

## Couple shines light on first lady Dolley Madison in PBS documentary

By Rich Heldenfels  
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It wasn't until its fourth president that the United States had a true first lady.

She was Dolley Madison, the wife of James, and her roles both in government and in determining what a first lady should be are deftly described in an *American Experience* telecast premiering at 9 p.m. Monday on PBS.

In addition, husband-and-wife filmmakers Ron Blumer and Muffie Meyer will be at sold-out screenings of *Dolley Madison* at the National First Ladies' Library in Canton Saturday.

In a recent telephone interview, Blumer, who wrote the script, and Meyer, who directed, talked about the production and why Dolley Madison is worth a documentary. After all, famous though Dolley was in her time, Meyer said that these days, most people know vaguely of her serving ice cream in the White House for the first time and saving the portrait of George Washington from torching by the British during the War of 1812.

There had been married presidents before Madison: George Washington had Martha, and John Adams had Abigail. (Thomas Jefferson was a widower). "Martha Washington acted properly as her husband's wife," Meyer said. "Abigail, who was so politically astute in her letters, had no interest in a public role. And those letters were private. . . .It was Dolley, really, who had the personality. . . ."

"And the genius," added Blumer.

Dolley, self-confident and outgoing long before she married James, set a different tone as her husband's confidante, a canny user of social graces for political ends, and a public personality. She was far more socially adept than her quiet husband. And together they went against some tides where women's roles were concerned.

When considering something like James putting Dolley in charge of decorating the White House, Blumer said: "You've got to remember the position of women back then. George Washington would *never* let Martha near the drapes."

"Men worked out of their homes," Meyer added. "Homes were public places and so men did the decorating. It was highly unusual for a man to let his wife decorate."

The program tells Dolley's story through monologues from her own writing, delivered directly to the camera by a costumed Eve Best of Showtime's *Nurse Jackie* series. There

are also archival pictures and comments from experts and historians, including Carl Sferrazza Anthony of the first ladies' library.

The commentators are entertaining on their own, and not all experts are, Meyer and Blumer admitted. Some can be dull, Blumer said, while others "talk extremely well, and are not knowledgeable."

As for using Best's bits, Meyer said, "Dolley was so incredibly charismatic, she would steal almost any show, and in a way she stole ours." After shooting more than they thought they could use, the producers ended up putting almost everything Best did into the program.

"We saw her on Broadway," Meyer said, "and she gave an extraordinary performance as a woman who couldn't have been less like Dolley. But she was so good, we knew she could do it."

Best has extensive stage experience and, Meyer said, "Classically trained actors, who have done Shakespeare, can do this sort of thing 'cause all they have is the words, and their voice and expression."

"Film actors often can't do it," Blumer added, "because they have to have some business. They have to have a gun or a cigarette or something, and they can't pull this off."

But Best said no at first. "We went through about two months of auditions," Meyer said, "and couldn't find anyone else we thought could pull it off." Best, meanwhile, reconsidered and ended up joining the program.

Best, English by birth, had a vocal coach for Dolley's accent, which is a bit Southern based on Dolley's Virginia and North Carolina background. Although, absent audio of the time, Blumer conceded, "who knows what a Virginia accent was?"

Finally, since they have spent so much time studying Dolley and James, I asked what that made Meyer and Blumer think about their own marriage. They laughed heartily.

"We work together," Blumer said, "and you have to develop a working relationship. When we first started working together, we would bring the films into the bedroom, as it were, and I think my first line to Muffie was, 'You've ruined my script.' "

"We sort of agreed to try not bringing work home," Meyer added.

"Fortunately, we'd been married for a while, so divorce was not imminent," Blumer said. "Like in any marriage, you have to work out spheres of power and influence. And with Dolley and James, that was amazing."

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Rich Heldenfels writes about popular culture for the Beacon Journal and in the *HeldenFiles Online* blog at <http://heldenfels.ohio.com>, on Facebook and on Twitter. He also does a weekly video chat for Ohio.com.

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