

# Ferry Tales

*a film by Katja Esson*



*Academy Award Nominee  
for Best Documentary Short*



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

Women Make Movies • 462 Broadway, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor • New York, NY 10013  
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## Synopsis

Academy Award Nominee for Best Documentary Short in 2003, FERRY TALES exposes a secret world that exists in the powder room of the Staten Island Ferry--a place that brings together suburban moms and urban dwellers, white-collar and blue-collar, sisters and socialites. For 30 minutes every day, they gather around mirrors to put on their makeup – talking not as wives, mothers, or professionals, but just as themselves. Sassy and honest, they dish on everything from sex scandals to stilettos, family problems to September 11<sup>th</sup>, leaving stereotypes at the door and surprising viewers with their straight-shooting wisdom.

In broaching such topics as divorce, single motherhood and domestic violence, FERRY TALES goes beyond the surface to show us the realities of life for working women. A rare and honest look at the intersections of race and class, this heartwarming film is also a must have for women's studies, urban studies and sociology departments. Utterly charming and often outrageous, FERRY TALES gives these unlikely heroines their moment in the spotlight.

## Credits

2003 · 40 minutes · Video · Color

Director

**Katja Esson**

Producers

**Katja Esson, Sabine Schenk, Corinna Sager**

Editor

**Sabine Hoffman, Moira Demos**

Camera

**Martina Radwan**

Music

**Cassis**

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# Festivals & Awards

For the most updated list, please visit [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).

Academy Award Nomination- *Best Documentary Short Subject*

Tampere Film Festival

Harlem Film Festival

Wisconsin Film Festival

Florida Film Festival- *World Premiere*

Woodstock Film Festival *Honorable Mention*

Annapolis Film Festival- *Honorable Mention*

exground filmfest, Germany- *European Premiere*

Underdog Film Festival- *First Place*

Seattle International Film Festival

Palm Springs International Film Festival

Ashland Film Festival

Brooklyn International Film Festival

Sarasota Film Festival

New Orleans Film Festival

Durango Film Festival

Austin Film Festival

New England Film/Video Festival

Orinda Film Festival

Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival

Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival

Little Rock Film Festival

Adelaide International Film Festival

Puerto Rico Women's Film Festival

Frame by Frame Documentary Film Festival



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## Background/ The Women

**What would possess** a German-born filmmaker to venture into the mysterious beyond of the forgotten borough of New York City to create a documentary about a women's bathroom aboard a New York commuter vessel? In July of 2001, Katja Esson decided to create a sort of 'working-girl' documentary about the women who occupy the ladies bathroom on the ferry each and every morning. Coming up with a concept was simple enough, but trying to gain the confidence of these women and filming them in their element was quite another matter.

Then, just as production was getting underway, the tragic events of September 11 happened. At first, Katja felt she would have to scrap the project altogether. Instead, she kept filming. The resulting footage shows just how strong a sense of community exists between the many different women in the powder room.

**Rachel:**

*"I want people to know that I am a mother and a daughter, a wife and a career woman. These roles though polar to each other are no less important than the other. They are the sum parts of my past and their evolution will make up my future."*

**Liz:**

*"I am a fourth generation native New Yorker. My husband, Frank, and I have been married for ten years and adopted our two year old son, Peter, this past October from Odessa, Ukraine. I work at Lincoln Center for New York City Ballet."*

**Valerie:**

*"Here is my description of Valerie Octavia Cambell-Spady:  
I am a surviving battered woman, who has beat the odds of violent past. I am a woman of excitement and imagination. I am also a woman of inspiration and confidence. I think that sums me up briefly (smile).."*

**Justine:**

*"I am a single working mother of three beautiful children. I am assertive and determined. There is still a lot I need to accomplish in life."*

**Kamillah:**

*"Kamillah - because it means the perfect one: beautiful. Totally self absorbed, vain, drama-queen who can assess any situation and execute a workable game plan with ease. I command attention almost always and that can be draining on those who love me. However, a good heart and a great sense of humor seems to make it harder for people to actually hate me."*

**Irma:**

*"Ok what do I say about myself? Hmm? Me? Me? Me? All about ME! I'm 5 ' 6 1/2" -yes a 1/2" does make a difference ask any Designer! Blonde-Natural of course, Blue Eyes, Your typical "white" girl -NOT! Just ask any FERRY TALES' Lady. I'm told I am naturally funny without trying. I might be funny in a Jessica Simpson Kind of Way- But I am most definitely smart- come to think of it so is she. Ok, Ok, Happy, Outgoing, Positive, Creative, Croatian, Born in Chelsea, How did I ever become a Part of "FERRY TALES"?"*



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## Crew Bios

### **Katya Esson, Director/Producer**

Katya Esson is a German-born, New York-based writer/director who mixes documentary, narrative and experimental genres. The film was broadcast on PBS and on Europe's ARTE Channel. Esson began her career in Miami as a production assistant for the notorious rap group 2 Live Crew. She has directed a variety of award-winning documentaries, short films and commercials. Born and raised in Hamburg, she also works regularly for German television and, in 1997, she received a fellowship for her screenplay EL ALEMAN at Berlin's Master School, and her narrative short film SPEECH LESS won the Gold Award at Houston and the Special Jury Prize at Nancy, France.



Aside from FERRY TALES, Esson's additional credits include the documentaries MIAMI QUE LINDA ES CUBA (1994), SEARCHING FOR SENSE (2002), and ADAM, MADE TO ORDER SAVIOR (2003).

### **Martina Radwan, Camera**

Martina Radwan started in her native Germany in the film industry in 1987 as a Camera Technician at ARRI, Berlin. In 1988 she began to work in production as an Assistant Camera, where she worked with directors Wim Wenders and Albert Maysles.

In 1995 she moved to New York where she attended the film program at NYU. She broke into the industry as an AC for Lisa Rinzler and Wolfgang Held and started to work as 2nd Unit DP and operator for high-end productions, such as the award-winning PERSONAL VELOCITY. Later, she started to work as a Director of Photography. Since then she has shot numerous features, documentaries and shorts. Her films have been seen at festivals as well as on PBS and HBO.

### **Sabine Hoffman, Editor**

Sabine Hoffman is a Film Editor who edited Rebecca Miller's PERSONAL VELOCITY and she is currently completing Mrs. Miller's upcoming new feature film THE BALLAD OF JACK AND ROSE, starring Daniel Day Lewis and Catherine Keener.

Other credits include Morgan J. Freeman's DESERT BLUE and HURRICANE STREETS, which won several awards at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival, Alex Sichel's ALL OVER ME, THE DAY THE PONIES COME BACK by Jerry Schatzberg, THE PARTY IS OVER, starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman and HARLEM ARIA, directed by William Jennings and starring Damon Wayans and Gabriel Casseus.

### **Sabine Schenk, Producer**

Sabine Schenk is a Producer/Line Producer based in New York. She completed her M.A. in cinema studies from NYU. She was an event coordinator at the Berlin Int'l film Festival for three years. In 1997 she founded her own company, Schenk Productions, Inc., offering production services for local and international film and media projects in New York.

### **Corinna Sager, Producer**

Corinna Sager is President of Lifestyle International, a production agency for marketing events, trade shows, video and TV productions, serving a broad spectrum of clients worldwide. She has won US & Int'l Film Festival Awards for her PR video CONTAINER SHIPPING - A REVOLUTION FOR WORLD TRADE and her documentary WOMEN - OUR CENTURY which toured the U.S. with Billy Jean King and Star Jones. Sager was also an Executive Producer for "Vertical Traveler", seen on PBS and the Franco/German TV channel, Arte.



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# Los Angeles Times

September 14, 2004

## Women Find Power in Ferry's Powder Room

Since time immemorial, when two or more women have entered a public powder room together, men have grown anxious. Their worries about what women do in there range from reviling the male kind to fomenting revolution.

"We talk about sex most of the time," says one of the female "bathroom club" members in Katja Esson's 2003 Oscar-nominated short documentary "Ferry Tales," airing tonight on Cinemax.

Esson, a German filmmaker who lives in New York, has uncovered a private club of sorts of women who spend their half-hour ferry ride in the restroom, applying makeup and talking. They commute from their homes on Staten Island to work in Manhattan.

This floating boudoir is a scene of gossip, intrigue, drama, even a bit of psychodrama. It resembles nothing so much as a backstage, with private women preparing for the play that is their public life. Esson began filming in the ferry's women's restroom in 2001, ultimately shooting 60 hours of video over a 14-month period. She identified a core group of about 10 women--ranging from domestic abuse survivor Valerie Campbell to Elizabeth Ferris, who works in administration for the New York City Ballet -- and interviewed them at length on camera. The resulting 40-minute film is both entertaining and moving.

Sociologists would call the Staten Island ferry's women's restroom a subculture; psychologists might label it an encounter group; feminists, perhaps, a (powder) room of their own. All of those descriptions would be accurate. "The women's bathroom is a phenomenon," says one woman. "You have no idea the scope of what goes on in there."

What seems at first to be superficial interaction--jockeying for seats near the mirror, swapping makeup tips, otiose squabbling--soon is revealed as something far more meaningful for the regulars, most of them working mothers. Secrets are shared, from a husband's infidelity to molestation as a child to parenting problems. The women's concerns transcend differences in race and class--"I consider the powder room the great equalizer," one says.

For a time, it's revealed, the wife and mistress of the same man shared the ferry bathroom space every morning, which created a division of loyalty among the women. At another point in the film, we learn that one woman came to the ferry bathroom even though she was bleeding profusely after an abortion. When another woman asked why she was there, she replied, "I just wanted to see somebody I could connect with."

"It's a break from whatever they left before they came in here and whatever they have to face when they leave," another regular says. "And it might be the break that keeps them going."

Just as production on "Ferry Tales" began, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. At first, Esson thought she might have to scrap the project. Instead, she decided to keep shooting after 9/11. The result is a tangent almost as jarring as the day itself, as the women relate their experiences on that day. But Esson manages to skirt pathos as she ties their 9/11 stories into the culture of the powder room, with the women explaining how they were brought even closer. After 9/11, the group "became more family in a way," said one.

In the end, the film is a celebration of women's resilience, especially when they've got a network of female friends to catch them when they tumble. "Twenty minutes -- that's all chicks need to get it together," one ferry sage concludes.

-Samantha Bona



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# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2004

## Sisterhood in a Floating Powder Room

An Oscar-Nominated Documentary Captures Life Aboard the Staten Island Ferry

By NANCY RAMSEY



Photographs by Stephen Hagen

A secret sorority: top, mirrored reflections of Elizabeth Ferris, left, and next to her, Irma Sindjic, with curlers. Above, Valerie Campbell, left, is interviewed while sitting next to Katja Esson.

Katja Esson, a German filmmaker who lives in New York, began lurking about the ladies' room on the 8:15 Staten Island ferry to Manhattan in the summer of 2001. Call it location scouting or character casting.

"I thought I was being very subtle and smart," recalled Ms. Esson, whose 40-minute film, "Ferry Tales," was nominated for an Academy Award last month. "I'd ride the ferry, and the women wouldn't notice me."

Not a chance. A handful of women who rode the 8:15 into Manhattan and assembled in the ferry's powder room shared a tight bond and cast a wary eye on outsiders. Leaving behind their roles as wives and mothers for jobs in accounting, advertising, fund-raising, fashion and social work, they fixed their hair and put on makeup, all the while talking about anything and everything: sex, race, husbands, difficult bosses, rebellious teenage children. If you could not deal with it, then that was your problem, and maybe you just did not belong in that aqua-and-white room with the fluorescent lights and the double mirrors.

That summer Valerie Campbell, a member of the group who always speaks her mind, recalled noticing this "white woman who had these dreadlocks, and this little camera with her." (Ms. Esson had first visited the ladies' room on a tip from a friend who had starred in a music video filmed aboard the ferry.) She said that whenever Ms. Esson left the room, the women seated on stools before the mirror would whisper: "Who is that weird woman? What do you think she wants?"

And even after Ms. Esson whispered to Ms. Campbell that she would like to make a documentary about the women of the ladies' room, and Ms. Campbell spun around on her stool, shrieking, "I'm going to be a star," they still were not sure what that woman wanted.

Nor was Ms. Esson sure what she would find. "Women came in with curlers, they'd paint their toenails,

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New York Times, February 12, 2004  
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## Sisterhood in a Floating Powder Room: Capturing Life Aboard the Staten Island Ferry

Continued From First Arts Page

shave their legs," she said. "The transformation was incredible. At first I was thinking, 'Cinderella.' Working Girl, women starting at the skyline of Manhattan and making themselves up to be somebody. But I found out there was so much more to that room."

The film's women, Elizabeth Ferris and her friends, are the subject of a state-of-suspended-animation. It's out of the context of everybody's lives. People can be more honest. You're not talking to your next-door neighbor who knows your husband and kids, or your mother's friend.

"On the ferry, I'm not Mrs. I'm not Mommy, I'm not Mrs. Hank's Will

You Bring Me That Report?" said Kamillah Hank, a member of four who works in public relations.

Last week Ms. Ferris and Ms. Hank were aboard the 8:15, and the big news in the powder room was not only the Academy Award nomination ("Go all the way," cried out one vendor) but Ms. Ferris's newly adopted son from Ukraine.

Not all of the six principals of "Ferry Tales" fit the 8:15 every day, but here they were about for a while. Ms. Ferris (about a new mascara for \$3 on GMA-belling), complaining about a dandruff in the shower for 20 minutes, checking out pictures of 2-year-old Peter from Ukraine.

"I've seen Liz struggling with the prod, and coos of adopting for two years," said Rachel Francis, who

### Six women on their way to work have a brush with fame.

has three children and works as a therapist in a foster care agency.

Ms. Esmon, 38, has worked on music videos and on serious documentaries for German television. She shot 90 hours of video over a 14-month period and weeded out the moments when her subjects performed for the camera, talked in clichés about struggling careers and families, spoke off-the-guff in ways that would hurt themselves or their families or the

other women. "Ferry Tales" set largely aboard a boat, hopes to establish an individual voice.

It is one of three films nominated for the Oscar for best short documentary. The others are "Chemistry Heart," about the effects of radiation on children who lived near the site of the 1985 nuclear accident, and "Asylum," about a Ghanaian woman escaping an arranged marriage and genital cutting and seeking asylum in the United States.

If the women talk openly in the ladies' room, they reveal themselves even more on camera. Ms. Campbell says that when she fell in a bathroom stall, she ended up in a bathroom from Studebaker moves from talking about how she thought she would be

the next Donna Karen ("then reality struck"), to talking about having been molested by an uncle when she was young. Ms. Campbell recalls the morning a woman came in who had just had an abortion and was bleeding profusely. Asked why she was on the boat, she said, "I just wanted to see somebody I could connect with."

Toward the end the women talk sparingly and movingly about being aboard the ferry on Sept. 11, 2001, about seeing the second plane hit the south tower of the World Trade Center about the exact time that she can't remember. ("I don't know if I have 20 minutes or 20 years.")

After Sept. 11 "one woman told me that there was so much emphasis on police and firemen, what about the

secretaries, the people who just went to work that day?" Ms. Esmon said. "You gave us a voice, she told me."

The film, not currently in theaters, is to be broadcast on HBO this year or next. Could it be a series? "We think it has enormous potential, and we would love to make that happen," said John Hoffman, HBO's supervising producer on "Ferry Tales." But there is no deal yet.

An Academy Award nomination is not what the women on the film wanted. The women from entered "Ferry Tales" in 2001. But when they stop to think about it, maybe it should not be that much of a surprise.

"We all knew we had something special here," Ms. Sindic said, "and it was only a matter of time before someone figured it out."





# New Indy Film Exposes the Secrets of the S.I. Ferry Powder Room

By Joe Maniscalco

Men never see it, but there are remarkable transformations happening almost every day aboard the Staten Island Ferry.

Inside the women's powder room, a hidden world exists for only the short time it takes the commuter vessel to reach lower Manhattan each morning.

It's a temporal place where the working women of the borough rush to throw off their old household personas and put on fresh cosmopolitan faces.

It's also the place where they share their sorrows and joys. And tell their secrets.

"I think there was a fistfight in there the other day," filmmaker Katja Esson says. "The police had to come in and break it up."

Esson's new documentary called *Ferry Tales* takes an intimate look at the often catty sub-culture where self-professed "divas" rule the powder room like their own temporary kingdoms.

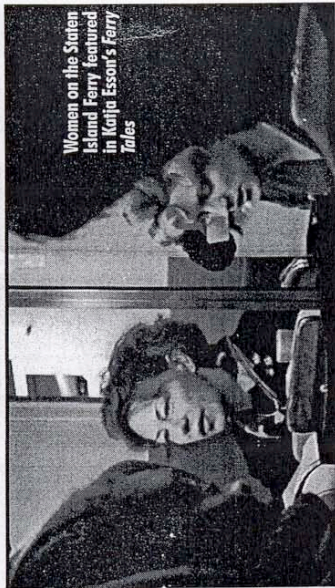
"They pour hot coffee on each other," Esson says. "There was one fight where one woman pulled the wig off of another woman."

The film premiered last week at the Cinema Village Theater, located at 22 East 12th Street. It is expected to be shown at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center sometime in November.

"It's a lounge kind of thing right before the area of the stalls. There are counters and mirrors, and only eight chairs," Esson says. "It's a big deal who gets the chairs. There are rules. It's amazing. There's a whole etiquette in that room."

It wasn't the kind of place that would easily welcome the 36-year-old camera-ready German into its good graces. Esson had to work at it.

"I have been in this country for 15 years, and in New York for eight," Esson says. "I still feel like a tourist here and I see certain



Women on the Staten Island Ferry featured in Katja Esson's *Ferry Tales*

things in a different way. Last year I did a documentary on vertical travel in New York on elevators where everybody thought I was nuts. Somebody just mentioned this ladies' room on the ferry. It just stuck with me and then I went one morning. I just poked my head in, and then I spent the next month trying to get in there, trying to be invisible."

It took Esson that long to build up a strong enough rapport with the powder room regulars before she felt confident about showing up with a camera. Overall, Esson spent over a year-and-a-half shooting the women.

"I had to make friends with them," Esson says. "That was a big deal to get the camera in there. But then I got the main divas on my side. They were like, 'Oh, yeah! We want to be stars.'"

For Esson, being in the powder room allowed her to chronicle social interactions

between women that could occur virtually nowhere else in the city.

"It was so amazing to see the mix," Esson says. "Old, young, rich, really rich, really poor, black, white, Latin, Asian, every thin, This is the only place where these women socialize. They don't meet outside. But they share their deepest secrets in that room."

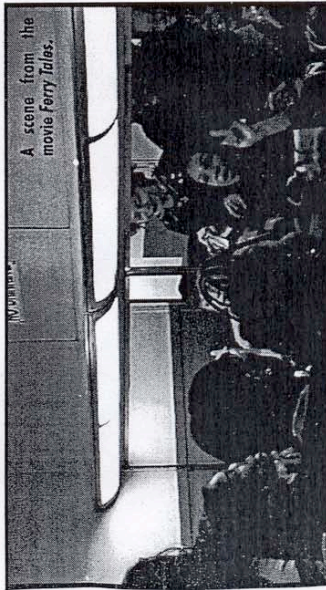
Sometimes the secrets weren't revealed; they were shattered.

"There was a huge scandal," Esson says. "There was a woman on the boat that was married. One day, this girl came in and she showed a picture around of her new boyfriend."

The couple had just returned from a cox vacation together.

Says Esson, "The picture went from hand to hand, and when it came to that or woman, she said, 'That's my husband.' An

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A scene from the movie *Ferry Tales*.

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and vitality of New York itself.

"When they talk about their September 11 experience, they were saying that the ferry

landed and they saw the first tower on fire and the cinders were hitting their face and they were like, 'Wow, big fire, but I have to go to work.' You know, nothing stops New Yorkers. We've just got to go on.



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

STATEN ISLAND  
**REGISTER**

OCTOBER 15, 2002

# 'Ferry tales' reveals secrets of floating powder rooms

By BILL FRANZ

What really goes on in the women's rooms of the Staten Island Ferry during the morning rush hour?

More than you might think. Katja Esson, an independent film writer and director, has produced a documentary about the subject that is the talk of the New York film community.

"In order to earn a living, 70,000 people travel on the Staten Island Ferry each day," said Esson. "Out of the necessity to commute to earn a living, our story, or tale, was born. As we put on our makeup, we are transformed from housewives to businesswomen, from mothers to lawyers, sisters to socialites. Each day hundreds of working women of Staten Island 'prepare' themselves in the

Women's Powder Room."

The 40-minute film covers more than just powder room chit-chat. It delves in candid terms into the lives of some of the women who crowd into the seagoing lounge.

"These women, Black, White, rich, poor, educated, just getting by, have formed a society and share a closeness unlike anything anyone has ever seen," said the filmmaker. There is a former battered, homeless woman who has raised herself up to a successful career; a divorced Brooklyn woman just getting back into circulation; a Staten Island mother of four who has no other place to express some of what is going on in her life; a young woman who was abused as a child.

The secrets come out as these women put on makeup, share jokes and exchange thoughts. At one

point, they stop a woman, a stranger, from abusing her child in one of the stalls.

The film plays in real time, beginning as an ordinary ride and ending with the women's descriptions of September 11 — the first plane in the World Trade Center attack flew right over them — how they felt and what they did when they landed on that fateful day in the smoke of wounded Manhattan.

"The film is a sneak peek into a culture that only happens 30 minutes a day in our secret place... a place where no men are allowed," said Esson.

The producers of the film are planning a premiere on Staten Island, which will be announced when the arrangements have been made. Excerpts from it were scheduled to be shown last week on NY1 News and Channel 76.



Director Katja Esson is interviewed about her new film about women on the Staten Island Ferry.



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