

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*"The Green Cow," assemblage created by artist/photographer Arthur Tress from a discarded iron lung. See "The Island Laundry: From Modern Miracle to Modern Art," p. 2. © 2017 Arthur Tress.*

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## Blackwell's Almanac

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## The Island Laundry: From Modern Miracle to Modern Art

The year was 1949. Welfare Island was a vibrant complex of social service institutions. Documents from the era list:

- Goldwater Memorial Hospital for Chronic Diseases
- Metropolitan Hospital
- City Hospital
- New York City Home for Dependents (Alms House)
- New York Cancer Institute
- Central Nurses Residence
- Reception and Dispensary
- Under construction: Coler Chronic Disease Hospital and Home
- Planned (but never realized): a custodial hospital and a tuberculosis hospital

The existing institutions housed a population of some 10,000 occupants, and the coming buildings promised the addition of at least another 3,500—a program of care for the sick and indigent of never-before-seen proportions.

JUST IMAGINE THE MOUNTAINS OF DIRTY LAUNDRY!!

The then-current laundry facility at the north end of the island had been built in 1912 and was originally designed to serve Metropolitan Hospital only. Updated equipment might have increased output, but the constricted building space made the installation of new, heavy machinery impossible. So, with outmoded and inefficient equipment, the facility operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week...and still couldn't meet the required workload. A portion of the operation had to be outsourced to Riker's Island.

And then a modern miracle emerged. As of May 1 that year, clothes and linens began being washed and ironed by the largest, most technically advanced hospital laundry in the world.

### A Milestone in Concept and Construction

Designed by architect Percival Goodman (also planner of an unrealized version of Roosevelt Island called Terrace City), with input from Isidore Rosenfield, Chief Architect, Hospitals (and designer of Goldwater Hospital), the building was located just north of the



*The new three-story laundry with extensive glass façade. Credit: NYC Dept. of Records.*

Queensboro Bridge and today's tram. Unlike the heavy stone construction used previously on Welfare Island, a relatively new engineering technique called for a cement mixture to be poured into a mold fitted with reinforcing steel bars; this enabled floors and columns to be fabricated in a single piece, thus increasing the capacity for heavy machinery.

What's more, skylights and outer walls that were actually ribbons of translucent blue glass provided daylight to the most remote portions of the interior, while at the same time affording thermal control.

Following a "gravity-flow" principle, the new design reduced handling and thus costs to a minimum. Work proceeded via chutes from the third floor, where laundry was classified by institution, type, color, etc., to the latest push-button washing, drying, pressing and folding machines on the second floor, and finally to distribution centers on the first floor. Prevention of cross-contamination was, of course, a critical goal. So water temperature in the washing process ranged up to 180° and was sustained for at least 30 minutes. The soap, alkali and bleach all had germicidal effects. And ironing exposed items to temperatures upward of 300°. Ultimately, the facility was able to turn out 11,000 tons of clean laundry annually, or double the 11,378,656 pieces of clothing, bedding and bath articles processed by the old facility. It also boasted a dry-cleaning unit, the first ever to serve the hospital complex.

been built in 1867, literally before the combustion engine. In the new structure, light steel trusses provided an unobstructed floor area: it had a span wide enough to include the



"Flowers of Wonder" (left) and "Throne of Bacchus," © 2017 Arthur Tress.



turning radius of a bus and was commodious enough to accommodate

50 vehicles, including ambulances, buses and trucks.

On the west side was a modern fire station housing Manhattan Engine Company No. 49, just relocated to Welfare Island. The new firehouse, the first to bless the island, featured a unique brick and glass hose-drying tower, a lounge terrace, recreational facilities, a well-lit bunkroom and generous locker and washroom facilities.

This complex, the pride of Welfare Island for many years, finally ceased to operate sometime in the 1970s. Parts of it were shuttered and parts of it, particularly the laundry, became a storehouse for outdated and unwanted equipment from the island's hospitals. And therein lies the laundry's second celebrated life.

### Reincarnation

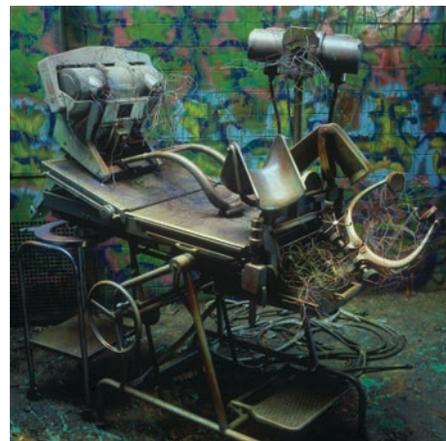
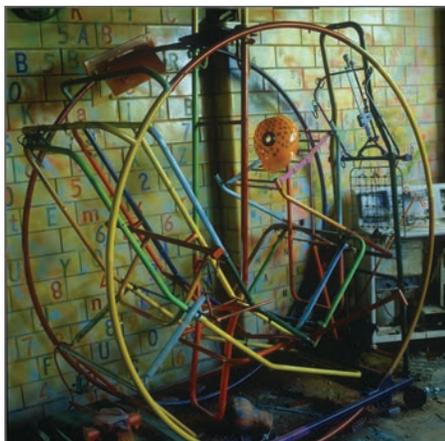
In 1984, Arthur Tress, an artist/photographer known for his surrealistic still lifes, came across the laundry with its room-after-room of broken and rusting medical detritus. Climbing in regularly through a shattered second-story window, he began to reassemble the assorted paraphernalia into new and strange forms, made even more bizarre by his



Firehouse (foreground), laundry and garage (right).

### Garage and Firehouse

Also incorporated into the new construction were other needed facilities. To the east was a contiguous garage whose predecessor had



"The Politics of Language (I.), "The Last Round-up" (center) and "Robot Birth," © 2017 Arthur Tress. See collection at <http://www.arthurtress.com/#s=0&mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&p=2&a=0&at=0>.

application of spray paint. He transformed iron lungs (see p. 1), x-ray machines, incubators, blood sampling machines, and rehabilitation baths into a Kafkaesque children's playland, creating, in the artist's own words, "...a multicolored Disneyland built by a slightly deranged Picasso."

Incredibly, no one ever discovered the artist at work, and no one, as far as is known, ever viewed the more than 60 installations in their *de facto* studio/museum habitat. The building complex was torn down in 1991, but Tress's photographs of the assemblages became part of acclaimed retrospective collections titled *Arthur Tress: Talisman* (Marco Livingstone, Thames and Hudson, 1986) and

*Arthur Tress: Fantastic Voyage* (Richard Lorenz, Little, Brown and Company, 2001). No matter that a residential building now occupies that space, the laundry and its reincarnation live on!

Sources:

- Address by Chrisman G. Schiff, MD, at the Cornerstone Laying Ceremony, Oct 14, 1948;
- Hospital Laundry Nears Completion*, New York Times, Feb 19, 1949;
- Progressive Architecture*, July 1953;
- Press Release, City of New York Department of Hospitals, Oct 11, 1948;
- Marco Livingstone, *Arthur Tress: Talisman*, Thames and Hudson, 1986;
- Richard Lorenz, *Arthur Tress: Fantastic Voyage, Photographs 1956–2000*, Little, Brown and Company, 2001.

## Coming Soon

### "North Brother Island: The Last Unknown Place in New York City"

Author Christopher Payne discusses the subject of his new book, a "secret in plain sight" — 20 historic acres poking out of the East River just north of Hell Gate with eerie abandoned buildings in various states of decay.

FREE LIBRARY TALK, Thursday, March 2, 6:30 pm.

## The Marvels of Green-Wood Cemetery

- It occupies 478 acres in Brooklyn, or the better part of a square mile.
- Since its founding in 1838 and its first burial in 1840, over 570,000 individuals have been interred there—many of them names you will recognize.
- It is among the first architecturally designed landscapes in New York City, comprising scenic hills, valleys, glacial ponds, paths and an extraordinary 7,000 to 8,000 mature trees.
- It boasts one of the largest collections of outdoor mausoleums and sculpture.
- In 2006, it was designated a National Historic Landmark.

These are just a few of the impressive facts cited by Jeffrey I. Richman, Green-Wood Cemetery's official historian, during his talk at the Roosevelt Island branch of the Public Library on December 8. Sponsored by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society, Richman's slide lecture painted a picture of an incredibly magnificent, artistic and historic resting place, amplified by its appeal and accessibility to tourism.

At the time of its founding, non-sectarian Green-Wood was a leader in the rural cemetery movement in the U.S., emulating such European cemeteries as the famous Père-Lachaise in Paris. Good health and communion with nature and God were the movement's organizing principles.

"Nevertheless," explained Richman, "the cemetery struggled at first; families resisted abandoning the tradition of a churchyard burial and disliked the idea of interring their loved ones with members of other sects." But the



*The Steinway mausoleum, the cemetery's largest, cost \$1 million in today's money. Photo courtesy of the Greenwood-Historic Fund.*

lush grounds soon lured them to what was then the country and Green-Wood became a "recreational" park where people came to stroll, picnic, view sculpture and enjoy carriage rides. "By the 1850s it had become the prestigious place to be buried and was attracting some 500,000 visitors a year," the speaker said. In fact, it helped inspire the creation of public green spaces, including Manhattan's Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

Among the notable permanent residents of Green-Wood are politicians, artists, musicians, entertainers, inventors, Civil War generals and other veterans, and baseball legends. Who in particular?

- **Leonard Bernstein**—Music director, conductor, educator, and celebrated composer (*Mass*, *On the Town*, *West Side Story*)
- **"Boss" Tweed**—Famously corrupt New York City politician, ultimately arrested,

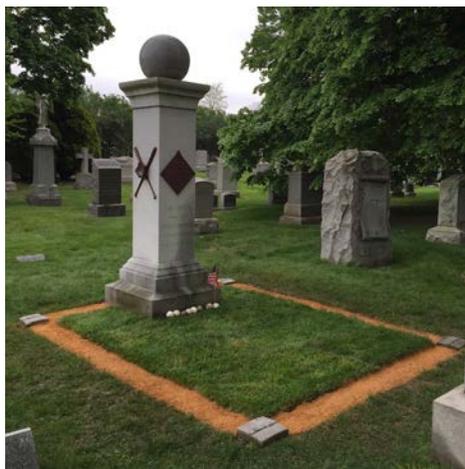


*The ecumenical Van Ness/Parsons mausoleum: Moses and mother are at left out of frame. Jesus and Mary occupy the center (with costumed docent). And Osiris appears above the doorway (shadow of Ra above the back of the Sphinx). Photo courtesy of the Green-Wood Historic Fund.*

tried and sent to prison; spent some prison time on Blackwell's Island

- **Charles Ebbets**—Brooklyn Dodgers owner in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who gave his name to the team's home field
- **Jean-Michel Basquiat**—Brooklyn-born graffiti artist who rose to become an internationally hailed neo-expressionist
- **Louis Comfort Tiffany**—Decorative artist best known for his Art Nouveau stained glass creations
- **Horace Greeley**—Founder and editor of the New-York Tribune; popularized the phrase "Go West young man," which he obviously didn't
- **Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives**—Very successful 19<sup>th</sup> century New York printmakers known for their hand-colored lithographs
- **Samuel Morse**—Inventor of the telegraph system and Morse code; also a portrait painter and pioneer in photography
- **James Renwick**—Famous architect of St. Patrick's Cathedral and Grace Church in Manhattan, and the Smallpox Hospital and Lighthouse on Blackwell's/Roosevelt Island.

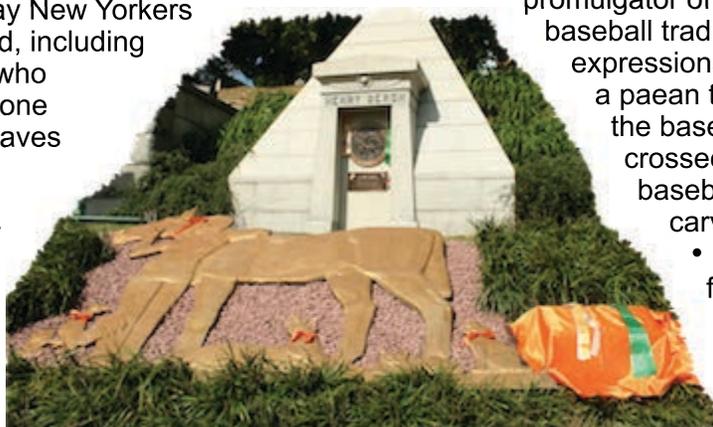
Of course, there are many, many thousands of everyday New Yorkers at rest in Green-Wood, including about 75 individuals who perished on 9/11. As one might expect, their graves are marked by the modest headstones one would find in any cemetery. By contrast, the city's celebrated and wealthy seemed to vie for exalted status in death as they did in



Baseball writer Henry Chadwick's monument memorializes the sport he promoted. Photo courtesy of the Green-Wood Historic Fund.

life. Noted architects and sculptors were hired to design family tombs, resulting in incredibly extravagant and utterly unique creations.

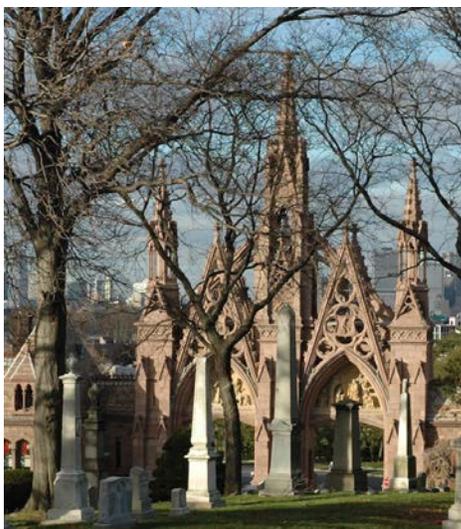
- The largest mausoleum belongs to the **Steinways** (p. 5), the Astoria piano makers. Occupying ground consisting of eight lots, it was designed by sculptor John Moffitt and has room for 108 caskets above and 108 caskets below. The granite construction is said to have cost—way back in 1870—some \$47,000 (almost \$1 million in today's money).
- Perhaps the cagiest is the **Van Ness Parsons** mausoleum (p. 5), most notably housing Albert Ross Parsons, a pianist and music educator. Sculptures portray Moses and his mother, Jesus and Mary, as well as the Egyptian god of afterlife, Osiris (above the door). To be fair, Parsons was also an avid Egyptologist, so perhaps he wasn't just hedging his bets.
- The vote for nearest and dearest to the American soul would probably go to **Henry Chadwick's** grave site. Transplanted to the U.S. from Britain, he was a Hall of Fame sportswriter credited with being the premier promoter of baseball, the inventor of field position numbers to score putouts, as well as the promulgator of many other baseball traditions and expressions. His monument is a paean to the sport. Note the baseball on top, the crossed bats, and the baseball diamond and carved stone bases.
- Most touching for animal lovers would undoubtedly be the final resting structure belonging to **Henry Bergh**,



ASPCA founder Henry Bergh's mausoleum features the sculpture "Humanity of Man Before a Group of Ageless Animals," by Wilhelm Hunt Diederich and John Terken, on permanent loan from the ASPCA. Photo courtesy of the Green-Wood Historic Fund.

founder of the ASPCA. It features an extraordinary sculpture titled “Humanity of Man Before a Group of Ageless Animals,” by Wilhelm Hunt Diederich and John Terken, on permanent loan from the ASPCA.

According to Richman, even the entrance gates to the cemetery are of notable artistry. The main one, at Fifth Avenue and 25<sup>th</sup> Street, was designed by Richard Upjohn of Trinity Church fame, who was architect-on-call at Green-Wood. The gate at Fort Hamilton Parkway was designed by his son, Richard Michell Upjohn.



*Green-Wood's main gate, designed by Richard Upjohn. Detail of a photograph by Art Presson.*

Green-Wood is also steeped in history. To begin with, it is a Revolutionary War historic site. The Battle of Brooklyn, the first battle after the Declaration of Independence was signed, was fought in 1776 across what is now its grounds. This past summer, the cemetery hosted a huge celebration at Battle Hill commemorating the skirmish's 240<sup>th</sup> anniversary; yearly commemorations take place on the last Sunday in August. In addition, the grounds are a designated site on the Civil War Discovery Trail. In 1869, the City of New York erected the Civil War Soldiers' Monument to memorialize its heroic dead. And in 2002, historian Richman launched the cemetery's Civil War Project, an attempt to identify and remember Civil War

veterans buried there. Based on volunteer research, as well as information from the public, some 5,000 veterans have been found, almost half of whom were buried in unmarked graves. Green-Wood is now installing headstones on these sites free of charge.

It goes without saying that the cemetery operation is a continuing work in progress. A restoration team is charged with repairing and replacing all the mausoleum and sculptural elements damaged by time and exposure. In addition, a vigorous tree-planting program goes on non-stop. And, then, there are still people being buried there—cremation or in-ground burial—provided they are heir to a lot.

Continuing its early contribution to recreation and entertainment, the cemetery offers all kinds of engaging spectacles, and it is worth a visit. Just walking the grounds is a visual treat—with enough scenic views, sculpture gardens and extraordinary graves to fill an entire day. Free concerts have been a significant attraction for the past 15 years. Gallery exhibits, including a collection of some 300 paintings by Green-Wood residents, can be seen on an occasional basis in the Chapel. Historic and other types of trolley tours survey various categories of those buried in the cemetery on Wednesdays and the weekend. And annual open-house events allow visitors into certain tombs, welcomed by costumed docents.

An array of aids has been developed to help visitors navigate and enjoy the Green-Wood experience. Maps (including a digital one at [green-wood.com](http://green-wood.com)), self-guided walking tour books, a mobile app, and public and private guided tours unlock the cemetery's secrets. And many books, including a few by our speaker,\* can provide a deeper insight into this fascinating landmark and its equally fascinating cast of characters.

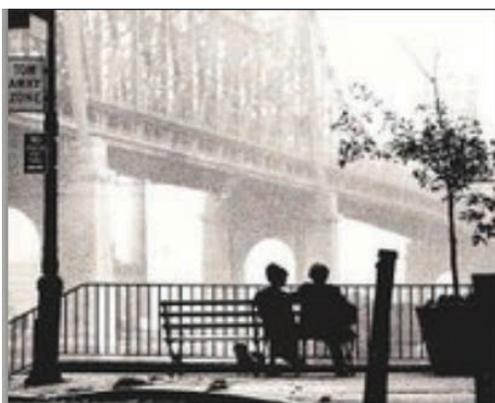
\*Jeff Richman is the author of *Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery: New York's Buried Treasure*; *Final Camping Ground: Civil War Veterans at Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, In Their Own Words*; and the just-published *"The Gallant Sims": A Civil War Hero Rediscovered*. All are available for purchase on the cemetery's website, [green-wood.com](http://green-wood.com).

## RI in the Movies: Starring the Queensboro Bridge and Roosevelt Island Tram

by Stephen Blank

Depending on our age and film enthusiasm, Roosevelt Islanders might remember our Bridge and Tram in two iconic film events.

Many of us will think of the scene in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) as the best of our Bridge appearances and one of the most romantic moments in a wonderful movie. Allen and Keaton are sitting on a bench on Sutton Square, looking out at a softly focused Queensboro Bridge. Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me" frames the moment, and the couple are in love with New York City. Just three minutes... but it's a favorite Bridge moment.



Others will say, no, the most memorable Bridge/Tram moment was near the end of *Spider-Man* (2002) when the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe) throws Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) from the Bridge, and Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) must decide between saving her or the passengers on the Tram. (The battle between Spidy and the Goblin continues on into the Renwick Smallpox Hospital.) The battle is reprised in the video game *Spider-Man 2*.

Of course, the Bridge had appeared in films before this. In *The Great Gatsby* (1974), Gatsby (Robert Redford) and Daisy (Mia

Farrow) drive over it (as do the lead characters in the 2013 version by Baz Luhrmann). In the 1976 De Laurentiis remake of *King Kong*, Jack (Jeff Bridges) and Dwan (Jessica Lange) think that Kong, like all primates, will not cross water, and they flee across the Queensboro Bridge to Manhattan.

The Tram's first filmic appearance may have been in Gerard Damiano's film *Odyssey, the Ultimate Trip* (1977). One of the lead female characters soars into Manhattan on the newly opened Tram for a modeling interview. Yes, that Damiano, more famous for directing (and writing) *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*. Alas, I haven't seen *Odyssey*, but one reviewer complains that Damiano takes too long to get to the first sex scene.

In the midst of what had become all too regular airplane hijackings (remember the "detour" to Cuba?), we worried that *Nighthawks* (1981) might give some nut ideas. The Tram, full of UN delegates, is held hostage by international terrorists Wulfgar (Rutger Hauer) and Shakka (Persis Khambatta). Hero cop DaSilva (Sylvester Stallone, doing his own stunts) is winched from a barge on the river into the Tram (where he rescues a baby but doesn't subdue the terrorists) and then winched down again. The Tram descends to our island where the terrorists and their hostages board a bus that will take them to JFK. They demand that DaSilva drive the bus so, presumably, they can off him at the airport. But DaSilva drives the vehicle, one of our own little Red Buses in a very forward role, into the river. Bad guys are taken and good people released. Was the Tram out of service for a week (several weeks?) because of this? I don't recall.

The Bridge had a serious part in *Turk 182* (1985). Jimmy Lynch (Timothy Hutton) battles with the mayor by tagging "Turk 182" all over the city. Finally, at a dedication ceremony for

the Bridge's 75th anniversary, Lynch alters the settings of the anniversary lights on the bridge to, of course, his tag. Hutton, also performing his own stunts, swings high above. In fact, the screenplay originally set the scene at the Verrazano Bridge, but the City urged a shift to the Queensboro which was about to celebrate its own, real-life 75th birthday.

The bridge has a more fleeting role in other films. The Queensboro (called "Gotham Bridge") was one of the few remaining bridges in the Batman flick, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), after Bane (Tom Hardy) takes control of the city. Late in the film Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) attempts to get some children out of the city, but is stopped by the police, who destroy a section of the Bridge. Early in *A Most Violent Year* (2014), thugs attempt to hijack a fuel truck on the Bridge (referred to as the "59th Street Bridge"), leading to a shootout and foot chase that leads down one of the Bridge's service staircases.

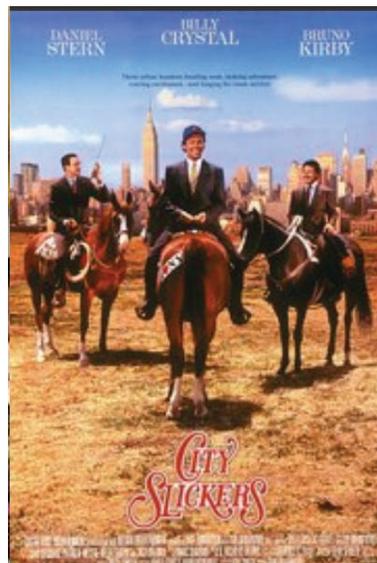
Roosevelt Island, the Bridge and the Tram all form the background for *City Slickers* (1991). The lead character, Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal) lives on the island, and we were tickled to see a movie with people living on our island—just like us. In the film's opening scene, Billy is commuting to work on the Tram—just like us.

Other films use the Island and Tram as background. In two, the Island appears more substantially.

*Conspiracy Theory* (1997) was shot on location in Times Square, Union Square, Greenwich Village, and on the Queensboro Bridge and our Island. Conspiracy-theorist New York City taxi driver Jerry Fletcher (Mel Gibson) continually expounds his ideas to

young lady lawyer and friend (he had rescued her from a mugging) Alice Sutton (Julia Roberts). The film's plot is pretty complicated, but the climactic scene was filmed in the abandoned (and soon to be torn down) Central Nurses' Residence.

Grimmer was *Dark Water*, a horror drama released in 2005 with unwelcome (and untrue) references to Roosevelt Island. After a difficult divorce, Dahlia (Jennifer Connelly) and her daughter move into a dilapidated low-rent apartment on Roosevelt Island where lots of bad things happen, including ghosts and a dead body found in the water tower. I learn from Wikipedia that the film is a remake of the 2002 Japanese film of the same name, which is in turn based on the short story "Floating Water" by Koji Suzuki.



Old-time RI residents saw lots of film shoots on the Island. Various lists of films with Queensboro Bridge and/or Roosevelt Island shots include *The Accidental Husband*, *Person of Interest*, *Escape from the Bronx*, *Anything Else*, *Autumn in New York*, *Before Night Falls*, *Changing Lanes*, *Down to Earth*, *Kate &*

*Leopold*, *Keeping the Faith*, *Leon: The Professional*, *The Secret of My Success*, *The Yards* and *Zoolander*.

Admittedly, we are not Hollywood. But as we have seen, Roosevelt Island, the Queensboro Bridge and the Tram all have a well-established place in American filmmaking.

(And a postscript: It's not a movie, but who didn't get a kick out of seeing the animated Tram zip by in the first season's opening credits to *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert? Unfortunately, it's now the second season, and the credits have moved on.)

## **RIHS Calendar**

**Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE**  
**@ the New York Public Library Branch, 524 Main St., 6:30 pm**

**Thursday, March 2**

**Christopher Payne, author**

**North Brother Island: The Last Unknown Place in New York City**

**Thursday, April 6**

**Judith Berdy**

**100 Years Ago Today— Metropolitan Hospital Goes to the Great War**

**Thursday, May 4**

**To Be Announced**

**Thursday, June 8**

**Thomas J. Campanella**

**Historian, urbanist and writer about our environment**

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