



# Local Soprano Turns Producer/Actress

## Bibbs produces documentary on civil rights activist, Mary Ellen Pleasant

"We stand on the shoulders of those who come before us. Those who come before us make us what we are", says Susheel Bibbs, recalling the old Yoruba (Nigerian) proverb. It is because Bibbs believes it is true, that she has spent the last several years researching an African American woman, Mary Ellen Pleasant. Bibbs, a classical singer from the Bay Area, by profession, started this project "when Jacqui Hairston asked me to perform the role of Pleasant in an opera".

Bibbs told Hairston she wanted to learn more about Pleasant first. Now, many years later, "infinitely richer for the experience, I am completing a documentary on San Francisco's African-American activist-pioneer, Mary Ellen Pleasant". Bibbs wrote, produced and performs in the film and Ruby Dee narrates. It has been selected for three screenings at film festivals: New York, Los Angeles, and Berkeley, CA. It is projected for distribution this fall to Public Television stations.

Bibbs has a background in television including producing for Public Radio (NPR) and Public Television (PBS). She holds a masters in Vedic philosophy and culture and a Ph.D. in Communications giving her the technical and research techniques for this project

"I dislike seeing inspiring work lost or omitted from history, especially if it relates to my people", says Bibbs. "I have developed a view of Pleasant (and her mentor Marie La-Veau), her work, motives, and actions-that differs from what has been told. I want to free her contributions from the fiction that has enshrouded them,



Susheel Bibbs

because hers is a life that can inspire others."

Bibbs elaborates, "despite her courageous deeds, by the late 1880s Pleasant and everything about her had become enshrouded in myth and obscured by legend due to reports by her enemies in the press and the legends that grew up around her life. It remained that way throughout the 20th century. Only recently have researchers been able to sort fiction from fact. Historians were too con-founded to include her in most of their books, describing her as an enigma."

Bibbs continues "So I had to sort fact from fiction surrounding her life. I found letters and

sive venue: television. Pleasant was daring and contributed greatly to the lives of 19th century African Americans and their freedom. Her great court case of 1867 helped change modern civil-rights law. She deserves to be a part of our history!"

Bibbs received help from The California Council for the Humanities, which sponsored many of her enactments of Pleasant and gave her funds for the script. She received a grant from the National Park Service under their Net work to Freedom Program, and the African American Museum and Library at Oakland gave her a large sum to produce the TV show.

✓ Bibbs has spent the last 6 years on this project and proudly announces the local screening in Berkeley on October 7, 3:35pm at the California Theatre, corner of Kittredge and Shattuck in Shattuck Square. Tickets can be obtained at [berkeleyvideofilmfest.org](http://berkeleyvideofilmfest.org) or the short version of the film is available to educators through [www.meplesant.com](http://www.meplesant.com).

10-8-07

→ Review: The Post Newspapers, SF  
Preview - 2004

10th Annual Berkeley Video And Film Festival Awards

# Best Film: "Meet Mary Ellen Pleasant"

## The Rosa Parks of the 19th Century and Mother of California Civil Rights History

By Barbara Fluhrer

This year The Berkeley Video and Film Festival (BVFF) gave a BEST OF FESTIVAL PEACE REEL MEDALLION AWARD for Best Documentaries to "Meet Mary Pleasant" played and produced by Susheel Bibbs. **41:28**

Bibbs' 40 minute preview of the film tells the story of the Mother of the Civil Rights in California, showing the impact of her work in a unique documentary. Her Underground Railroad story started with her enslavement in the South. After being involved in slave



Susheel Bibbs

rescues in Ohio, Pleasant came to California in the 1850s. Her life here was impacted by the

California Supreme Court decision regarding denied access to a North Beach trolley in San Francisco. Attorney David Oppenheimer of San Francisco said, "To my mind, Mary Pleasant was the Rosa Parks of the 19th century."

Bibbs portrays Pleasant; Ruby Dee narrates. One leaves the experience realizing how many African American heroes' stories lay dormant in the dust. Bibbs' commitment, and she says, "tenacity", must be commended for the extensive research and documentation.

Continued on page 10



Mary Ellen Pleasant

# \* "Meet Mary Ellen Pleasant"

Continued from page 1

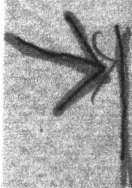
which recreated this historical figure. Pleasant never forsook her avowed commitment to "help my people". Bibbs had to work against stereotypes and distorted truths to bring out and carefully document the life with facts and personal testimonies.

"To my mind, Mary Pleasant was the Rosa Parks of the 19th century."

Bibbs, as actress (as well as historian), communicated effectively the passion and strength of Pleasant as she demonstrated what African

Americans were endeavoring to do in the mid-to-late 19th century. Bibbs sang the favorite songs of Pleasant throughout the film and they were rendered beautifully, setting the mood of the scenes.

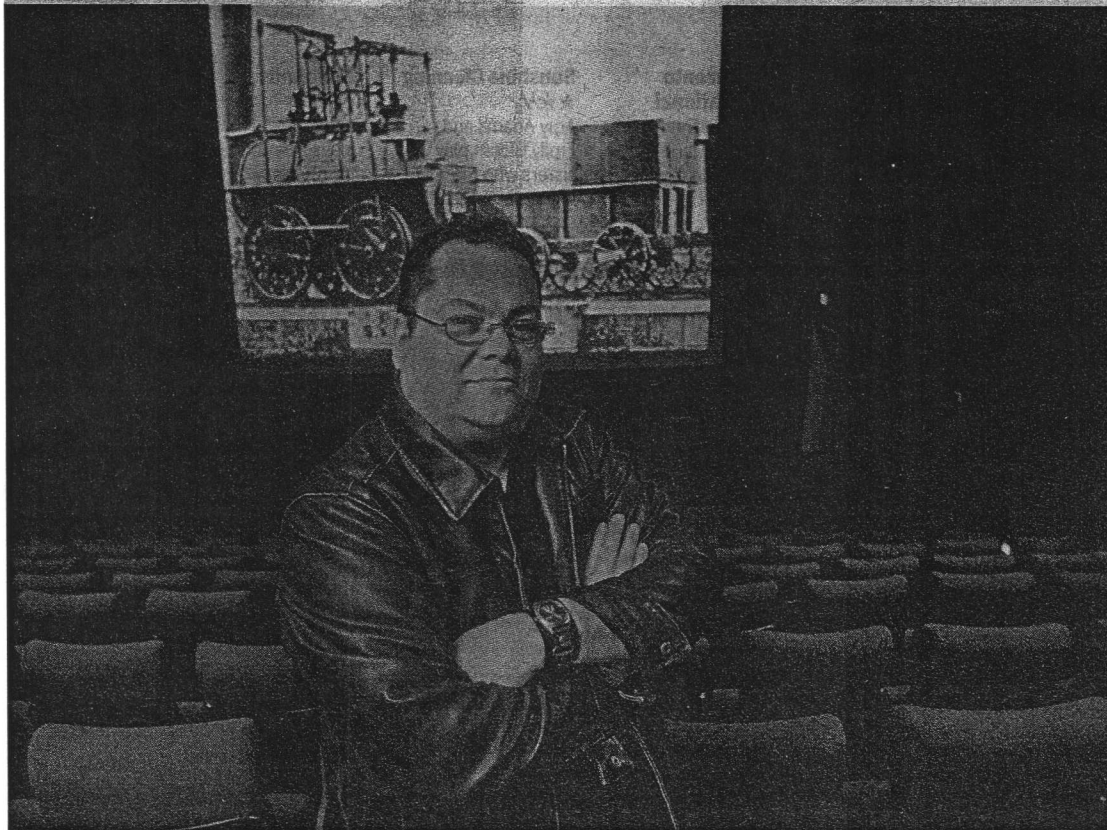
This film\*  
won  
Best in show:  
Peace-Reel  
Medallion.  
It was a  
preview for  
the final  
feature



# MOVIE EVENT

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MOVIE GUIDE  
PULL OUT SECTION



Martin Anaya, director of the Sacramento International Film Festival, is pictured in the theater of the California State Railroad Museum, where the "California History Day" program will be presented Sunday.

LEZLIE STERLING [lsterling@sacbee.com](mailto:lsterling@sacbee.com)

## SACRAMENTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

WHEN: Saturday-April 5

WHERE: Artisan Theater, 1901 Del Paso Blvd.; California State Railroad Museum, 111 I St.; 24th Street Theatre, 2991 24th St.; and on the Delta King, 1000 Front St. (for awards night only, April 5)

TICKETS: \$10 per show or \$150 for an all-festival pass

SCHEDULES AND INFORMATION:

[www.sacramentoilmfestival.com](http://www.sacramentoilmfestival.com) or (916) 475-9616

# celebration of the past and future

Sacramento International Film Festival presents characters from history and filmmakers of tomorrow

By Carla Meyer  
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After the fourth grade, concentrated lessons in California history can be hard to come by. Good thing the Sacramento International Film Festival is stepping into the gap with its "California History Day" program Sunday at the California State Railroad Museum.

The program includes "Meet Mary Pleasant," a performance documentary in which Sacramentan Susheel Bibbs embodies the 19th century civil rights activist and entrepreneur; "Alcatraz Reunion," in which ex-inmates dare to return to The Rock; and "Turlock: A History Documentary," whose name might say it all.

The train museum venue seems particularly appropriate to "Pleasant," given its proximity to the old state Supreme Court building where Pleasant's precedent-setting case charging racial discrimination on San Francisco streetcars once was aired.

A writer, researcher and performer, Bibbs has spent much of the past 18 years telling Pleasant's story - a story that has been lost, she says, "amidst a lot of distortion of who (Pleasant) really was."

A former slave who eventually made a fortune via mining and other businesses, Pleasant herself was inconsistent on the details of her life. But although she might have fibbed and embellished on some counts, she clearly was an extraordinary woman. A big financial supporter of, and spy for, the Underground Railroad, Pleasant eventually became a scandalous figure in the San Francisco press, thanks to the vendetta of an associate and the prevailing racism of the time.

Bibbs certainly has done her part to restore Pleasant's place in history, through exhibits on Pleasant, her one-woman show and now the documentary, which is narrated by actress/activist Ruby Dee and has aired on PBS stations.

"The idea for me was that I could travel for the next 20 years and perform a one-woman show ... or I could do a mass-media production" to reach a larger audience, Bibbs said. "And since my Ph.D is in mass media, I decided to do a documentary."

The historical themes extend past the train museum program to the larger festival. On Monday evening, the festival presents "American Idealist: The Story of Sargent Shriver," which chronicles the life of the Peace Corps founder, Kennedy brother-in-law and father of California's first lady, Maria Shriver.

"It is probably the best documentary I have seen on the 1960s," festival director Martin Anaya said of "American Idealist," which also has aired on PBS stations. "In telling the story