



CIFF

FILMSLAM 2019
43RD CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
STUDY GUIDE

FilmSlam

FILMSLAM IS PRESENTED BY

Bruening Foundation
The Char and Chuck Fowler Family Foundation
Cuyahoga Community College
Kiwanis Foundation of Cleveland
Louise H. and David S. Ingalls Foundation
Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Ohio Arts Council
Rakuten OverDrive
Tom Piraino and Barbara McWilliams
Third Federal Foundation

WITNESS THEATER

USA, 2019, 75 minutes
Oren Rudavsky, Director

SYNOPSIS

As the last generation of Holocaust survivors dwindles, it is now more important than ever to capture their stories and to prevent their memories from dying with them. The Witness Theater program in New York City has done just that. Over the course of a school year, eight Holocaust survivors and 16 high school seniors collaborated in telling these invaluable stories. The survivors entrusted their life experiences to the students, and together they created a theatrical production for the community, depicting the survivors' lives and the suffering they endured at the hands of the Nazis. For many of these survivors, this is the first opportunity they've had to share their stories with the world. Allowing us all to be witnesses, WITNESS THEATER is multifaceted storytelling at its finest. Created with tenderness, honesty, and the healing that comes from being heard, WITNESS THEATER is a transformative process for all involved, viewers included. – G.S.

FEATURING

Holocaust Survivors – Claudine Barbot, Ernest Biederman, Eazek Blum, Agnes Friedman, Khana Kuperman, Aron Tambor, Cipora Tambor, Elizeveta Vigonskaia

Students – Shelly Alkadaa, Ricky Aboutboul, Samantha Chabot, Sarali Cohen, Deborah Coopersmith, Frida Eskenazy, Sheila Franco, Amanda Heskiel, Diana Hoffstein, Mimi Lazerowitz, Isaac Levi, Suzy Mosseri, Abie Rosow, Estelle Saad, Max Shemtob, Jane Zakay
Sally Shatzkes – Witness Theater drama therapist and director

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Biography – Producer-director Oren Rudavsky is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and several National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts grants. His films have been selected for and screened at numerous film festivals and have also aired on PBS to much acclaim.

Filmography – “Spark Among the Ashes: A Bar Mitzvah in Poland” (1986), “At the Crossroads: Jews in Eastern Europe Today” (1990), “Saying Kaddish” (1991), “A Life Apart: Hasidism in America” (1997), “And Baby Makes 2” (1999), “Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance After the Holocaust” (2004), “The Treatment” (2006), “To Educate a Girl” (2010), “Colliding Dreams” (2015), “The Ruins of Lifta” (2016), “Joseph Pulitzer: Voice of the People” (2018), WITNESS THEATER (2019).

CURRICULUM LINKS

European History, American History, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Drama, Media Studies

CURRICULUM GOALS

- Improve media literacy
- Develop critical thinking skills
- Engage in interdisciplinary learning
- Hone oral and written communication skills
- Foster global awareness and social justice

FILMSLAM VIEWING GUIDE

The Art of Filmmaking

Filmmakers of both narrative and documentary films (of either short or feature length) make numerous artistic decisions throughout the filmmaking process, beginning with the conception of the film, through filming, and finally during distribution and marketing. Understanding film terms and the production process helps viewers to identify and interpret these artistic choices.

Crew: The people who are involved with the production of a film and who do not appear in the film. The following are a few of the numerous people that make up a film crew:

- **Producer:** The person who oversees the entire filmmaking process. The producer finds the script, hires a director, finds financing to make and distribute the film, and markets the film.
- **Director:** The person who supervises the creative aspects of a film and instructs the actors and crew.
- **Screenwriter:** The person who creates the story, action, and dialogue.
- **Cinematographer:** The person who is responsible for the camerawork and lighting.
- **Editor:** The person who selects what he/she considers are the best shots and pieces them together to produce scenes, then larger sequences, and ultimately the film.

Development/Pre-Production: The process of preparing the film concept, assembling the crew, and determining a budget and shooting schedule. The following are terms often associated with this phase of the filmmaking process:

- **Synopsis:** A short description of the film.
- **Screenplay:** A detailed written account of the dialogue and action of a film, often including basic camera directions.
- **Literary Elements:** Films share numerous elements with literature, including plot, characters, setting, point of view, mood, and theme.
- **Genre:** A type or classification of films with identifiable similarities. Comedies, westerns, musicals, horror films, and science fiction films are popular genres.
- **Storyboard:** A series of drawings showing the scenes, shot by shot, and transitions for a film. The storyboard gives a director a clear idea of how the film will look.

Photography: The process of capturing visual images with a camera. The director and cinematographer make artistic choices about the following aspects:

- **Frame:** A single photograph of the larger film strip.
- **Shot:** A unit of film or series of frames over which the camera does not stop filming.
- **Take:** The length (in terms of time) of a single shot.
- **Focus:** The variable degree (from **hard** to **soft**) to which the image is clear and sharp.
- **Camera Angle:** The placement of the camera relative to the subject. When a camera is placed above (looking down upon) the subject, the camera is at a **high angle**. When the camera is placed below (looking upwards at) the subject, the camera is at a **low angle**.
- **Range:** The apparent distance between the camera and the subject, differentiated as **close-up shots** (framing the head from the neck up), **medium shots** (framing the body from the waist up), and **long shots** (framing the entire body).
- **Composition:** The organization of subjects or objects within the frame of the film.

- **Lighting:** The use of natural or artificial illumination and shadows for the purpose of visual clarity and/or mood.
- **Camera Movement:** There are number of common types of camera movements, including **panning** (in which the camera pivots from right to left, or vice versa), **tilting** (in which the camera pivots upwards or downwards), and **tracking** (in which the entire camera moves forwards, backwards, or sideways).

Sound Design: The process, completed during or after filming, of capturing, creating, and interweaving dialogue, sound effects, and music. The following are terms associated with this process:

- **Soundtrack:** The recorded sound of a film, including dialogue, sound effects, and music.
- **Voiceover:** A voice of a narrator, generally not seen but heard on the soundtrack of a film.

Post-Production/Editing: The process, typically after filming has concluded, of combining shots, scenes, and sequences with the soundtrack. The following are terms associated with this phase:

- **Cut:** The distinct, abrupt transition from one frame to another.
- **Fade Out/Fade In:** A technique in which a shot gradually darkens until a new one emerges from the darkness.
- **Dissolve:** A technique in which one image gradually transitions into another image in such a way that the viewer can temporarily see both images at the same time.
- **Flashback:** A sequence of a film that shows events that happened prior to those already shown.
- **Title Sequence:** Written material at the beginning of a film, usually including the names of the people involved in the production of the film (the director, producer, screenwriter, cinematographer, featured actors, etc.) and sometimes called the opening credits or titles.
- **Intertitles:** Text displayed on the screen in between photographed shots or superimposed over a photographed image.

Distribution/Marketing: The process of selling and supplying films to exhibitors, including mainstream theaters, art house theaters, film festivals, television networks, and websites.

A Short History of Filmmaking: Nonfiction Films

Since the advent of motion pictures in the mid-1890s, filmmakers have been creating nonfiction films. Often lasting about a minute, silent nonfiction films were known as “actualities” and could be further classified into two predominant sub-genres: “scenics,” depicting a filmmaker’s travels; and “topicals,” delineating contemporary events. Brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière, early filmmakers and inventors, pioneered this mode, releasing “Workers Leaving the Factory” and “Arrival of a Train” in 1895.

The nonfiction film developed into a feature-length genre, then called a “documentary,” in the 1920s. Filmmaker Robert Flaherty directed the internationally celebrated “Nanook of the North” about an Inuit family in Northern Canada in 1922. Featuring numerous staged reenactments of the family’s daily activities, “Nanook of the North” portrayed Flaherty’s subjective understanding of Inuit life. Among those impressed with Flaherty’s work was British documentarian John Grierson. Throughout the 1930s, Grierson, who mainly garnered financial support from the government and businesses instead of the film industry, lauded the educational function of film and produced a number of noteworthy documentaries, including “Night Mail” in 1936.

In addition to these feature-length documentaries, newsreels, which often preceded the screenings of Hollywood narrative films, kept viewers informed about current events prior to the

invention and popularization of television. During World War II, the American government depended upon newsreels and documentaries to explain America's role in the war and to build morale. Academy Award®-winning directors, including Frank Capra, John Ford, and William Wyler, contributed to the war effort by filming educational, and largely propagandistic, documentaries.

Following the war, new technologies transformed the style of documentaries in the 1950s and 1960s. Lighter, more portable camera and sound equipment allowed filmmakers to capture events as they happened. While some filmmakers strove for a more personal documentary style during this period, a movement known as Direct Cinema (related to the French *cinéma vérité* movement) aimed for immediacy, truth, and objectivity through techniques that called for the least amount of interference with their subjects. The “rockumentary” genre developed from this movement. D.A. Pennebaker, who directed “Don’t Look Back” (1967) about a Bob Dylan tour, and David and Albert Maysles, who along with Charlotte Zwerin directed “Gimme Shelter” (1970) about a Rolling Stones festival, were key figures in the Direct Cinema movement.

As filmmakers began to question their ability to achieve pure objectivity, the “synthetic” documentary emerged in the 1970s and continues to be a common style of documentary to this day. Filmmakers of synthetic documentary combine the observational methods of Direct Cinema with interviews, archival footage, intertitles, and music. In the 1990s, independent production companies found a growing audience for documentary films at film festivals, in art house theaters, and on cable television. The documentaries of Michael Moore (“Roger and Me” [1989], “Bowling for Columbine” [2002], “Fahrenheit 9/11” [2004]) and family-friendly nature documentaries like Luc Jacquet’s “March of the Penguins” (2005), among others, demonstrated the appeal of the mode amongst mainstream theater audiences, as well. Viewers’ familiarity with the conventions of documentaries allowed the “mockumentary,” or documentary parody—exemplified in the films of Christopher Guest (“Waiting for Guffman” [1996], “Best in Show” [2000]) and several comedic television series (“The Office” [2005-2013] and “Parks and Recreation” [2009-2015])—to take shape as a significant genre of contemporary popular culture. Today, crowd-sourcing websites, like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, enable young filmmakers to secure funding for their projects outside of studio support and thus have ushered in a new crop of innovative, socially significant documentaries.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading: Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010); David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010); Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

Assess the students' experiences viewing documentary films. Which documentaries have they seen? Discuss how documentary films differ from and are similar to fiction/narrative films. In your discussion, consider film scholar Bill Nichols's definition of documentary film: "Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory."

Screen the entire film or key scenes from one or more of the documentaries listed in the short history above. Research the historical context of the film's production and how changes in the film industry, film technology, and larger artistic movements affected its subject matter and style.

In preparation for the screening of WITNESS THEATER, explore other nonfiction works about the Holocaust. Consider one of the books listed in Dan Friedman's article "[Seven Holocaust Memoirs You Must Read](#)," published in the *Forward*, or one of the [documentaries suggested by the USC Shoah Foundation](#). (After attending FilmSlam, ask students to compare and contrast how various filmmakers and writers have represented coping with the traumas of the Holocaust.)

MAKING THE MOST OF POST-SCREENING Q&As

FilmSlam offers a unique opportunity for teachers and students to interact with filmmakers and/or local experts on the subject of the films screened. While teachers and students should feel comfortable asking any question inspired by their viewing of the films, the following questions (and many others) may help viewers understand the production process, how the subject of the film is important to their local community, and/or how they can get involved in local organizations.

What inspired the filmmaker to make a film on this subject?

What does the filmmaker hope audiences will take away from the film? (After the Q&A, consider if the filmmaker's answer aligns with or differs from your reaction to the film.)

How did the filmmaker get funding for the film?

How did the filmmaker assemble the production team? How big was the production team?

How long did the film take to produce?

Where else has or will this film be screened?

How or why is the subject of this film important to the students' local community?

How can students get involved?

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's [Behind Every Name a Story](#) project "gives voice to the experiences of survivors during the Holocaust." In a group of two or three students, select one of

the survivors and read his/her story. Then create a short scene to share the survivor's experience with the class.

Interview an older family member or friend about the hardships he/she has had to overcome in his/her life. What do you learn from the interview? Write a journal entry about how this person's life affects and inspires you.

PROMPTS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Interpreting Film Content, Characters, and Themes

Discuss the significance of the quotation by Elie Wiesel that opens the film: "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness."

Why have the survivors avoided talking about their experiences before and during World War II?

Describe your reaction to the survivor's stories. What story did you find most surprising? What story did you find most moving?

In voiceover, drama therapist and director Sally Shatzkes says, "It's not enough to watch a movie about someone. It's not enough to read somebody's book. And it's not enough to go and hear somebody speak one time. There is never enough ink, never enough time, to hear the stories of the Holocaust." What does this quotation mean for viewers of the film? How should we respond?

How does beginning the program by playing games help the participants?

Why is it important that the student (instead of the survivor) shares the survivor's story with the larger group?

At the Museum of Jewish Heritage, Eazek says, "Behind all those objects, there used to be a life. There was a community. That's all what [sic] is left." Consider this statement in relation to the scenes in which the students visit the survivors' houses. What objects help to communicate the survivors' stories?

Why does Aron say that his suffering started after the camp?

How did each survivor's country of origin influence their unique experience?

How do the relationships between the students and survivors evolve over the course of the program? Give examples to support your answer.

How does the performance affect the students? How does the performance affect the survivors?

What questions would you have liked to ask the survivors?

Interpreting Film Style*

Documentarians have a number of tools for presenting information: interviews or “talking heads” (testimonials of witnesses or experts); observational footage (images of events as they happen); reenactments or staged events; archival footage (images initially created by someone else); **intertitles**; **voiceovers**; and graphics (maps, charts, or diagrams). Which of these tools does the filmmaker employ? What role does archival footage play in this film? Which events might be staged in this film? Which do you think are most effective at conveying the film’s message?

How does the filmmaker visualize the memories shared in the film? Identify the tools used in specific scenes to support your answer.

Consider the structure of the film. How does the filmmaker piece together the tools listed above to present a compelling documentary? How does the filmmaker transition between the different informational tools? How do these choices affect your interpretation of the film?

Recall the **range of shots** and **camera angles** the filmmaker uses. When does the filmmaker use **close-up** shots, **medium** shots, or **long** shots? What effect do framing and camera angles have on your understanding of the participants’ experiences?

Discuss the rehearsal scenes. How does the filmmaker use editing and music to make the scenes both humorous and a little suspenseful?

*Definitions for terms in **bold** can be found in the FilmSlam Viewing Guide.