



Rhett Turner's "Water War"

BY H.M. CAULEY

Rhett Turner

Let's get this out of the way early: Rhett Turner says there is no doubt that having Ted as a dad has helped him become a documentary filmmaker.

"Sure, being the son of Ted Turner was very helpful," he says with a laugh. "He bought tons of documentaries we watched growing up. But there were other great advantages, too. In the early '80s, when Public Broadcasting dropped Jacques Cousteau, Dad picked him up and asked Jacques what he wanted to do. Jacques immediately said he wanted to go up the Amazon, and dad then turned to my brother and me and asked if we wanted to go on the Calypso with him. It was incredible. I can't say I wanted to be a documentary filmmaker because of that, but it was always a dream."

Turner now heads his own Atlanta-based company, Red Sky Productions, that gives him control over projects. He brings his expertise from years at CNN to the firm that produces documentary films.

"When I worked with CNN, I got the hook for being behind the camera," says Turner. "When we were in Jordan during the Gulf War, we'd work all day on a piece, edit it and then see it air moments afterward. It was very cool. My expertise is as a director of photography, but with documentary films, you end up doing everything."

Turner has a particular affinity for environmental subjects—another influence he traces back to his dad. "I've always wanted to be attached to things that are important," he says.

Along with Jonathan Wickham, Turner is currently working on a detailed documentary called "Water War" that traces the intricacies of the water feud between Georgia and its neighboring states. Wickham, who has been making documentaries for more than 25 years, started his own company, ZoeTV, 13 years ago after leaving a job at Turner Broadcasting. The two teamed up for the first time a few years ago to make "A Village for the Arts" about the High Museum expansion and its architect, Renzo Piano.

"We've been working together on projects for four or five years now, and the issue has been gnawing at us," says Turner. "No one has taken it on, but we've been on it for about two years now."

The experience has been highly enlightening, says Turner. "One of the most surprising things I've learned is that Georgia does not have any natural lakes. I find it fascinating that all the great lakes we have are man-made. How did they all get here and why—that's what the exploration in this film is about."

Work on the 60-minute "Water War" won't wrap until early next summer. In between shooting, Turner and Wickham

are raising the money to underwrite the project themselves, and recently won a grant from the Park Foundation to help with the costs.

Though "War" is a time-consuming project, Turner finds time to fit other jobs into his schedule. He's working on documentaries for the Carter Center, and in October went to Uganda to work on a film about river blindness and the Center's commitment to eradicating the disease.

When he's not off with his camera, Turner devotes his time to his family, wife Angela and 9-year-old son Alexander. "My son is a good fisherman," he says proudly. "I'm to expose him to as much as possible. We're great friends."

And speaking of dads, Turner makes another admission: His name is taken from the character Rhett Butler in "Gone with the Wind."

"It's a great movie, and Rhett Butler was awesome!" says Turner. "Everything he did was spot on—except for his parenting. He really messed up that one and paid the ultimate price for it. Even my dad says that. What really matters in life is being a good father."

For more information, visit www.waterwar.org.