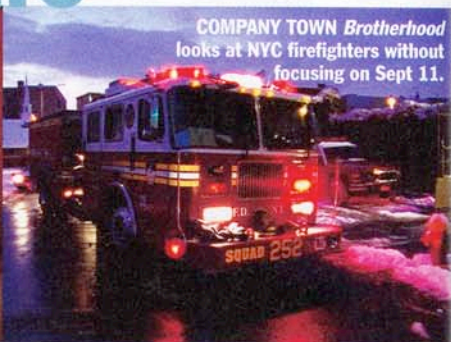
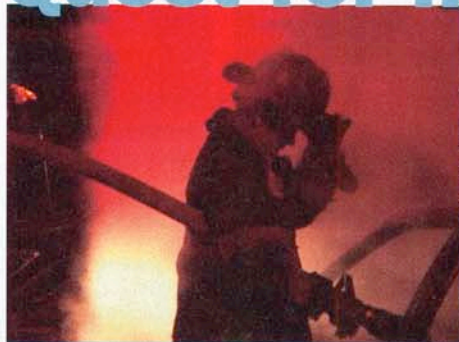


Quest for fire



New York City firefighters open their doors and hoses for Lilibet Foster's camera

Unlike a slew of films and TV specials, *Brotherhood*, Lilibet Foster's documentary about New York City firefighters, barely mentions September 11.

"I didn't want to make a 9/11 film," says Foster, who grew up in the Virgin Islands and has lived in New York for 13 years. "I found the whole thing so disturbing. People are doing it and doing it well, but I didn't feel that was my role."

Still, Foster became fascinated with New York's Bravest after the attacks. In her film, she probes the relationships among the men in three firehouses: Rescue Company 1 on West 43rd Street; Squad 252 in Bushwick, Brooklyn; and Rescue Company 4 in Woodside, Queens. One reason the firefighters "approved" Foster's shoot was that they were relieved she wasn't making another 9/11 film.

For eight months in 2002 and 2003, Foster recorded the minutiae of day-to-day life. Her 84-minute distillation shows men kibbitzing, mopping floors and suddenly racing off to save lives. It's clear that the men have grown comfortable with her camera, and they do not "perform." In one scene, squad members are about to eat Thanksgiving dinner when the fire alarm rings; you can see their frustration as they abandon the food and rush off.

Brotherhood's most dramatic moments concern Squad 252, a beloved fixture in an impoverished, fire-prone section of Bushwick. While Foster was filming, the men learned that the city wanted to close the firehouse and relocate the squad to Manhattan's Upper East Side. Foster follows the Bushwick community's protests and the captain's struggle to hold his team together.

One fireman had warned Foster that

camaraderie within the FDNY is elusive. But the film shows the strength of the connections between one generation of firefighters and the next, and how all-consuming the work can be. As Rescue 4's Liam Flaherty puts it, "I live and breathe the FDNY. At night I dream of going to fires."

Still, the challenge was a familiar one to Foster, who has a track record of making intimate documentaries about people who live in rarefied worlds. She produced *Speaking in Strings*, about Italian violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, which was nominated for a Best Feature Documentary Oscar in 2000. In 1997, Foster produced the acclaimed documentary *Soul in the Hole*, about street basketball.

What *Brotherhood* reveals is an old New York institution caught in transition. Amid fears of bioterrorism, firefighters are expected to have ever more expertise, even as firehouses fight to stay open, veterans retire and hundreds of fresh recruits begin their careers. Given the death of 343 FDNY members in the attack, not to mention retirements, illness and other turnover, the film offers this startling revelation: Within a year, 50 percent of the NYC force will have less than five years' experience.

In the film's final moments, a veteran captain gives newcomers a pep talk. "Someone will ask you," the captain bellows, "'What will you do in your day, what will you do in your time?' And you will tell them you were a New York City fireman. And when the day is done and the page is turned, that will be enough."—Charles Lyons

***Brotherhood* premieres at the Tribeca Film Festival May 3.**