

## A great film rocks local Fest

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Brookline — *“Deaf Jam”* plays Nov. 9 at 7 p.m. at the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline. It's part of the Boston Jewish Film Festival.

### Deaf Jam (A)

The star of this year's Boston Jewish Film Festival might be Aneta Brodski, a deaf teen firecracker with stories in her heart and a beautiful, dance-like way to tell them with American Sign Language. With her hunger for life, her bright eyes and a smile that seems to never fade from her expressive face, you root for her from start to finish of Judy Lief's highly artistic and deeply absorbing documentary “Deaf Jam.”

Lieff follows Aneta through a couple of years at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York, as she and some of her friends enter into an ASL poetry workshop. Her classmates are a charming and likeable bunch, but Aneta is clearly the star. First, even before she becomes a standout at ASL poetry, she demonstrates an ability to sign that's so precise and physical that she elevates it to an art form. I always thought I wanted to learn French; Aneta makes me think I'd like to learn ASL instead.

It's a natural fit: ASL and poetry. But the teachers wisely push the students to emphasize and refine their storytelling: What personal thoughts are they impassioned about sharing? You get the sense that Aneta is a woman of introspection and insight, and she's got something to say. The story she tells at one of her first performances, to an audience full of deaf students, not only gloriously blurs the line between ASL, mime and acting, it's such a sweet and empowering story that it just might make you cry.

As the program gains momentum, the film follows Aneta and her classmates to a poetry slam, where they are the only nonspeaking performers. Aneta, perhaps a bit headstrong, wants to perform without a verbal translator, and just let the audience catch whatever they can. As always, her signing is lovely, but the audience doesn't catch much.

Aneta is such a promising performer that eventually she's teamed with another bright young woman, a hearing slam poet (and student at Columbia University), named Shiran, who happens to be Palestinian. Almost incidental to the story, Aneta is an Israeli immigrant. The two bond. But credit to director Lieff for never underscoring the political implications of this partnership and turning it into a syrupy statement. She just lets it exist for what it is: a Jew and a Palestinian finding a way — across the huge chasm of language — to not only communicate, but also become friends.

If you think it's impossible to make an artful documentary, check out “Deaf Jam.” The great success of the film rides squarely on the shoulders of two women — the endlessly enchanting Aneta and Lieff, who takes a project fraught with the potential for failure (the film's stars can't talk and instead communicate with a language the rest of us can't interpret) and turns it into 70 compelling minutes. She's masterful in her use of the score, often drawing on hip and percussive beats that emphasize the high drama and mesmerizing break-dance-like physicality of ASL. It's documentary filmmaking of the highest order.

In the end, “Deaf Jam” just makes you feel good: Good about Aneta, good about the quality of education she and her friends are getting, and good about the future of a country that will be left in the hands of these bright, capable, motivated, resilient students.

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