

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA

Synopsis

One sentence: John Lithgow narrates the story of a team of idealistic filmmakers who, during the darkest hour of global war, hoped the power of the movies could reshape the world.

One paragraph: During the darkest hour of the WWII, a team of idealistic filmmakers hoped the power of the movies could reshape the world. Led by Academy Award-winning screenwriter Robert Riskin, the filmmakers created twenty-six short documentaries about American life shown to millions of people around the world. The “Projections of America” films told stories of cowboys and oilmen, farmers and window washers, immigrants and school children, capturing the optimism and messiness of American democracy. The gorgeously crafted films were idealized versions of what America *could* be, created by politically engaged filmmakers who while fighting tyranny abroad, wanted also to fundamentally change America itself. But seventy years later, the films have disappeared. John Lithgow narrates this story of war, idealism, and the power of cinema.

Long synopsis: PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA is the story of a team of idealistic filmmakers who, during the darkest days of World War II, hoped the power of the movies could reshape the world. As Allied forces liberated Western Europe, the military campaign was accompanied by a vast propaganda effort, and at its center were 26 short documentaries about American life targeted at the newly liberated populations.

The PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA films presented American stories – of cowboys and oilmen, farmers and window washers, immigrants and school children – capturing the optimism and messiness of American democracy. The gorgeously crafted films were idealized versions of what America *could* be, created by politically engaged filmmakers who wanted to fundamentally change America itself while fighting tyranny abroad. The project was headed up by the Academy Award-winning Hollywood screenwriter Robert Riskin, who had written many of Frank Capra’s greatest films. Riskin’s personal and political journey, including his passionate romance with the beautiful movie actress, Fay Wray (*King Kong*), is the dramatic heart of the story. Teaming up with an improbable collection of brilliant filmmakers – including Josef von Sternberg and John Houseman, as well as many of the giants in the documentary field – Riskin created some of the most indelible images of America ever put to film.

More than a film about filmmaking, PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA is a story about the audacity of trying to build a better world in the midst of the most devastating conflict in human history. The emotionally charged story is narrated by the acclaimed actor John Lithgow, and told through rare and evocative archival materials, including pristine new transfers of the “Projections” films themselves, interwoven with interviews with filmmakers, audience members, and film critics. Passionate letters between Robert Riskin and Fay Wray, read by actors, frame this story of war, idealism, and cinema in an unforgettable, personal narrative.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A 'JEEP'

Synopsis

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A 'JEEP' is a 1943 propaganda film produced by the US Office of War Information as part of its Projections of America documentary series.

The ten-minute film is told from the perspective of a Jeep, the utilitarian military vehicle that exemplified a can-do American attitude. As historian Ian Scott describes in the PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA documentary, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A 'JEEP' was “arguably the most successful of the Projections films, and of course in many respects it was the most simple – a tale where you create a piece of machinery that has human emotions and expressions and can tell the tale and relate the narration itself for you.”

The film was screened around the world, but was especially popular in France, where it had its first screenings soon after the D-Day landings. According to the *New York Times*, whenever the film was shown in Normandy, audiences responded with cheers of “Vive la jeep!”

It was directed by documentarian Irving Lerner, a left-leaning filmmaker who would eventually be caught up in the Hollywood blacklist, and written by Joseph Krungold, whose straight-forward prose would later win him Newbery Awards for two of his children's books.

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA
Credits

Directed by
Peter Miller

Based on an idea by
Antje Boehmert & Christian Popp

Narrated by
John Lithgow

Written by
Peter Miller

Producers
Antje Boehmert, Peter Miller, Christian Popp

Editor
Amy Linton

Director of Photography
Antonio Rossi

Senior Advisor and Story Consultant
Ian Scott

Historical Advisor
Marja Roholl

Associate Producers
Jonas Schilling, Amy Linton

Commissioning Editors ZDF/ARTE
Martin Pieper, Türkân Schirmer

A DOCDAYS Productions film

A co-production with
Willow Pond Films & ZDF

In collaboration with ARTE

Distributed by PBS International

Developed with the support of
MEDIA Programme of the European Union

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA

Director's statement

The Projections of America films are twenty-six brilliant but forgotten documentaries that helped to change the world. As a passionate fan of non-fiction film, this was an irresistible subject for me to take on.

I was approached about the project by the Berlin-based documentary company Docdays Productions and its producer, Antje Boehmert, who had discovered this untold story. Antje had seen an earlier documentary I had made that, by coincidence, featured a short clip from one of the Projections films. I had known nothing about the Projections series, but as soon as I learned about it, I was convinced that its story needed to be told. And when I watched the films themselves – beautifully crafted, character-driven stories that reflected what America could be if it lived up to its ideals – I was hooked.

Our filmmaking work reflected the international spirit of our subject. We produced the film in Berlin and New York. We tracked down eyewitnesses to our story, including children from France and Germany who had watched the Projections films in bombed-out theaters during the 1940s. Our chief historian was from Manchester, England, and we filmed with members of Robert Riskin's family and his filmmaking team from Southern California to Northern Vermont. Our film editor, Amy Linton, cut the documentary in Atlanta, and our original score was written and performed in Berlin.

The story of these forgotten movies is of great filmmaking, high ideals, and the audacity of imagining a better world in the midst of the worst conflict in human history. We made our film at time when the world is again shaken by conflict and America's role in it is increasingly uncertain. My hope is that the story of the Projections of America documentaries can provoke us to think about how America can use its power to communicate to help bridge dangerous divides and imagine a future that embraces our best ideals.

- Peter Miller

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA

Director's bio

Peter Miller's award-winning documentaries include the theatrically released A.K.A. DOC POMUS, JEWS AND BASEBALL: AN AMERICAN LOVE STORY, and SACCO AND VANZETTI. With Carlos Sandoval, he directed the Latino civil rights documentary A CLASS APART, which was recently acquired by Eva Longoria to become a feature film. With Renée Silverman, he produced, directed and shot SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD, about a theater project uniting Jewish and Latino teenagers, and REFUGEE KIDS: ONE SMALL SCHOOL TAKES ON THE WORLD, now in film festivals. His musical film THE INTERNATIONALE was short-listed for an Academy Award nomination. A long-time producer for Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, he's served in various producing roles on landmark PBS programs including JAZZ, THE WAR, and the Peabody Award-winning FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT. Peter's latest film, PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA, tells a story of how documentary film can help us imagine a better world – a goal he aspires to in his own filmmaking work.

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA
Screenings and awards (as of May 2016)

European television broadcast on ARTE, October 2014
Cosima Cinema, Berlin, February 2015
International Festival of Films on Art, Montreal, March 2015
Stony Brook Film Festival, July 2015
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, July 2015
Air Canada, in-flight movie selection, Summer 2015
WNC Film Series, Asheville, NC, September 2015
National Archives, Washington, DC, October 2015
Dallas VideoFest, October 2015
Virginia Film Festival, November 2015
Boston Jewish Film Festival, November 2015
Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival, November 2015
Santa Fe Film Festival, December 2015
New York Jewish Film Festival, January 2016
Santa Barbara Film Festival, February 2016
San Diego Jewish Film Festival, February 2016
Beaufort International Film Festival, February 2106
Chicago Jewish Film Festival, March 2016
Seton Hall University, March 2016
Salem Film Fest, March 2016
North Hollywood International Film Festival, April 2016
Bucharest Jewish Film Festival, June 2016
Berkshires Jewish Film Festival, July 2016

Awards:

Best Documentary, San Diego Jewish Film Festival, 2016
Metta Media Award, Dallas VideoFest, 2015

PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA

Press

[The Los Angeles Beat](#) As with the best films about filmmaking and filmmakers the pleasures of PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA, Peter Miller's wonderful addition to what is becoming one of the preeminent bodies of work in current documentary cinema, are multi-layered. And as the narrative of this profoundly moving film unfolds it is difficult to sort out whether the wonderment is more from the story itself, the beauty with which it is told or the drama and suffering of the world war within which it takes place.

[Dallas Film Now](#) A lovingly crafted homage to screenwriter Robert Riskin and his team of Hollywood artists who assisted in the war effort by producing and spreading our own propaganda films immediately after liberating certain countries. Initially – and rightfully – distrustful of the Allied forces, Riskin's films of everyday life in America... helped to lessen the citizen's unease... PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA touches deeply on two of my favorite subjects – World War II and the movies – which only endeared the documentary to my heart and many festival goers as well.

[The Hollywood Reporter](#) An informative slice of history enlivened by a Hollywood love story.

[The Forward](#) A documentary gem.

[The Jewish Week](#) Miller wisely chooses Riskin as his point of entry into the subject, not only because as a Jewish-American Riskin had a lot at stake in the war and its aftermath, but because as a veteran of a particular moment in Hollywood history, Riskin brought an unusual skill set to the task of introducing the rest of the world to the still relatively unfamiliar American way(s) of life. Add to that Riskin's winning personality and eloquence, and the story of his courtship of and marriage to Fay Wray, and you have a splendid armature for what might otherwise have been just another piece of Hollywood Americana.

[This Week In New York](#) Together, PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA and THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A JEEP shed light on a fascinating aspect of what the country believed itself to be and what its hopes and dreams were for the future.

[Unseen Films](#) You'll forgive me if this is brief because the film is nigh impossible to critique. A breezy, no nonsense film it tells you everything you need to know about the films and why their shunting to a back alley of film history is a real shame.

[Santa Fe New Mexican](#) PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA is especially timely, as politicians and citizens argue over immigration and refugee issues in the wake of terrorist attacks and civil wars raging outside of our borders, as well as the very nature of what it means to be an American.

[Italian Cinema Today](#) A beautiful, compelling film.

[Huffington Post](#) One of the documentaries featured in the 35th annual San Francisco Jewish Film Festival focuses on the cinematic propaganda machine created by the United States Office of War Information. The agency's efforts aimed at domestic audiences were obviously intended to support the war effort. What most people don't know is that the OWI's newsreels were produced under the leadership of screenwriter Robert Riskin (won an Oscar in 1935 for *It Happened One Night*) and was a frequent collaborator with director Frank Capra. Riskin was also married to Fay Wray (the star of 1933's *King Kong*). Without a doubt, the favorite OWI film shown around the world was 1943's *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A JEEP*. Narrated by John Lithgow, Peter Miller's documentary, *PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA*, pays tribute to the work of Riskin and the OWI's secret film unit.

[48 Hills](#) (San Francisco): If you are a fan of Frank Capra's greatest films then you unknowingly are a fan of the Oscar winning screenwriter, Robert Riskin. The dynamic duo of Capra and Riskin swept all the main categories at the Oscars in 1935 for *It Happened One Night* (1934), a feat only two other films in history have done, and continued to churn out some of the most important "All-American" films of the Depression including *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *You Can't Take It With You* (1938) followed by lesser known masterpieces: *Meet John Doe* (1941), *Lady for a Day* (1933) and *American Madness* (1932). Understandably, both were called on to help "the good fight" of WWII (as were other giants at the time like John Ford and Orson Welles). While many people have heard of Frank Capra's flag-waving *Why We Fight* propaganda films, made to counterbalance Adolph Hitler's movies like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), very few Americans have ever heard of Robert Riskin's decidedly different approach to pro-American sentiments. Talk about a screening not to miss!

[Boston Jewish Film Festival](#) interview with director Peter Miller

[Santa Fe Radio Café, KSFR](#) interview with director Peter Miller

[Santa Barbara Independent](#) interview with Peter Miller and Victoria Riskin

[The Salem News](#) interview with director Peter Miller