

CHARLESTON CITY PAPER

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Actions speak louder than words in *Deaf Jam*

Hear No, Speak No

by Abigail Darlington

Deaf Jam is a documentary you can't take your eyes off of. If you do, you're probably missing the point. American Sign Language (ASL) poetry must be seen, not heard. But instead of opening with an explanation of her film, and what ASL poetry even is, director Judy Lieff lets us figure it out for ourselves. At first, it's pretty frustrating. Hints are thrown at us through shots of rapid sign language and animated subtitles that are difficult to follow. As the film progresses, the metaphor becomes clear. She's demonstrating to the "hearing people," as we are called in the film, what it's like to be thrown into a language we can't understand. Her technique is effective, and it attaches the viewer to the cause in a way words could not. And once you catch onto the film's rhythm, it all begins to fall into place.

ASL poetry is basically spoken word for the deaf. It's a physical demonstration that combines facial expressions, hand gestures, and even dance to create stories, and those stories are what make *Deaf Jam* so powerful. In the film, a group of teachers at Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens, N.Y., are assembling an ASL poetry team to compete at poetry slams like Urban Word in New York City. Through poetry, the students reveal their struggles with deafness, their family life, and even their love lives. Lieff pays equal attention to those issues; she doesn't just narrow in on the sad stories to tug on our heart strings.

And her honesty isn't coincidental — it's crucial to the film's meaning. At their first competition, Lieff muffles and mutes the sound during a passionate spoken performance on stage. She cuts to a shot of the Deaf Jam team and we see one girl sign to her friend, "I'm bored." This candid moment is the first time we are able to understand the gravity of that communication barrier. Their peers at Lexington offer them a culture that they belong to, but outside the school walls, they're shut out of the rhetoric.

At a more hopeful moment in the film, a spoken word poet, Tahani, offers Aneta, a deaf ASL poet and the film's protagonist, the opportunity to work with her on a collaborative piece. When the girls begin working together, Tahani reveals she is a Muslim from Palestine. Aneta, a Jewish immigrant, signs back, "Really? I'm from Israel." And that's that. Though Lieff could have dramatized their relationship, she lets their final performance do the talking. The effect is powerfully symbolic and sets up a rather emotional ending to the film. In other words, keep your tissues nearby.

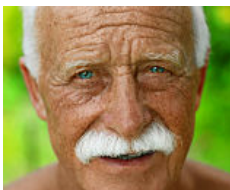
Deaf Jam may end on a moving note, but it's not meant to be chicken soup for the soul. The overall aim of the film is to recalibrate our perception of deafness. In one pivotal scene, a group of ASL poetry teachers sit at a café and sign a discussion about cochlear implants. The overall consensus among them is that though deafness is a daily challenge, it's also a culture that relies entirely on its shared language. If deafness is cured, their language, and by proxy their culture, will become obsolete.

Lieff succeeds in representing that culture authentically. She doesn't just use subtitles and interpreters; she makes us understand their language for what it is. Their worldview is often overlooked, which makes *Deaf Jam's* message all the more powerful. But like ALS poetry itself, it must be seen, not heard.

Community Cinema Charleston hosts the free screening of *Deaf Jam* at the *Olde North Charleston Picture House* (4820 Jenkins Ave.) on Oct. 23 at 4 p.m. A discussion will follow. Visit parkcirclefilms.org for more info.

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