An Interview with Abigail Disney

By the Films for the Feminist Classroom Editorial Collective

Abigail Disney is a filmmaker and philanthropist. Her first film, a feature-length documentary called *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, won the 2008 Tribeca Best Documentary award. She is also co-Founder and co-President of the Daphne Foundation, a progressive, social change foundation. She received her Bachelors degree from Yale University, her Masters degree from Stanford University, and her Doctorate from Columbia University.

This interview took place at Rutgers University on February 24, 2009, and was conducted by members of the Films for the Feminist Classroom editorial collective: Deanna Utroske, Julie Ann Salthouse, Ariella Rotramel, and Karen Alexander.

Utroske: Would you briefly describe *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*?

Disney: *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is a seventy-two minute feature documentary that I made as a producer. I'm the originating producer. My director is Gini Reticker, who is the Academy Award–nominated director of a short called *Asylum*, which is a film about female genital mutilation in Ghana, along with films about women's issues in Rwanda, in Morocco, and elsewhere. It tells the story of a group of women in Liberia who, after a long series of civil disruptions and civil war, have really reached the end of their rope. They started organizing, first as Christian women within the church and then realizing that they needed to form a broader coalition with Muslim women through the mosques. And they worked out their differences, which they had. They had a certain amount of suspicion of each other. They started strategizing about how to bring this civil war to a close. They started by pressuring the president at the time, Charles Taylor, who was a notorious dictator, to meet with them. He refused and refused, so they took to the field that was along the main road on his way to work.

They all wore white T-shirts, which was very important. It took class out of the way that they were organizing. They stripped themselves of hairstyles and makeup and everything. It also permitted some of the more prominent women to sort of hide in plain sight. One of the women, Asatu Bah Kenneth, was number
two in the police department, and nobody knew she was out there protesting with them because she didn’t have her usual hair and makeup and clothing on. About two thousand women started gathering on a regular basis every day, sun, rain, no matter what, carrying signs, singing, praying together. They started a sex strike where they urged women not to have sex with their husbands and to tell their husbands, as one of the women in the film says, “By commission or omission, you're not doing enough. Go figure it out.”

Finally, after a long period, Taylor agreed to the meeting with them. It’s pretty terrifying. He’s a really terrifying man. He could be looking you straight in the eye and then have you killed the next day. He was that kind of guy. Rumors were he was eating his victims, and who knows what’s true, but anyway people were terrified of him. This isn’t in the film, but when Leymah Gbowee, the leader of the women, showed up to meet with him on the scheduled time, the guard says, “You can’t meet with us unless you bring twenty-five women.” She says, “Okay, I’ll be right back.” She then shows up with twenty-five hundred women. We have footage of that meeting, which is a pretty big deal. And he agrees at this meeting to go to the peace talks that the international community has brokered. It’s the first he’s agreed to these meetings.

The women go to Sierra Leone. They persuade the rebels to do the same thing, and then what they do that’s really remarkable is they follow everybody to the peace talks in Ghana, and they surround the building there. They organize the Liberian refugee women in Ghana, and they’re all in white and they’re praying and they’re singing and they’re fasting. The peace talks were supposed to go on for two weeks and they lasted for over six weeks. While they were there, the conflict re-erupted back in Monrovia, and it was really brutal.

One day, a particularly horrible bombing was reported on the news and the women became so frustrated with the way the men were using the peace talks for personal gain, rendering them useless, that they became completely exasperated. Literally in a spontaneous gesture, Leymah got all the women to surround the building and lock arms. She sent a note inside saying “We’re taking you all hostage on behalf of the women of Liberia.” All hell broke out in the peace room, the negotiating room. The men were climbing out windows to get away from the women. I love that. They sent security to arrest Leymah, and when security came to arrest her, she says in the film, ‘They came to arrest me, and they said ‘We’re arresting you for obstructing justice,’” and she said, “If they’d said anything else, I don’t think I would have freaked out like that, but ‘obstructing justice’?” She said, “It was like gas on a flame. I flipped out and I just started to strip my clothes off.” In Africa, I mean we have to face it, anywhere this is the case: If Dick Cheney’s mother started to strip her clothes off, we would freak out too. The men were freaking out. Security refused to arrest them. It’s classic; Mahatma Gandhi talks about this. This is the classic version of nonviolent organizing.

Now the women have all the power, so the mediator has to come out and negotiate with them. They give them a two-week deadline, and two weeks later, the peace agreement is signed. The women go back to Liberia, and they’re incredibly pivotal to the disarmament process. They were incredibly important to
the reconciliation process with the kids who fought, and then when the election
that had been set up by the peace talks took place the following year, they
organized, they got out the vote, they registered women, they taught women how
to vote, and Liberia elected the first woman head of state in African history. It’s
an incredible story.

I’m going straight to the second question, which is how did I become
involved in it. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was interesting to me because she’d been
elected, this is an overstatement but, the first woman head of state in Africa since
Cleopatra. That’s not entirely true, but nevertheless, it’s something to think about,
and I know from my experience with women that this doesn’t come from
nowhere. There had to be some groundwork laid for that to have happened. So I
was interested in the story, and I was asked by a friend, Swanee Hunt, who ran
the Women and Public Policy Program at the Kennedy School at Harvard, to
come with her, just literally in the spirit of seeing if there was anything we could
do to support Ellen’s presidency. Her entire national budget was thirty-three
million dollars. Imagine that—we pay that on parking meters in New York City. So
we went there to see how we could be supportive, and as a side effect of being
there, I heard the story of the women’s involvement in the peace process. I heard
it repeated by people, and I was so struck by how it was not anything I’d ever
heard had happened before. It was so historic, it was so epic, it was so
courageous. No one knew it, and what was worse was it was clearly on its way to
being forgotten. It was totally oral, it wasn’t written anywhere. The women were
telling it among themselves, but all I could think was, “As a feminist who cares
about history and literature, I know about the process of erasure. I understand
that process intellectually, and yet here I am standing here looking at it, and I
didn’t realize until the end of the week here that that was what I was looking at.
This is what it looks like.” I came home with this feeling, like it was possible in the
case of this one thing to pull it back from the edge, to say, “In this one case, we
choose to prevent this erasure from occurring, and beyond that to lift up the
example of these women and show the world what they’d done.”

Utroske: Even though initial research suggested that little footage of the Liberian
peace demonstrations was available, you chose to share this story via film. Talk
about why documentary film was the right medium to present the story of these
women, and what makes film uniquely suited to present and encourage social
change.

Disney: That’s a good question. Documentary because it’s cheaper than feature.
Film because film reaches into your heart and your guts in a way other things just
don’t. We didn’t understand at the time we started how much we would have to
rely on archival footage, so that didn’t daunt us at the beginning, and we didn’t
really understand until we were way into it and it was too hard to stop, just how
hard it was going to be to find the archival footage. In fact, the central pivotal
moment, when Leymah threatens to strip naked, was footage we couldn’t find
until maybe the last three months, the ending 10 percent of the editing process,
so it felt like this hole that we were editing around in this mythical story. It was
like our Moby Dick. We couldn’t find it! What we have in the film, you’ll see, isn’t really very much of that particular day. It was on a video tape from a VHS tape recorder that was holding up a window that was open in the offices in the Ghana office of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, the parent organization, and I mean that in the most patriarchal sense I can. No one really understood what was on the videotape. Most of it had been damaged by rain, so what we used is the only useable part of that whole videotape.

The meeting with Taylor that took place, I’ve had journalists say to me, “Oh they didn’t really meet,” “Oh, they’re overstating it.” None of the journalists were there for that meeting. There were twenty-five hundred women in white walking to the presidential mansion! There’s part of it that’s not in the film about how they wanted them to sit on chairs and the women refused to sit on chairs because their sisters in refugee camps didn’t have chairs to sit on and they were going to sit on the ground like their sisters. They described it to us in great detail, and yet there were people already dismissing to us the idea that it had ever happened. Women work in informal networks: a friend of a friend said, “I hear you’re looking for this. I think you should try this guy.” It turns out, and we wouldn’t have found this if we hadn’t been physically in Monrovia either, he had been the presidential videographer since 1978. He had been there for the original coup, the assassination of everybody in the ministries; he had been there for everything. He’d been there for mortar attacks on the presidential palace, and he was downsized out of his job by Johnson Sirleaf because when women come in, they’re practical and they cut costs, and he’d gone home with all the copies of everything he’d ever recorded. He had everything in boxes spread around in safe houses because he understood how inflammatory it was; it was dangerous to have, and he had everything.

If we hadn’t found that footage, we would never have been able to insert that episode into the film, and that episode would have been discredited. It would be thought of as women overstating their accomplishments and so forth. When you see this very bad footage—it’s terrible, all the archival footage is terrible!—when you see that camera pan across, you see just how many women knowingly were taking their lives into their hands by coming and confronting Charles Taylor. Taylor had said “If my own mother protests, I will kill her,” and there they were. It’s an astounding moment.

One of the things I love the best about getting that footage of the women was that Leymah had described that episode to us in incredible detail and she had inserted all these details that I didn’t understand the importance of. She talks about how she stands at the lectern, they set up this very formal meeting. She talks about how the lectern was facing the women, and she wasn’t there to address the women; she was there to address Taylor. And she tries to turn the lectern but she can’t because it’s too heavy, and so she just turns around and faces away from the women and talks to Taylor. Everything about the footage that we finally got verified every detail, even the irrelevant ones. It was very nice, actually, to know that we were working with witnesses who were so reliable.

I’m glad we didn’t know what we were getting into because I don’t know if we would have gone there if we had! But it really is important that it’s
documentary first. I mean, we’re talking about a feature film potentially, and that would be ... . Feature films are bigger but they’re smaller in a lot of ways. Narratively, they really have to be very contained. Documentary gives you the capacity to address much larger issues and a lot of context, because you expect exposition in a documentary that gets laborious and obnoxious in a feature film. Documentary was important because we needed to situate these women regionally and geographically and in terms of conflict as it normally plays out in women’s lives. And also, you really need to see that this woman really did stand there and look Charles Taylor in the face. That’s not just some director overstating it. This is really what happened and that’s the actual footage, so I think that it was the best way to make sure this story got elevated to the status it deserved.

_Utroske:_ Do you consider _Pray the Devil Back to Hell_ a feminist film? Why or why not?

_Disney:_ Yes, yes, yes! And you could even capitalize that. It’s feminist from a lot of perspectives, in terms of both form and content. The women, in terms of the way they organize, are feminist—and African women are very ambivalent about the word feminist. They’re not so sure about it for a lot of reasons that aren’t unfair. A lot of them feel left out of what American women have done in terms of feminism. They don’t understand our perspective and our emphasis on some issues at the expense of other issues. But the women who organized there, regardless of how they wanted to describe themselves, did it totally and completely as feminists. They were collaborative organizers. They were consensus-based planners. They understood the importance of—and every feminist organization I’ve ever known has done this—the long, obnoxious, boring, stupid process of working out your differences before you get to the picket line or do that whatever else you’re doing so that you can’t be divided off from each other or you don’t feel the need to circle back and question the decision that you made earlier. The way that they organized really is classic feminist organizing, and as I was saying to Karen, it’s also kind of a primer on organizing in general, nonviolent organizing. They really do go through stages. After I made the film, I read a Gandhi quote that says “First they ignore you, then they make fun of you, then they try to hurt you, and then they pay attention to you.” That describes the film right there. It’s that predictable, and there are that many predictable stages, so, yes: feminist in terms of content, but also in terms of form.

I self-financed the film because I didn’t want to be beholden to somebody who wanted us to drag it back to something that made everybody more comfortable. The people who make films are made comfortable by different things than regular people are made comfortable by, because they’re gambling a lot of money and reputation and so forth. So I was willing to go out on a limb on one issue in particular, which was the issue of a narrator. It’s a little bit hell on earth to try and do interviews, get archival footage, and then piece together a coherent narrative without a narrator. That’s incredibly difficult. It was a huge editorial challenge, and we spent most of our money in the editing room. There
were moments where we considered narrators, but I was absolutely militant against it because these women have seen themselves spoken for in so many ways and so many times, and often not in a way that reflects who they really are and what they're really about. In screening it in Africa, I’ve had African women come to me crying, saying “Thank you for not having a narrator in there,” whereas in America, most people actually don’t realize that there’s no narrator. African women have done the feminist analysis of the nature of a narrator and they are sick of being presented as women with flies in their eyes, lying by the side of the road while—and God love her, she means well and everything—Angelina Jolie speaks for them. They were incredibly appreciative of the opportunity to be unmediated themselves for an audience. So in terms of form, we really went out of our way.

I think the way Gini and I approached the nature of a partnership also was with the best feminist values. Producers and directors very often are a little adversarial in the film world because producers are in charge of making sure we don’t spend too much money and we have to sometimes make hard choices. HD is expensive but it looks really nice, and directors are very predictable: of course they want this, and of course they want that! On top of it I had a lot more creative opinions than producers are usually allowed to have by their directors. I spent a lot of time in the editing room. I was there most of the time. Most directors would be threatened by that. So Gini and I had very frank conversations at the beginning. This is not like the Muslim and the Christian women working it out, because we were anticipating that there might be problems and tensions, so we decided on a way to handle disagreements. And there were disagreements. Some of them I won and some of them I lost. We came out of it more than willing to, and in fact in the process of, working together on another project, which says a great deal, because producers and directors often find themselves not ever working together again. So yes, that’s a triple answer to the question of whether I consider Pray the Devil Back to Hell a feminist film.

Utroske: We see film as a viable complement to print texts in the classroom. Talk about your role as the facilitator of textual production and how you envision Pray the Devil Back to Hell being used as a teaching tool in and beyond the classroom.

Disney: I’ve had experience with it as a teaching tool already. It was very important to me that this wasn’t a film about Africa, this is a film about women organizing, and that women around the world would recognize themselves in it—they wouldn’t see a race barrier, a religion barrier. The first place I took it was to Srebeniza in Bosnia, where the women had endured a horrible massacre and had come home and were living among Serbs. It’s a very intense situation. The screening went like this: “Why did you bring this? We’re so upset!” There was anger, there was a post-traumatic reaction, and then there was one woman who raised her hand and said “I'm kind of glad, because I haven’t really forced myself to stop and look at this and reflect a little bit.” And then someone else said, “Yes, I can’t believe how much that was like my experience. I saw her and I recognized
her and this was so-and-so”—they started matching a person in their lives to a person in the film who played a role, and they started realizing how similar the roles are. Then they moved from matching up to: “What are we going to do today? The mayor of Srebreniza isn’t giving us enough bread. How are we going to ...” and it becomes a very practical thing. Women have the reputation of being overly emotional, but I find them to be incredibly pragmatic. They’re just not afraid to get through the emotional part to the pragmatic part. They’re not necessarily going to tiptoe around it. At the beginning I really felt badly because of the way the women had felt so traumatized by just viewing it. It’s not an easy film to watch if you’ve been through combat. But I felt encouraged by this identifying. So I’ve since taken it to Ramallah, Jerusalem, Peru, we showed it to indigenous women from all over North and South America, Ghana, Khartoum—we had an incredible screening in Khartoum—and every screening has gone almost exactly the same way. It’s a very interesting thing.

Film is an interesting thing for a classroom because it’s linear. It takes a certain amount of time, and classes take a certain amount of time, and generally not more than an hour. You have a seventy-two-minute film, there’s no opportunity for discussion, so there’s a practical thing that has to be brought into consideration there. But I think there’s a way to get past that; I think that’s pretty straightforward. I think it brings (it’s almost mundane to say) an immediacy, an emotional reference point for the intellectual content you will never get in a book. The one thing can’t exist without the other. And very often in the classroom we spend so much time on intellectualizing things and frameworks that we lose our contact with the emotional content. What was feminist about the way these women organized and made themselves effective at the peace talks was reasserting how appropriate an emotional and moral dimension was in a peace talk. The political class and the people who normally do this consider it to be unsophisticated, overly emotional, kind of childish, not really relevant, all of that stuff, so that even opposite parties make a tacit agreement to shed the emotional and moral dimensions of the issue before they walk into the room. The women stayed outside the peace talks in Ghana and continued to insist on the importance of that dimension, so that when they penetrated the room, they entered it whole and intact with the entirety of that moral and emotional dimension—that’s what’s so important about it, that’s what film brings to a classroom in an analogous way. Let’s restore the emotional and moral dimension to the classroom because in fact it does belong there, and it’s a long patriarchal history of the idea of education that’s led us to believe that it doesn’t.

Utroske: Assuming that the quality of the viewer’s experience informs their sense of what is socially possible, how might you suggest an instructor enhance the inspiring message of Pray the Devil Back to Hell? Or what screening situations have seemed most conducive to audience engagement?

Disney: The first half of that is really important, and this is the effect of the film that I wasn’t expecting. When we showed the film at the Tribeca film festival, I had people come up to me who said “I just got out of rehab,” or “I’m a social
worker,” or “I came from a violent family.” It was interesting that what the Bosnian 
women were locating in there, this disruption, this horrible emotional trauma that 
they were latching onto and then seeing transformed into not just getting past it, 
but in fact that becoming a root of something very powerful. They were relating to 
that on some kind of intuitive level. So I think that it is possible, without it 
devolving into therapy, to use the film to locate what all of us carry with us in one 
way or another, the parts of ourselves that have experienced some form of 
victimization or some form of trauma, or have witnessed it to somebody else, and 
to go back and find the aspects of that experience that make you a better 
organizer, make you a more effective communicator. It’s so ironic that I’ve spent 
all these decades away from my family and my name and the whole thing, then I 
end up making a Disney movie right out of the box. But it’s a Disney movie in a 
certain kind of way that I’m not ashamed of in my family history, which is going 
through the hardest part (like famously they killed Old Yeller) and then earning 
your way to the happy ending. Documentaries never end in a happy way. There’s 
never a satisfying ending, but this one is a pretty satisfying ending. I don’t think 
any of us is fooled into thinking things are just fine, but it feels like they moved 
the world and they got it to somewhere.

I think that a lot of people who come and see the film, men and women, 
have a tendency to personalize it in a way that really surprised and incredibly 
pleased me. We have found in showing the film that in high school classrooms 
and college classrooms, people really embrace this film, boys and girls, and feel 
a certain relief at finding somebody that they can genuinely use the word “hero” 
for. So I think that there’s all sorts of possibility there. We talk a lot; the high 
school boys, in both classrooms that we’ve shown it in, raised the question of 
“Where are the good men? There are no good men in this.” That’s really 
important. Feminist classrooms have to include men, and they have to make sure 
that men are made to understand what their part is if we have a vision of a better 
place. I certainly want to include them, and I tell them, “If you go back and look at 
it, there are men who are carrying out the dead, there’s a man who is carrying his 
grandmother, and there’s General Abu Bakr, who acts as mediator and the 
women’s ally.” There are good men in this film, so I tell them to ask, “Why didn’t I 
notice them? Why were they invisible to me? And what does this tell us if we go 
back to the question of masculinity and imagining agency and power and the 
people who matter and have authority in society and what do we know about 
that?” The fact that there was so little footage of men demonstrating has 
everything to do with what it is a journalist is motivated, either economically or 
personally, to think is important and valuable and marketable in an economic 
sense. There’s a lot to tap into in a classroom in terms of making this very 
relevant to the lives of privileged middle-class kids living in the developed world.

Utroske: How was the film received by Liberians, both those celebrated in the 
film and others who have viewed it? Talk about how the film has affected 
peacebuilding efforts in and around Liberia. And how do you see the election of 
Liberia’s president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in relationship to the story you told in 
Pray the Devil Back to Hell?
Disney: We’ve only shown the film once so far in Liberia, to a relatively small audience. I didn’t want to take the film back to Liberia until Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had seen it. There are people who are currently in her government who are featured in it, and not in a flattering way. Not all the women get along with each other, and I wanted not to make a film that in any way undermined her political authority and capacity to get her job done. So once she’d seen it—and her reaction was enormously positive and she really wanted us to take it back there—I took it back to Liberia. But I’ve been holding it back until I could get it back there in a way that I thought really strengthened the hand not only of President Johnson Sirleaf, but also the feminist movement in Liberia. We’re going back next week, March 9th, the day after International Women’s Day, and we’re going to be showing it as part of the International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, which President Johnson Sirleaf has called. Mary Robinson and President Tarja Halonen of Finland and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany … there are going to be women political leaders from all over the world. I have since the beginning dreamed of bringing my own red carpet and a photographer, and making sure the Liberian women activists are applauded by the people with stature who normally get applauded themselves. And that’s what we’re going to do. We’re bringing a box full of plaques and we’re going to hand everybody a plaque. I would love to tell you it’s all peaches and cream, but we also know that oppressed groups organizing are sometimes territorial and not always kind to each other, and you know the ceiling is low and the stakes are high. The fighting gets brutal at times. There’s been some trashing of this one and that one and unfortunately the film hasn’t helped in that way. Because there aren’t a lot of films in Liberia and there’s not a lot of sophistication about media and narrative and those kinds of things, it’s impossible to explain to people that I could not tell the story of twenty-five hundred women. It would be the most boring thing on earth. We needed six individual people to carry the weight of the narrative, and even six was too many and it was hard to manage. And at the end of the day, it was going to turn into a show about Leymah, the leader. It was bound to. And the footage is irrefutable. There she is. But unfortunately some aspects of the effect the film has had have been disappointingly counterproductive.

Rotramel: I think it’s really important to be honest about that.

Disney: Yes, I think you have to tell it.

Utroske: Can you provide a brief overview of your work with the Daphne Foundation?

Disney: The Daphne Foundation is a part of my activism. When my kids were younger and I wanted not to travel too much because I wanted to be with them, I decided to spend some time learning about philanthropy and how it worked and why and so forth. I happen to live in the city that’s kind of the capital of
philanthropy, so that doesn’t hurt. The Daphne Foundation makes grants to community-based organizations in New York City. What it does is a reflection of my value system and my husband’s about respecting the authority and the talents of the people who are in the groups that you’re trying to help and not asserting solutions for them top down. Listening for solutions to bubble up: that’s the ethic of how we do things. It represents maybe about a third of my total philanthropy, so I do a lot of work on my own over and above that. I also serve on a lot of boards of NGOs in the country. I’ve gotten more and more interested in women’s political leadership, which is why I got to Liberia to start with.

The film is really a very logical extension of everything that I was doing. I was in Liberia because I was interested in women’s leadership and I was interested in women’s leadership because I was interested in women’s power and taking their rightful place, but also in changing the political paradigms that have gotten us to this situation that we’re in. And one of the primary barriers to women succeeding in leadership and/or arriving at more leadership is media. Media is not helping both by being passive on the subject and also by being actively counterproductive, and it’s so powerful when it’s actively counterproductive, and the corollary to that is that it can be so powerful when it’s good. So with the film, once I’d heard the story, I was able because of years of activism and philanthropy to understand where it fit in the context of what women have been doing globally around organizing. I knew this was one of many stories, and so when I started the film, I saw it as an opportunity to take one episode in what I knew was a long-running story with many, many other episodes to talk about that, and take the one episode that was really synecdoche, everything was in this one episode, and drill really deep into it and show you who the individual people were and what were the organization dynamics and how did it play out and how did people tend to react to it and so forth. But I really have wanted to take a step back and also say, “Well, Liberia is chapter one, actually chapter twenty-seven, and there’s a much larger story and let’s talk about why this matters globally.” So it is totally about me being an evangelist of women’s leadership and wanting to help women be more effective at it by giving them media support and also spreading the word to potential allies of the importance of what they do.

Utroske: How have you been effectively encouraged and supported in your activism in general and in your work on Pray the Devil Back to Hell in particular?

Disney: My kids think I’m really cool now [laughter] so that’s kind of good. You know, at first it was kind of interesting. We said something to someone who’s actually a somewhat well-known human rights activist about making this film, and he said, “I was there at those peace talks. Why would you make a film about those women? They were so pathetic!” It’s been frustrating in places, because I worry and I think sometimes I internalize the analysis that these things are not as important and this is just a side issue, and it’s just a bunch of women … . You know, we all absorb those things to a certain extent, and I’ve had to fight some of that. I think some of the negative feedback we got at the beginning when we
started sending the film out to film festivals arose from the fact that it was about women and it was about Africa and it was not a story people believed. So we were turned down at Berlin, at Full Frame, at South by Southwest, and Hot Docs, at Sundance—everybody turned us down for six months until Tribeca said yes. And then once we got past the gatekeepers, the film was totally embraced. That’s when everything changed. On the last screening, I’ll never forget, going into the theater to do a Q&A at the end, and out come walking three security guards from the Tribeca Film Festival. Men. Big off-duty police officers, and they’re crying! And I said, “You guys were crying?” And they said “Are you kidding? This film is everybody who works at the Tribeca Film Festival’s favorite film. We haven’t been able to get anybody to sell popcorn because everybody wants to go and see the film.” Gatekeepers are hard, because there’s a disincentive to risk. Failure is punished greater than success if you’re a gatekeeper, so I understand why it was hard for them to step up. Once we got past them, it was nothing but encouragement, because then it became okay for people to say, “This is great!” I think to a certain extent, in the overly intellectual and rarefied circles of the film community, if it’s not negative it’s not serious. If you’re not feeling like you want to die of depression, then it didn’t really take on a political issue. So I’m happy and feeling empowered by the fact that we very much took a political issue on and we, I think, had more effect by showing power and ability rather than by naming, shaming, and blaming.

Utroske: Pray the Devil Back to Hell portrays successful women’s organizing efforts. You’ve spoken about the universal capacity of women to organize and the making of Pray the Devil Back to Hell as an extension of your own activism. Speak about how this film and film in general might be uniquely suited to convey and encourage women’s activism.

Disney: Film is interesting because as a medium it’s collaborative in the way it’s produced, but it’s incredibly directive in the way that it gets responded to, in the way we traditionally distribute it theatrically. And that’s why a semi-theatrical distribution is interesting to me as a feminist model. Economically it’s more feminist because there’s less capital intensiveness at the front side. It’s more sharing of profit at the back side. And it creates more intimacy in the viewing experience. So we’ll see how this pans out, the semi-theatrical release. We’re encouraging people to have community screenings. They’re sort of self-financed community screenings, so if they do their work, bottom line it’s relatively free to the NGO, but it promotes discussion and dialogue. It’s not like “I paid my $10, I saw the film, then I walked out and had dinner with my friend and talked about it one on one.” It’s more like “We came, we paid $2, we talked about it with the other thirty people who were there.” I think that it’s all about the context and how you decide to do it. But again, film goes to the heart the way very few other media can. It merges your heart and your mind the way a dream does. I think that film affects people the way it does because of the way it’s so like a dream. I experience dreams in a lot the same way—you know, that feeling of immersion and being in a flow and losing consciousness of time and physical space and so
forth, these are all things that are qualities of dreams, so I think that films reach a little further and a little deeper into us than other media do. And as a result, I think they have enormous capacity to influence. And up till now, they've had a relatively negative capacity for the most part. Not exclusively. But there's all this potential for positive.

**Alexander:** I have one final question: Where does the title come from?

**Disney:** You know, we really struggled with being two white American middle-class girls making a film about Africa with the word “devil” in the title. Because there'd been a whole group of films about Africa with the word “devil” in the title. We just didn't want to do it again! But the truth was the devil was loose in Liberia, and that's no joke. The leader of the women says at one point, really cynically, “All the men, even the worst warlords, were going to church, going to mosque every week. And they were all up on their high horses.” At one point in the film, you see Taylor say, “If God didn't want me here, I'm not here because I wanted to be here. Because the only person who could protect me over these last five years is Jehovah God Almighty.” It's amazing that a lightning bolt does not kill him right on the spot. So Leymah says, “Charles Taylor was so religious he could pray the devil out of hell,” which is beautiful. She has a great way with words; it's such a beautiful line because he was a con man. He probably could pray the devil out of hell, you know? And so that came to us; we had been struggling with titles. It's the classic feminist struggle with titles, too, because you can't use the word “women,” you can't really use the word “peace,” I mean, all the values that you have, you can't put those in the title because all the regular people are scared of your values, even if they share them. It was that classic struggle of “How will we find a title that just tells them enough, gets their attention without being a barrier?” It was Gini's, my director's idea. Great title.