

TELLURIDE  
**MOUNTAINFILM**

*A Beautiful Waste*



*Directed by Jon Kasbe*

Steve Duncan is the subject and filmmaker of award-winning film *Undercity* (Mountainfilm 2011) where he explored way below and way above New York City. In *A Beautiful Waste*, he journeys down to the core of the Big Apple to wander its sewers. Of course this exploit offers its share of nastiness, but there's also something — as the title implies — beautiful in these adventures. (USA, 2012, 6 minutes)

**Discussing the Film:**

*The following questions are intended to spark discussion and activities related to both the content and storytelling elements of this particular film.*

1. What were some of the most interesting images from *A Beautiful Waste*? What sights and sounds do you remember the most about the film?
2. Do you think Steve Duncan is an interesting person in the film? If you met him, what would you ask him?
3. How do you feel about Steve's underground photography from the film? Check out more of Steve's photographs on: <http://undercity.zenfolio.com/urbanlayers>.
4. The NYC sewers appear beautiful in Steve's photographs. Think of something the world thinks is ugly, write it on a piece of paper, hand it to a friend and ask them to think of ways it could be beautiful. Have them do the same for you.
5. New York, with 8.5 million people, produces a lot of waste, yet recycling and composting prevented 86.6 million tons of material from becoming trash in 2013. What are some products that you recycle in your home? Collect your recycling for a couple weeks and then weigh it to find out how much waste you are helping to save in your household. See if you can save more in the next two weeks!

### Extensions:

1. **WATCH:** Go to Steve Duncan's website at <http://www.undercity.org/> to rewatch *A Beautiful Waste* or many other videos chronicling Steve's subterranean explorations.
2. **WATCH:** Steve's 2012 TED Talk on what he's learned from exploring the sewers of NYC: <http://www.undercity.org/videos/tedx-talk/>.
3. **READ:** The Huffington Post article about how NYC kept its drinking water clean through the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. It includes a great graphic on where NYC gets all its clean drinking water: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-moss/new-york-drinking-water\\_b\\_2064588.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-moss/new-york-drinking-water_b_2064588.html).
4. **READ:** Alan Feuer's fascinating *New York Times* article on going into the sewers with Steve and Erling Kagge. It comes with an interactive map of their trips and a photo slideshow: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/nyregion/02underground.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2&hp%20Slideshow:%20http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/01/02/nyregion/02underground-ss.html&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/nyregion/02underground.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&hp%20Slideshow:%20http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/01/02/nyregion/02underground-ss.html&).
5. **DO:** Teachers: Break your students into groups and have them pick a film from Jon Kasbe's website: <http://jonkasbe.com>. Have them review the film they've chosen and then, as a class, try to determine if you can find similar styles or subjects throughout John's films. Decide what film you like best as a class

and have each group email John a question about the film they watched.

## **Filmmaker Conversation:**

**Jon Kasbe, director of *A Beautiful Waste***

**You've made a lot of great short films very early in your career. Talk about that.**

**Jon:** Yeah, when I started I was doing a lot very fast. I was 18 and had just gotten into college. I think there are a couple reasons. I saw people who were older than me doing it and I wanted to be like that. I was seeing people work very hard and not sleep and give up social life to create films and I liked that they had a purpose in their life. In the beginning, in a way, it was not all that genuine. In the last two years it's definitely been shifting a lot. I've been slowing down, really trying to be intentional about what I take on. And starting to respect the "why."

**How did you first meet Steve? What is he like to work with?**

**Jon:** I was part of a bigger project at the time that was centered around water as an energy source. It was a summer program at school. I was wanting something surrounding water that was different and wasn't going to be boring. I found Steve's blog on the internet about how he goes in the sewers and takes pictures of them. I saw all the pictures and was blown away by what he does with his life. I just wanted to spend time with him and meet. We had a phone conversation and I was coming to NYC, so I just asked if I could come and crash at his place. Steve, as a person, is super cool, but he's a loose cannon with a lot of energy. You can't hold him in one place for too long. He's brilliant. From the get go, I was trying to actively listen while also trying to create the story in my mind of "where is this going?" Once we started shooting, I pretty much decided to shoot everything and work it out later. We shot for four days and didn't go into the sewers till the last day. We were down there for seven hours just walking around. The hardest part was keeping up with him while moving and carrying the gear. It was tricky to not fall. Once we were down there, everything just sort of flowed. For me, it felt like the camera wasn't there. Another funny thing about this project was Steve taking these beautiful photos. I really didn't even think about it at the time. I'm so glad that happened. It wasn't till post-production it hit me that these photos were powerful, and seeing what is so commonly thought of as disgusting, in a beautiful way, is something people would care about.

**Did you face any challenges in the sewers? What was the filming process like?**

**Jon:** It was pretty dark. Which, up until this project, I had always thought of darkness as a challenge, but now I love shooting in the dark. The darkness is really like having a blank canvas behind whatever you're shooting. Mostly, I was worried about damaging the equipment because it wasn't mine. I actually still don't own any equipment; I've always rented or borrowed. I wasn't wearing the right shoes or clothes and I kept slipping. I never fell, but sometimes I'd have to put one hand down while holding the camera

up with the other. For me, part of not owning a camera means that I don't shoot when I'm not doing a story. So when I do shoot, and am doing a story, it's special every time. I think I'm a little scared of becoming someone who sees the world in that way {through a camera lens} instead of experiencing it.

**Talk about the message of *A Beautiful Waste*.**

**Jon:** My goal was to get people to care about water without making people feel guilty. Urgency is important, but before urgency there needs to be genuine care. You know, people suffering from depression, before you can get back to a stable life, there's all these steps you have to take. I've seen enough documentaries about water that present a lot of facts. I think this short shows someone who does care. Steve does care, but for a different reason. If you talk to Steve about cities, he really understands them. He really cares about how they're built and maintained. He understands what will happen if we continue on this path. For me, I just felt like a student. In a way, I was my own audience. I just saw it as darkness, and Steve saw so many opportunities to paint light on the walls.

**Do you think the film is successful?**

**Jon:** I don't know what success is really. I haven't watched the film since finishing it. I don't really re-watch anything I make. The last festival I saw it at, I was thinking, "Is that as far as it can go?" Out of all the pieces I've done, on the festival level it's the most successful. I don't know if it's the most important. I struggle with this a lot. I go back and forth about why I make films and what it's for. It's really about making it.

**What piece of advice would you give to a student who wants to get into filmmaking?**

**Jon:** I think the first thing I'd say is to pay attention. The second thing I'd say is, try to get over yourself as soon as you can. I think it's easy to make something that's successful and get into festivals and be cool. It's too easy to get lost in that. Figure out why you want to do it and what stories you're drawn to. Figure out what makes you good. And as you get good, very quickly, remember that you're not that good and you'll always have everything to learn. I've found that going out and screwing up is the best way to learn. Stop reading and talking about film and go make it. It's easier and more fun. You can make great work that's also fun.

**What's your next project?**

**Jon:** I just finished editing this experimental dance film. That was some of the most amazing footage I've ever shot. I've also done music videos with musicians outside for Nathan Jar Music. They're based in Brooklyn and I'm moving up there to live with them.

My most special project is *The Two-Year-Old*. You can see the trailer on my website. That girl is my little sister. She just turned five a week ago. I want to follow her till she's twenty or thirty and try to capture a life in a film that is real. It's cool because I don't know what's going happen with the story. Her parents are big on the film being between me and her, and leaving it up to her to decide. There have been plenty of times where she's asked me to stop filming and others where she's like, "Hey, I'm gonna do a handstand. Go get the camera."