LESLIE CUNNINGHAM

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER / CULTURAL HISTORIAN / CURATOR / WRITER / EDUCATOR

Research Triangle, North Carolina | tribesentertainment.com | harleminhavana.com

ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Leslie Cunningham is a documentary filmmaker, writer, cultural historian, curator and educator who digs into Black stories too often left out of the record. She founded TRIBES Magazine in 2004, growing it into TRIBES Entertainment, and has spent more than two decades making independent work. Her films, books, exhibitions and classes draw on family archives, original research and the lives of artists who deserve to be remembered.

SIGNATURE MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

HARLEM IN HAVANA® | The Harlem in Havana Project | Creator, Director & Producer | 2012–present

Created from her family archives, the Harlem in Havana Project follows Leon Claxton's traveling revue and the Black and Cuban performers who worked during Jim Crow. Cunningham has brought this history to audiences through documentary and scripted film, archival books, exhibitions, public programs and original classes.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

JIG SHOW | Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana | Feature documentary | 2024

Director / Producer / Researcher. Feature documentary on Leon Claxton's traveling revue, told through archival footage, family photographs and interviews. Supported by ITVS and Southern Documentary Fund.

I BREATHE LIFE! | Documentary | In production

Co-Director / Co-Producer with Debbie Vu. A documentary about Durham artist and advocate Monica Daye, her work with Stand Up Speak Out-NC and the role of art in healing.

M.I., A Different Kind of Girl | Documentary | 2012

Director / Producer. A portrait of a masculine-presenting Black woman finding her place in the drag world.

SCRIPTED TELEVISION DEVELOPMENT

Harlem in Havana | Dramatic television series pilot & series concept | 2026

Creator / Writer. Original dramatic television series concept and pilot screenplay set in the world of Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana Revue. In development.

SELECTED FESTIVAL SCREENINGS & FILM PRESENTATIONS

2026 | New York Public Library for the Performing Arts | May 9

JIG SHOW, screening and panel discussion, New York City.

2024 | Dancinema Film Festival | July

JIG SHOW, official selection.

2024 | Seoul International Short Film Festival | April

JIG SHOW, online festival presentation; listed in the Feature Documentary category.

2021 | Hayti Film Festival Next Level | October

JIG SHOW, official selection.

2021 | Duke University, SLIPPAGE Fall Series | August

Invited presentation of the first two parts of JIG SHOW, Durham, NC.

2012–2016 | M.I., A Different Kind of Girl | Festival Selections

Out On Film, Atlanta (2012); North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2012); Gender Reel Film Festival (2014); Massimadi Festival of Africa (2016).

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS & CURATORIAL WORK

Brown Skin Showgirls: Leon Claxton's Harlem in Havana | Traveling exhibition | Creator / Curator

Archival photography and stories of the Black and Cuban women who performed in Claxton's revue from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Everybody Wants to Be a Showgirl | DuPont Underground, Washington, DC | February 2026

Featured presentation of Brown Skin Showgirls in a larger exhibition honoring Black burlesque artists.

Brown Skin Showgirls | Burlesque Hall of Fame, Las Vegas | April–July 2025

Co-Curator. Exhibition of archival photography, performer histories and related public programs.

SELECTED LIVE PRODUCTIONS & CULTURAL PROGRAMS

Brown Skin Showgirls: A Harlem in Havana Tribute Show | Lincoln Center, New York | 2026

Presented live performance and history programming at the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center.

Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender | Las Vegas, NV | June 5–8, 2025

Shared the Brown Skin Showgirls exhibition, signed books and taught My Grandma Was an Exotic Dancer?! during the Weekender.

Brown Skin Showgirls Weekender | Atlanta, GA | February 17–18, 2024

Co-presented a two-day Black History Month program with Atlanta School of Burlesque and Black Burlesque Atlanta, bringing film, live performance and history classes together.

BOOKS & INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING

Brown Skin Showgirls, Vol. 1 | Photographic history book

Photographic history of Black and Cuban women who worked the burlesque and carnival circuits.

Brown Skin Showgirls, Vol. 2: The Cuban Edition | Photographic history book

A companion collection focused on Cuban performers in the Harlem in Havana Revue.

Steel Town: A Black Punk Memoir from the Haunted Summer of 1982 | Author | Novella

A Black punk coming-of-age story set in the summer of 1982.

TRIBES Magazine | Founder / Publisher | Founded 2004

Started in 2004 to make room for independent artists, photographers, writers and musicians. The magazine later grew into TRIBES Entertainment.

TEACHING & CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Harlem in Havana Burlesque Education Series | Founder / Curriculum Creator / Instructor

Created and teaches original history courses using family archives, documentary video and discussion. My Grandma Was an Exotic Dancer?! follows the Bates Sisters; Girl Shows! explores the women of the traveling carnival circuit.

INVITED TALKS, TEACHING & PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

Burlesque Hall of Fame | Exhibition presenter & history instructor | Las Vegas, NV | 2025

Raleigh School of Burlesque | Guest Educator | 2025

Atlanta School for Burlesque | Guest Educator | 2024

International Booklover's Burlesque Festival | Featured Presenter | 2023

BurlyCon | Guest of Honor / Keynote Speaker / Presenter | 2022

SELECTED AWARDS, HONORS & SERVICE

Burlesque Hall of Fame | Invited judge, Miss Exotic World Competition | 2025

Dancinema | Uncovering History Award, Harlem in Havana Project | 2024

Seoul International Short Film Festival | Feature Documentary, JIG SHOW | April 2024

National Poetry Awards | Poetry Magazine of the Year, TRIBES Magazine | 2010

Black Web Awards | Best Online Zine, TRIBES Magazine | 2009

Leslie Cunningham Burlesque Education Scholarship | Named educational scholarship supporting burlesque education

GRANTS & INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Independent Television Service (ITVS) | Development funding | JIG SHOW

Development funding for JIG SHOW. ITVS credits Cunningham as Producer/Director.

Southern Documentary Fund | Grant and fiscal sponsorship | 2017

2017 documentary grant for JIG SHOW, made possible by the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, along with fiscal sponsorship, workshops and artist development.

Cucalorus Film Festival | Works-in-Progress Program | 2015

JIG SHOW selected for the festival's film development program, Wilmington, North Carolina.

INDEPENDENT ARTS & MEDIA PRACTICE

TRIBES Entertainment | Founder / Creative Director | North Carolina | 2004–present

Founded TRIBES Magazine as a home for independent artists and writers. Expanded it into TRIBES Entertainment, producing documentary films, books, exhibitions and cultural programs.

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University | Certificate in Documentary Arts | Durham, NC | 2010–2014

The People's Channel | Film Production & Editing Training | Chapel Hill, NC | 2007–2009

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Southern Documentary Fund | Artist / Member

Film Fatales | Member

Gamma Xi Phi | Pledged