accomplished our mission."

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