

Beautiful Hills *of* Brooklyn

Jessie, an 80-year-old woman, carries a suitcase down the stairs of an old apartment building. She has been forced to move out of the city because her beloved neighborhood has become too dangerous. We hear her speak the words of the Walt Whitman poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

"...I, too, lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine..."

About The Production

Beautiful Hills of Brooklyn is a transcendent story of the human spirit, told through the ordinary, daily life of an elderly woman – strong, independent and unsentimental – the kind of life that goes on quietly among us, hidden from view, full of undiscovered riches. Moving effortlessly from present time to reverie, director **Ragnar Freidank** captures Jessie's remarkable inner life, with a spare beauty and lyrical grace that resonate far beyond the limits of her world.

The production is a film adaptation of Ellen Cassedy's award-winning one-woman play, based on the diary written by her great-aunt, Jessie Singer Sylvester, between 1976 and 1978 and discovered by Cassedy, tucked away in a

dresser drawer after her aunt's death. "When I discovered her amazing journal, I was mesmerized by its strong, poetic voice," says Cassedy, a playwright and award-winning short story writer.

Filmed entirely on practical locations in Brooklyn in the fall of 2007 and completed in the spring of 2008, the film stars Broadway, film and television actress **Joanna Merlin**, who created the role of Jessie in the original stage production and also co-wrote and produced the film.

"I found the very ordinariness of Jessie compelling", says Ms. Merlin, "I was inspired by her courage, her ability to take care of herself under difficult circumstances and her efforts to enrich her life."

An accomplished international stage director, **Ragnar Freidank** brought a unique artistic vision to his directorial film debut. "What is a diary," he asks, "but a conversation with our invisible selves? I translated this into the relationship between Jessie and the camera. The point of view is delicate, like an emerging friendship until, ultimately, Jessie notices our presence and begins to speak to us through the camera."

"Ragnar dreamed in images, encouraged my imagination and gave me the freedom to discover what was unwritten," says Ms. Merlin. "Now that I am older and suddenly find myself alone, I understand Jessie's need to fill the silence and the empty spaces. Jessie deeply loved her sister, whom she visited every day in the hospital, and her memories of their childhood shaped the framework of the film."

“I was very moved by Joanna’s wonderful performance in the stage production,” says Mr. Freidank. “We wanted to create a film together that could move beyond the linear plot of the story and utilize the medium of film to explore the poetic images in the language of the diary.”

Michael Chekhov Association presents *Beautiful Hills of Brooklyn*, starring Joanna Merlin and directed by Ragnar Freidank. The film was written by Joanna Merlin and Ragnar Freidank, based on the play by Ellen Cassedy. The director of photography was Edward Marritz, with production design by Alexis Weiss and original music by Kazzrie Jaxen. The film was edited by Bob Jorissen and executive produced by Bob Balaban.

About the Cast

Joanna Merlin (Jessie/Screenwriter/Producer) made her Broadway debut opposite Laurence Olivier in *Becket*, created the role of Tzeitel in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and has appeared extensively on the Broadway stage as well as in off-Broadway and regional productions. Her film credits include *Invasion*, starring Nicole Kidman, and co-starring roles in *City of Angels* with Dennis Franz, *Class Action* with Gene Hackman, *Mystic Pizza* with Julia Roberts, *Fame*, *All That Jazz*, and *The Killing Fields*. She was most recently onscreen in 2008's *The Wackness*, which won Best Picture at the LA Film Festival and the Audience Award at Sundance. Among her many television appearances, she co-starred in HBO's *Witness Protection* and has a recurring role as Judge Lena Petrovsky on *Law and Order, Special Victims Unit*.

As a casting director, Ms. Merlin is the recipient of two Casting Society of America Artios Awards for her work on Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Her film credits as a casting director also include *Year of the Dragon*, *Big Trouble in Little China*, and Merchant Ivory's *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, as well as the U.S. casting for their films *Jefferson in Paris* and *Surviving Picasso*. As casting director for Harold Prince, she cast the original Broadway productions of Sondheim's *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Merrily We Roll Along*, as well as *Evita* and *On the Twentieth Century*.

Ms. Merlin is the President of the Michael Chekhov Association, a co-founder of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (formerly the Non-Traditional Casting Project), and a former member of the Tony Awards nominating committee. She is a faculty member at the NYU Graduate Acting Program at the Tisch School of the Arts and teaches regular workshops at the American Conservatory Theatre, the Manhattan School of Music. Her book, [Auditioning: An Actor Friendly Guide](#), was published by Vintage in May of 2001 and is in its eighth printing.

About The Filmmakers

Ragnar Freidank (Director/Screenwriter) makes his feature directorial debut with *Beautiful Hills of Brooklyn*. As a stage director, he has worked in New York, Connecticut and Germany, and his credits include productions of *The Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*, *The Stronger*, *Oscar und die Dame in Rosa*, *Monsieur Ibrahim und die Blumen des Koran*, *Waiting for Godot*, *I Have Never Been Here*, and *Uncle Ethan Ripley*.

He began his career as a performer, receiving his MFA in Acting from the Conservatory of Music and Theatre in Hamburg. He was awarded a scholarship to study the Michael Chekhov technique in New York, which led to a long association with The Actors Ensemble. In addition to his theatre credits in New York, Mr. Freidank has worked as an actor in Germany, as well as in Budapest, London and Stockholm.

Mr. Freidank also teaches at the Graduate Acting Programs of Columbia University and the New School. He has been invited to teach workshops in both academic and professional venues across the country and internationally, ranging from Sarah Lawrence College and Brandeis University to The Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Theatre Institute in Connecticut and The Actor's Center in Rome.

He continues to work closely with MICHA, the Michael Chekhov Association, and has taught at numerous Teacher Training Workshops and International Conferences in the United States and Europe.

The project marks his second collaboration with Joanna Merlin, cinematographer Edward Marritz and editor Bob Jorissen. They worked together on the acclaimed NEA-funded series, *Master Classes in the Michael Chekhov Technique*, on which he served as Co-Artistic Director with Ms. Merlin.

Ellen Cassedy (Playwright) connects the stories of ordinary people with social issues as a speaker, journalist and playwright. She won a Moondance Festival Award in 2002 for her play, *Beautiful Hills of Brooklyn*, upon which the film is based. Ms. Cassedy was a founder and longtime leader of 9 to 5, the national association of working women that inspired the film *Nine to Five*, starring Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton. She is the author of two books for women workers and a contributing writer to *Hadassah*, *The Forward*, and other publications. She is a frequent and popular speaker, sharing the story of her great-aunt's diary and encouraging dialogue about the ways in which individuals and society can respond to the unique needs of the elderly with greater insight, compassion and caring.

Bob Balaban (Executive Producer) was a multiple-Emmy nominee in 2008, including Best Director, for HBO's *Bernard and Doris*, starring Ralph Fiennes and Susan Sarandon. He also received an Emmy nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in HBO's *Recount*. In 2001, he received a Best Picture Academy Award nomination for his production of Robert Altman's ensemble murder mystery *Gosford Park*, the critically acclaimed film in which he also co-starred. An accomplished stage, screen and television actor, he received a Tony nomination in 1979 for his Broadway performance in *The Inspector General*.

Mr. Balaban's extensive feature credits include all of Christopher Guest's films: *Waiting For Guffman*, *Best In Show*, *A Mighty Wind*, and *For Your Consideration*; *Miami Vice*, *Absence of Malice*, *Bob Roberts*, *Deconstructing Harry*, *The Majestic*, *Lady in the Water*, *Parents*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* He made a cameo appearance in the Oscar nominated film *Capote*. He made his screen debut in the Academy Award-winning *Midnight Cowboy* opposite Jon Voight. His directing credits include Showtime's *The Brass Ring* and the television series *Tales of the Darkside* and *Amazing Stories*. His feature directorial debut was the black comedy *Parents*, followed by *My Boyfriend's Back* and *The Last Good Time*.

Edward Marritz (Cinematographer) received an Emmy nomination for Best Cinematography for his work on HBO's *In Memoriam: 9/11 New York City*. Specializing in documentary features, his credits include the Academy Award-winning film *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, the 2003 Emmy Award winner for Best Science Documentary *The Secret Life of the Brain*, and the Columbia Peabody award recipient *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*. He photographed the Academy Award-nominated *Why Can't We Be a Family Again?* and is currently working on a project for the acclaimed PBS documentary series *Frontline*.

Alexis Weiss (Production Designer) was the Art Director on two episodes of the TV series *The Burg* and served as Set Decorator on the series *Splurge and Sam* and *The Ultimate Color Guide*. She began her career working as Prop Master on *The Treatment*, *The Visitor*, *Capers* and *The Untitled Nicole Holofcener Project*.

Bob Jorissen (Editor) has been honored with an Emmy Award and two BDA Gold Awards and has extensive documentary and independent feature credits. Recent theatrical releases include *The Simian Line*, starring Harry Connick, Jr., and two films he co-edited with director Heather MacDonald: *Been Rich All My Life* and *Ballot Measure 9*, which received an Audience Award at Sundance and won a Teddy at the Berlin Film Festival. He recently completed the second in a series of documentaries by director Michael Apter, *Married in America*, and has an impressive list of PBS credits, including *Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* and an acclaimed series he created with producer Robert Byrd, *The Diary Series* for KTCA, the PBS station in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Kazzrie Jaxen (Composer) is a prolific jazz pianist and recording artist who has performed throughout the United States and Europe, both as solo artist and with her jazz duos and trios. Her latest album is *Prayers and Mad Laughter*. She won the 2006 Digit Festival Award for Best Musical Work for her innovative outdoor performance, Roebing Resonance, and has recorded extensively on the New Artists and Jazz Records labels. She has created two one-woman shows, *Kazzrie in Boogie and Blue* and *Changing Keys*.

AWARDS

Big Apple Film Festival | **BEST SHORT FILM**

Beverly Hills Hi-Def Film Festival | **AUDIENCE AWARD**

Washington, D.C. Independent Film Festival | **AUDIENCE AWARD**

Las Vegas international Film Festival | **GOLDEN ACE AWARD**

World Fest Houston | **SILVER REMI AWARD FOR DIRECTING**

OFFICIAL SELECTIONS

Connecticut Film Festival | **IN COMPETITION**

L. A. Show Off Your Shorts Festival | **SEMI-FINALIST**

International Zolotoy Vityaz Film Festival in Russia

INVITATIONS

2nd Intl. Russia Abroad Film Festival | **OPENING NIGHT FILM**

Cannes Short Film Corner

CFC Worldwide Short Film Festival Market