A film by Peter Miller & Renée Silverman

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SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Synopsis

LONG SYNOPSIS:

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD tells the story of Jewish and Dominican teenagers in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood, who together with the legendary theater director Liz Swados, put on a musical about the Dominican rescue of 800 Jews from Hitler. Award winning filmmakers Peter Miller and Renée Silverman interweave an intimate, behind-the-scenes portrait of the making of the theater production with this little-known Holocaust story.

Through the young actors' eyes, we are introduced to a morally complex history in which the Dominican dictator, Raphael Trujillo – a murderous strongman – took in the Jews largely because they were white, at the same time he was also murdering tens of thousands of Haitians because they were not. This forgotten story is shown in rare archival images of the Dominican rescue effort, from FDR's Evian Conference, to boatloads of refugees in New York harbor, to the tiny rural outpost of Sosúa in the Dominican Republic where the Jews launched their new lives.

Over the course of the film, we are engrossed by the alchemy that the cast members reveal in the making of the show. We see a disparate group of young, untested, talented Dominican and Jewish kids who through dancing, singing, crying and creating theater together, form new bonds forged on old ties.

In a neighborhood where Jews and Latinos live side by side but rarely interact, SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD charts the students extraordinary journey of discovery of what unites them – both in the past and in the present.

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD tells the story of Dominican and Jewish teenagers in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood, who together with the legendary theater director Liz Swados, put on a musical about the Dominican Republic's rescue of 800 Jews from Hitler. Award-winning filmmakers Peter Miller and Renée Silverman interweave this little-known – and racially complex – Holocaust story with an intimate, behind-the-scenes portrait of the making of the theater production. In a neighborhood where Jews and Latinos live side by side but rarely interact, the theater project brings its young actors on an extraordinary journey of discovery of what unites them – both in the past and in the present.

55 minute documentary, USA

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Critical acclaim

DVD Verdict
"Sosúa is what you'd expect…and it isn't. As you'd expect, the film follows the evolution of musical from its initial discussions to opening night. What you might not expect is that the emphasis isn't the music, but rather the history, one that still resounds in Washington Heights today." - *more*

Jewish Women's Archive
"This fascinating movie provides great insight into the magic of theater as well as into a little known aspect of Shoah history." - *more*

School Library Journal
"Following the tradition of Mad Hot Ballroom and Brooklyn Castle, filmmakers Peter Miller and Renée Silverman give us a window into the lives of precocious kids and teens, who learn to overcome the challenges of their socioeconomic background and forge new paths. Perfect for social studies units on the Holocaust, Latin American history, or Hispanic Heritage Month, this film can also be enjoyed by budding actors and theater enthusiasts." - *more*

The Jewish Daily Forward "Only in New York could a troupe of Jewish and Dominican kids team up with a Broadway legend on a musical production about a Latin dictator's rescue of Jews during the Holocaust." - *more*

Diario Libre (Anibal de Castro, Ambassador to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic)
"The film explores diversity and breaks down the boundaries between two communities in Washington Heights, united by an episode in history." - *more*

The New York Jewish Week
"Jewish and Dominican teens forming bonds over the Sosúa story." - *more*

The Jerusalem Post
"An uplifting Holocaust escape story has become a tool to unite a mixed community of Jews and Dominicans." - *more*

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Film credits

Directed and Produced by
PETER MILLER
RENÉE SILVERMAN

Edited by
AARON VEGA

Associate Producer
CAROLINE BERLER

Camera
PETER MILLER

Sound
CAROLINE BERLER

Music Composed by
LIZ SWADOS

Instrumental Music Performed by
SAM WILLMOTT – piano/arranger
HIROYUKI MATSUURA – drums/percussion

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Bios

PETER MILLER (DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/CINEMATOGRAPHER): 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 (winner of the American Historical Association's best film award). With Carlos Sandoval, he directed and produced A CLASS APART (PBS American Experience, Imagen Award). His musical film THE INTERNATIONALE was short-listed for an Academy Award nomination. With Docdays Productions in Berlin, he wrote and directed PROJECTIONS OF AMERICA, about a little-known American WWII propaganda film unit. With Renée Silverman, he produced, directed and shot SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD (shown on PBS stations nationwide) and REFUGEE KIDS: ONE SMALL SCHOOL TAKES ON THE WORLD (now screening in communities everywhere). His most recent film is ROBERT SHAW: MAN OF MANY VOICES, about the celebrated conductor.

Peter has been a producer on numerous documentaries by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, including the PBS series THE WAR and JAZZ, as well as the Peabody Award-winning FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT. He's served in various producing roles on films including THE UPRISING OF '34, PASSIN' IT ON (winner of twenty film festival prizes), the Academy Award-winning AMERICAN DREAM, and many other celebrated documentaries. He works regularly as a script consultant, writer, and music supervisor.

RENÉE SILVERMAN (DIRECTOR/PRODUCER: Renée Silverman (director/producer) is an award-winning director who, together with her producing partner, Peter Miller, has made SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD which was broadcast on dozens of PBS affiliates across America, and REFUGEE KIDS: ONE SMALL SCHOOL TAKES ON THE WORLD , which will be launching a nation wide grass roots campaign this fall.

Renée is also a news and documentary producer whose work has been distributed theatrically and broadcast on major networks including PBS, ARD and ZDF German Public Television Networks, the BBC, Channel Four, UK and NHK, among others. For over twenty years, she has been producing hundreds of reports on politics, science, economics and culture including an award winning 3-part feature series on global warming in Alaska for German NOVA, dozens of breaking new stories, four presidential elections, two hurricanes and countless red carpets.

Having started her career in narrative filmmaking as an assistant to feature director, Jerry Schatzberg, she has also written, produced and directed two award winning short dramatic films, Other Islands and Deep Water. She is currently writing an episodic television series, THE GENIUS OF PARIS, set in 1903, that follows the birth of the modern era through the circles of young Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso in Paris and Sigmund Freud in Vienna.

Renée is a graduate of Barnard College, Columbia University and holds a Masters degree in Comparative Literature from New York University. She spent a semester abroad at the University of Haifa and studied German at the Free University of Berlin. She works and lives in New York City with her husband, Sebastian Zimmermann and their two children.

AARON VEGA (EDITOR) has edited many documentaries for PBS, including A CLASS APART (for PBS American Experience), JOHN AUDUBON: DRAWN FROM NATURE (for PBS American Masters), RACE TO THE MOON: THE APOLLO 8 STORY (American Experience), Ken Burns's JAZZ, and RAM DASS: FIERCE GRACE (PBS). A leader and activist in his own community, Aaron has served as a city council member at large in his hometown of Holyoke, Massachusetts, and was recently elected to a seat in the Massachusetts state legislature.

CAROLINE BERLER (ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, SOUND RECORDIST) has worked on several feature length documentaries, including A.K.A DOC POMUS and JEWS & BASEBALL: AN AMERICAN LOVE STORY. In 2012, she founded Riverhouse Pictures, a film production collective in Brooklyn, New York. She is currently producing and directing EAGLE FORD, TEXAS is about the oil and gas boom happening now in her native South Texas.

ELIZABETH SWADOS: Perhaps best known for her Broadway and international smash hit *Runaways*, Elizabeth Swados composed, wrote, and directed for over 30 years. Some of her works include the Obie Award winning *Trilogy* at La Mama, *Alice at the Palace* with Meryl Streep at the New York Shakespeare Theater Festival and *Groundhog*, which was optioned by Milos Forman for a film. Her work has been performed on Broadway, off-Broadway, at La MaMa, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Carnegie Hall, and locations all over the world. She also composed highly acclaimed dance scores for well-known choreographers in the US, Europe and South America. Ms. Swados created issue-oriented theater with young people for her entire career. This work has culminated in a theatrical extravaganza for New York University, *The Reality Show*, about the trials and tribulations of college in New York City.

Ms. Swados also published novels, non-fiction books, children's books and poetry to great acclaim, and received the Ken Award for her book *My Depression*. Her theater textbook, *At Play: Teaching Teenagers Theater*, was published by Faber & Faber in 2006. Her first book of poetry, *The One and Only Human Galaxy*, was published by Hanging Loose Press.

Awards: Five Tony nominations, three Obie Awards, Guggenheim Fellowship, Ford Grant, Helen Hayes Award, Lila Acheson Wallace Grant, PEN Citation, and others.

Ms. Swados passed away in January 2016.

VICTORIA NEZNANSKY is the Chief Program Officer at the YM & YWHA of Washington Heights, where she conceived and produced the play, SOSÚA: DARE TO DANCE TOGETHER and was instrumental in the planning of the subsequent

documentary. Recognized by the U.S. State Department for her outstanding work with refugees, Ms. Neznansky has had a distinguished clinical career in the field of trauma and immigration. She emigrated from the Ukraine in 1989 and holds a Master Degree in Social Work from NYU.

MARTIN ENGLISHER has served as Executive Vice President of the YM & YWHA of Washington Heights and Inwood since 1981, worked at Y the for over forty years and has been affiliated with the Y from childhood. Among his countless awards and honors, Mr. Englisher was the receipient of the prestigious 2012 Neighborhood Achievement Award for Leadership for outstanding community work at the highest level. Mr. Englisher holds an MBA in Management from Fordham University.

THE MUSICAL: "SOSÚA:
DARE TO DANCE TOGETHER"
Credits

Composed and directed by LIZ SWADOS
Conceived and Originated by VICTORIA NEZNANSKY
Assistant Director – MATTHEW GEHRING
Music Director – SHAINA TAUB
Set and Puppetry Designer – ELI KAPLAN-WILDMANN

MARTIN ENGLISHER
Executive Vice President
YM & YWHA OF WASHINGTON HEIGHTS AND INWOOD

Produced by the YM & YWHA OF WASHINGTON HEIGHTS AND INWOOD
With the generous support of the UJA-Federation of New York

Cast

KAITLIN ABREU
CINDY DE LA CRUZ
KASSANDRA DE LA CRUZ
MARCELA ESPAILLAT
DARIEN FERNANDEZ
ANNIE FIDOTEN
JEREMY GERSHONOWITZ
JOHN GUTIERREZ
JORDAN HOEPELMAN
DEREK JEFFRY
CODY KOSTRO
BRETT KRUTIANSKY
HANNAH KRUTIANSKY
NAOMI NESHER
BEN PAKMAN
THALIA PIGNANELLI
LUIS RODRÍGUEZ
ALISON SCHILLING
MARGARET SAUNDERS
ZOE TCHAPRASTE

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Directors' statements

A few years back, the Washington Heights YM+YWHA program director, Vicki Neznansky, approached Peter and me about documenting an upcoming teen musical. "This is not going to be some amateur kid production," Vicki assured us. "It's going to be a big, life changing experience that will speak to the whole community and beyond." Vicki proceeded to describe how the story of the musical would be based on a true but little publicized chapter of Holocaust history when the murderous dictator of the Dominican Republic, Generalissimo Trujillo offered refuge to 800 European Jews. They ultimately came to settle in the deserted outpost of Sosúa from 1939 until the end of WWII.

Vicki then announced that the illustrious Broadway director, Liz Swados, had agreed to direct and compose the show. Swados has been a hero of mine since her 1978 hit, "Runaways". Peter and I were intrigued and curious about how the project would unfold and agreed to film the first day.

We arrived early and trailed the kids who auditioned in groups of ten. There we filmed for the first time John, 17, who shared hilarious stories on being the only Dominican scholarship student at an elite Princeton boarding school and Nomi, 12, who candidly dissected her raw experience at the Y camp where the Dominican and Jewish girls assiduously avoided contact with each other. Then there was Jordan, 14, a heavy set boy who declared – on camera, "I want to prove them wrong – the kids who tease me – I want to show them that I can be somebody."

Peter and I were both hooked – we could see the seeds for a feature documentary. The structure of the "making of" chronology would enable us to explore and interweave a compelling array of themes. We'd have the "fly on the wall" perspective on the creative process of a world-class theater artist with a unique approach to workshopping material with young people. The historical underpinnings for the show offered the opportunity of including rare archival materials in a fresh light. Most importantly, the film would tell the individual stories of adolescents who are unguarded and articulate interpreters of what it means to come of age – and to come together – in a diverse urban neighborhood.

We spent the next ten months filming the kids at rehearsals, celebrating holidays, and kibitzing during down time and also at home, in their schools and communities. In that time, we strived to capture the elusive quality of what it means to have a life transforming experience – especially at this critical moment in the kids' development. As Liz says, "It doesn't happen in a day; it doesn't happen in even a year – it's not Disney but you can see it in their eyes." We not only had the privilege of seeing it "in their eyes" but also witnessing the creation of a community that did indeed transform lives. I hope that some of the magic of this visionary project has been captured in our film – and will indeed go beyond "the whole community" to touch viewers with its honesty and passion.

– Renée Silverman

I'm drawn to stories of how history shapes our lives. The films I've made about the past are always just as much meditations about the present, using historical stories as a lens for understanding who we are today. Among my most recent films are two about Jewish subjects; JEWS AND BASEBALL and AKA DOC POMUS, and one about Latino history, A CLASS APART: A MEXICAN AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS STORY. Each film was at its heart about underdogs overcoming bigotry and barriers to become vital parts of the American mainstream. SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD is in many ways a culmination of all of the stories I've been fortunate enough to tell in my films. It's been an amazing experience watching the Dominican and Jewish teenagers come together to learn about their common past, and in the process, discover what unites them in the present. Jews and Latinos live side-by-side in Washington Heights but too infrequently interact. That putting on a play about a little-known story from the Holocaust brought them together is testament to the power of history and the necessity of the arts in our lives. I am overjoyed that my friend and filmmaking partner Renée Silverman invited me to join her in documenting this amazing story. And I look sharing the SOSÚA story with audiences and thinking about ways in which more barriers can be brought down in our wonderfully diverse nation.

– Peter Miller

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
Historical background

A History of the Jewish settlement in the Dominican Republic:

Founded in 1938 as a haven for Jews escaping Nazi persecution, Sosúa was an isolated settlement on the coast of the Dominican Republic that offered refuge to approximately 800 hundred German, Austrian and Polish Jews from 1940 –1945.

The proposal to settle Jews in Sosúa emerged from the 1938 Evian Conference, convened by Franklin Roosevelt in response to the growing Jewish refugee crisis in Europe. Among the 39 nations attending, the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo was the only one to come forward with an offer to accept one hundred thousand Jewish refugees. Trujillo's offer was an especially generous in relation to the general population as there were only 1.6 million people living in the Dominican Republic at that time.

A murderous and racist dictator, Trujillo's offer to rescue Jews stemmed from his desire to improve his international reputation after the "Parsley Massacre" of 1937 where an estimated 20,000 Haitians were slaughtered at the Haitian/Dominican border. (It is called the "Parsley Massacre" because the Haitians and the Dominicans were so blended that their ethnicity was determined by how one pronounced the Spanish word for 'parsley'. The Haitians who couldn't roll their "r's" in Spanish were killed.)

In addition to redeeming his image, Trujillo was also said to be interested in "whitening" the general population of the DR. While the entire world was evolving toward restrictive immigration policies and created barriers against Jewish refugees, the Dominican Republic represented a rare exception. Still, racism was also an underlying principle for Dominican immigration policy, but Jews, in this instance, "passed" the fictitious color line and were welcomed on the condition that they become agricultural workers. The Joint Distribution Committee, an American Jewish organization, created a the Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA) and funded it to purchase 26,000 acres of an abandoned banana plantation in Sosúa.

Initially, the settlement struggled. The settlers needed a period of adjustment to the semi-tropical climate of the island. Tomatoes, the first crop chosen for commercial exploitation, proved unattractive to the local Dominican population. The colony appeared headed for disintegration. DORSA imported experts from kibbutzim in Palestine to teach the settlers communal agriculture. The kibbutzniks helped build a communal meat processing plant and a butter and cheese factory. A trickle of refugee settlers continued to the town despite the fact that the American entry into the war made it even harder to cross the Atlantic. By October 1941, the Nazis had cut off Jewish emigration from occupied Europe. Meanwhile, by 1944, the settlement in Sosúa began to thrive as the colonists focused on raising cattle, and on butter and cheese production.

All told, the Dominican Republic saved the lives of about three thousand Jewish refugees, at times merely by granting them a visa. About two thousand Jews passed through the Dominican Republic before arriving at their final destination, the United States. Trujillo, in tandem with American Jewish organizations, would have welcomed many more refugees were it not for the lack of support of the United States during the war. Today, thousands worldwide can trace their family heritage to the Jews of Sosúa.

Excerpted from:

- http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sosua1.html

- Marion Kaplan, Dominican Haven: Jewish Refuge Settlement in Sosúa, 1940-1945 (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage- A Living Memorial to the Holocaust), 2008.

- NPR – Tell Me More – "Dominicans, Haitians Remember Parsley Massacre, October 1, 2012"

SOSÚA: MAKE A BETTER WORLD
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