



Acting Out, Acting In . . .

A Documentary Short Film by Joe Habraken

Reviewed

by

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Acting Out, Acting In delivers a very worthy look into an unusual program designed to help young offenders in the Maine juvenile justice system prepare themselves for re-entry into the work a day world. Filmmaker Joe Habraken introduces us to the subject of his documentary short with a montage of quick intercutting images revealing the story's setting, the Maine Long Creek Juvenile Detention Center and inside its walls, surprisingly, a group of young male inmates in the midst of a rehearsal. Three black and white still frames

dissolve into the briefest snippets of full color action introducing these young men, but only the third shot provides any revelation. In this shot a young African American inmate, Ali, demands of the audience “I am not a criminal. You and I, we are one and the same.” Ali’s demand is the doorway into Habraken’s film. The accompanying simple, yet hope filled piano underscore sets the perfect tone. From here viewers are introduced to various stakeholders who supervise the detention center and the volunteers who work closely with the incarcerated young men of the Maine Inside Out program. We learn that the volunteers help interested inmates create original plays about their lives. We meet various inmates and see the volunteers, who all have backgrounds in theater, help guide the young playwrights in the act of play creation. And we also see pieces of these young men’s efforts brought to life in performance. Through the film we come to understand a little about these young men, their hopes and dreams and more about the essence of the Inside Out program.

As the film unfolds there are many interesting aspects and ideas revealed along the way. Habraken experiments with a variety of stylistic elements to relate his story. To introduce certain ideas related to his juvenile subjects he often begins a shot or set of shots as a black and white still, then dissolves to color, restarting in the action a bit earlier than the still and then proceeding. The effect is a bit jarring, intentionally so, as the Inside Out program seeks to unfreeze the lives of these men. A different technique is used when introducing the primary volunteers, each shot beginning in action, then carried through and freeze framed at the end of the shot. Later in the film, to accent the end of a play’s performance, Habraken imagines the main character’s idea of freedom using a super eight film styled montage made up of outdoor shots aptly set to a musical underscore. The openness of these shots contrasts clearly with the closed internal feel of the rest of the film and underlines the feelings that these young men must carry with them on a daily basis. Interviews with the volunteers and detention center workers provide useful information as we develop an idea about the Inside Out program and its goals. And we get to learn more about the youthful inmates through both their actions and short interview style clips.

There is much to admire in *Acting Out, Acting In*, yet for this viewer somehow all the story pieces do not quite finally come together whole. Why, one thinks? Perhaps it is the

structure of the story. On first examination the film's story is loosely structured and seems to meander a bit as it delivers its messages. At its bones it asks important story questions in just the right places. From the opening's enticing hook, "I am not a criminal," we want to discover if "Ali," as a representative of the juvenile in detention, is true to his word. And early in the film we do spend significant on screen time with him, enough to believe he will be a key character and a lens into the story as it continues to unfold. But before the first play's performance an inter-title reveals that Ali has been released and we do not see him for the remainder of the film. And we miss his absence. Around ten minutes in, as the play is being performed before an audience in a church off campus, one of the performers repeated asks of other characters in the play, "Who are you?" And yes, perfect timing again, we want to know who are these young men? Why are they here? And how is this program helping them? It seems a great time to dive into these meaty questions, but perhaps because of the loss of Ali, the filmmaker uses the repeating question as a means of introducing the players in the play, in a way restarting the story as opposed to diving into the question. We do get a few quick glimpses into the play as it is being performed but none reveal more about these boys. And it is here we jump into the next section of the story, where we discover a program related to Inside Out, the S.O.L.O. program, for inmates about to be released. And we are introduced to a new set of inmates who are creating a different play for performance. So this then for me appears to be why the story seems to go a little off track. It is really two separate stories, with separate real life characters and story threads. As we leave the first story behind at around eleven and a half minutes, we jump into a second story, remaining unresolved with the first story, unanswered questions swirling. We wonder if deeper glimpses into the performance of the first play might have revealed more about these young men. We wonder what the last line of the play, "this is our punishment, what is yours?" really means. We wonder if different questions being asked of the performers in their close-ups might have provided some deeper understanding. We wonder what the first play is all about.

In the second story we do develop a deeper understanding of the process used in the S.O.L.O. program and of the participating inmates as well. We hear more from these inmates, we see more of what they are up to. The core of the story unfolds about twenty-

one minutes into the twenty-nine minute film. For the first time we see an extended portion of a play in rehearsal, enough to see inside the story of these young men's lives. As Zac, one of the play's main characters, struggles with what he will do once he is discharged from detention, we are opened up to our shared humanity. These are gem like moments. We discover a little about the inner "man," the answer to that question raised earlier in the film, "Who are you?" As Zac struggles with his hopes and fears, the viewer connects. We have the same sorts of hopes and fears. And sometimes we act out, we make mistakes, sometimes we let them overwhelm us, but, like Zac, in the end we must put ourselves together, we must go forward. Each of us must find our way. It is in this part of the film that the bravery of these kids comes through. And therefore, the dedication and caring of the detention center staff and volunteers who work to make Inside Out successful also comes through.

As we consider these ideas the big surprise comes to us. This is a different story. In an environment where we might expect juvenile inmates to be closed off, silent, territorial, to act out in destructive ways, we instead discover something transformative. Habraken shows us here that through the arts and through relationship, these young men have discovered it is okay to reveal themselves, to be on camera, to be vulnerable. When we see such kids hugging each other, questioning, laughing, we understand these young men have found a safe place to be boys, a safe place to show who they really are, and to learn that they are not alone. And enclosed in that safe non-judgmental place they become bound by hopeful common endeavor, not bound by the mistakes of their pasts. Isn't that something special and unique for each of us to ponder?