

Witness

THEATER

A documentary that follows the journeys of Holocaust survivors and high school students as they share stories of loss, struggle, and lives rebuilt and experience the healing power of intergenerational relationships.

WitnessTheaterTheFilm.com



North American distribution:

Menemsha Films

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Selfhelp

Witness Theater Productions

About

Witness Theater: The Film was produced by award – winning documentary filmmaker Oren Rudavsky, together with Selfhelp Community Services. The film documents a nine – month period in which Holocaust survivors and high school students meet weekly to share their stories, which culminates in a series of public performances in the spring.

“*Witness Theater* is a terrifically moving film. It’s respectful of the Holocaust survivors, as well as the high school students fortunate enough to act/interact with them. This project not only valorizes survivors while continuing their legacy; it also endows young people with a dramatic understanding of the past, and the preciousness of life.”

- **Annette Insdorf**

Columbia University Film Professor and author of:

Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust

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.

Rudavsky produced the NEH funded American Masters documentary: Joseph Pulitzer: Voice of the People, broadcast date April, 2019. The film was chosen to premiere at the Mill Valley Film Festival and at the Hot Springs Documentary Festival. He produced *Witness Theater* a film chronicling a Selfhelp organized workshop between holocaust survivors and high-school students which will premiere in 2019. His films *Colliding Dreams* co-directed with Joseph Dorman, and *The Ruins of Liftaco* co-directed with Menachem Daum, were released theatrically in 2016. *Colliding Dreams* was broadcast on PBS in May 2018. For more information about Oren, the production team, and the cast, visit witnessheaterthefilm.com/about.

Selfhelp Community Services is a nonprofit organization in New York City that served more than 4,500 Holocaust survivors last year as they age in their homes and communities, with independence and dignity. Selfhelp operates the oldest and largest program serving Holocaust

survivors in North America, caring for over 4,500 elderly and frail individuals. Selfhelp services for Holocaust survivors honors the sacred pledge made by our founders: to serve as the last surviving relative to victims of Nazi persecution. This promise remains our imperative. Our overarching goal is to provide Holocaust survivors with the services they need so that they may live with the comfort and dignity they so richly deserve. To learn more about Selfhelp Community Services, visit www.selfhelp.net.

Film Synopsis

Aron is 88 years old, Eazek is 94 and Claudine is 89. Over seventy years ago, although they lost their entire families, they survived the holocaust and resettled in New York City. Now they are sharing their stories in a unique program led by a drama therapist with high-school students in Brooklyn. The hope is that this sharing will sensitize the students and give some closure to the adult survivors after all these years. The Witness Theater workshop they participate in culminates in the performance of a play based on Survivor stories.

The film that has emerged uses a mix of cinema verite, archival footage, interviews, animation and staged recreations of stories to blend past and present, using the Witness Theatre program as a vehicle for telling the survivors' remarkable stories. Scenes from the program's weekly creative workshops and final performance are interspersed with scenes of the survivors at home, all within the structure of a dramatic arc that traces survivors' lives before, during and after the war.

The result is a story that, told in the present, imparts insights into the effect of the past on multiple generations of Jews, while also illustrating the power and importance of transmitting experience from one generation to the next.

As the last generation of Holocaust survivors lives out their final years, the number of individuals who are physically and mentally able to “bear witness” dwindles and the question of what happens to their stories and their experience remains.

Director’s Statement

I was drawn into the orbit of Witness Theater quite accidentally four years ago in 2015, when my wife heard that our friend Celia Ores was participating in a unique workshop of Holocaust Survivors and high school students at the Heschel School in Manhattan, called Witness Theater. We spoke to Celia about the experience and then quite by accident, an acquaintance Heidi Rieger told me that she was a supporter of Witness Theater and would be excited to try to make a film about the workshop experience along with the Selfhelp community.

And thus my two-year immersion into Witness Theater began, with filming in two communities: at the Yeshivah Joel Braverman High School in Brooklyn and the Heschel School in Manhattan. What remarkable people I met! I knew the film that emerged would only include one school and the choice was made to focus on the Yeshivah community.

I have worked on a number of Holocaust related films, including *A Life Apart*, which focused on the remnants of the Hasidic community’s move from Europe to the United States in the wake of the Holocaust, to the film *Hiding and Seeking*, which told the story of an American family’s journey back to Poland to find the farmers who hid their grandfather.

What makes Witness Theater unique is both the close relationships I watched form between the survivors and the students who did not know each other when the project began, and the detailed, unique stories the survivors told. Out of this story sharing and close listening, relationships blossomed. These relationships were formed in the school and outside it and they continue to this day, long after the drama workshop and the performance of the play ended.

We documented it all. What I've discovered is the absolutely essential way that storytelling and listening keep history alive, teach kids to be witnesses and storytellers themselves. I see this process as being essential to all of us at a time when the last generation is passing on. I also see this process as being reproducible in so many survivor communities, and hope that viewers see the connection between Holocaust Survivors and all communities and individuals who have gone through trauma. I hope we can honor the experiences of people whose lives are very different than our own, so that their stories are not lost. And I hope that all young people are exposed to others whose experiences are different than their own and that they can all learn to talk to elders and learn to make the kind of unique friendships that the students of Witness Theater formed.

Downloads

View the Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/299267497/5d11da07d7>

Still photos for download:

www.dropbox.com/sh/1duz8k4npirkyd3/AABks0R2fa_4OuQMLUNx4HRHa?dl=0

Technical Details

Country of Origin:	United States of America
Language:	English
Running Time:	74min
Aspect Ratio:	16 x 9
Format:	Color

Credits

Director/Producer/Writer/Camera	Oren Rudavsky
Editor/ Writer	Zelda Greenstein
Composers	Olivier & Clare Manchon
Animators	Joel Orloff & Jazzman Lee – Johnson
Associate Producer/Asst. Editor	Clare Redden
Graphics	Andrew Roberts

Media Contact Information

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For information about Selfhelp Community Services, Witness Theater, the needs of survivors and/or to connect with a Holocaust survivor, contact:

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