

'The Rink': Two up-and-coming filmmakers document roller skating in Brick City

By Sarah Friedland

About a year ago, The RINKSIDER highlighted the work of two young filmmakers intent on producing a documentary about one rink in Newark, N.J., and the diverse group of skaters who call it home. The 52-minute documentary entitled "The Rink" is now complete.

This new film by Sarah Friedland and Ryan Joseph tells the story of Newark's Branch Brook Park Roller Rink and follows the lives of some of the skaters there. According to Friedland, "This vibrant film depicts a space cherished by skaters and a city struggling to move beyond its past and forge a new narrative amidst contemporary social issues. "The Rink" illustrates a space transformed and its symbolic representation to those who use it."

Synopsis:

Branch Brook Park Roller Rink, located in Newark, N.J., is one of the few remaining urban rinks of its kind. This concrete structure is nestled in the pit of a hill, bordered by public housing and a highway. Upon first glance, the exterior resembles a fallout shelter; however, the streamers and lights of the interior are reminiscent of 1970s roller discos. Serving extremely diverse subcultures within Newark, the rink is a microcosm of the

city that surrounds it.

The film opens with the train ride into Newark. As the train glides through city, the passing landscape is met by the sound and image of hundreds of skaters moving against the train's direction. We enter the rink and the lights come on across the ceiling to reveal a football field sized floor with a disco ball in the center, voices remembering the race rebellion of 1969 echo in the empty space. One voice challenges, "Society has basically written this place off the map, and we've got to put it back on the map. Not just all that fancy stuff downtown, but for the people who live in the city of Newark."

This statement is repeated throughout the film. In a peppy and fast paced style that reflects the feel of the roller rink, The Rink features many Newarkers and roller skating personalities. Through these fascinating characters, the film visits facets of Newark's rich history, such as the scattered Italian American community of the 1950s 'Old First Ward'; the rebellion of 1969; the late 1970s house music scene at club Zanzibar; and the current "renaissance" redevelopment of the downtown area.

Two main characters emerge in the film: Bonesaw, a tough talking, tattooed member of the Garden State Roller Derby team; and Graylen, a deeply spiritual, Gospel Night skater.

These two groups converge in the Rink. The predominantly African American Gospel Skaters say the Lord's Prayer and enter the rink floor for a night of praise and worship. As their skating session winds down, the predominantly Caucasian Roller Derby Girls enter the rink and scrimmage to heavy metal music. Reminiscent of the city's racially divided past; the two groups pass each other with little more than a sideways glance. Graylen and Bonesaw are revealed in their perspective crowds.

Gospel Skating and Graylen "Stephen" Vereen

Graylen is a Department of Motor Vehicles employee, a deacon at his church and, above all, a father. As a young man growing up fatherless in Trenton, N.J., during the late '70s and early '80s, he became addicted to crack while frequenting the popular House Dance clubs of Newark. He has been clean for twenty-five years and his biggest joys in life are his children. Graylen takes fourteen year-old Future and ten year-old Graylen Junior to Gospel Skate Night every Monday. For him skating is a form of praise, part of his deeply religious core that provides the structure he needs to maintain a drug free life.

Roller Derby and Michelle, "Bonesaw" Mickey

Bonesaw is one of the original members of the Garden State Roller Derby Team. She grew up in the foster care system and by age seventeen was living in the streets of Jersey City and Newark, where she struggled with addiction and a violent tendency that landed her in prison multiple times. Bonesaw has been sober for over five years and is currently a construction worker. The only woman at her job, she often has to put up with abusive language bordering on sexual harassment. Bonesaw has loved both men and women, but she is currently with her long-term friend and co-worker, Mark, and the two are trying very hard to begin a family, which is something that she has always desired. For Bonesaw, Derby provides a place where she can, "be aggressive and not get in trouble."

The film comes to a close with a broad look at the thousands of skaters who breathe life into the rink with the ebb and flow of many of wheels whipping around the floor. There is one last conflict that is faced collectively, the extinction of American roller rinks. In the last five years, real estate pressures have forced many roller rinks out of urban areas: 'Empire' in Brooklyn; 'Skate Key' in the South Bronx; and 'The Roxy' in Manhattan were cultural meccas for decades. These once vibrant community havens have been abandoned or demolished to make space for more

profitable businesses. Displaced skaters who now frequent Branch Brook speak longingly of their home rinks as images of these now transformed spaces have play on the screen.

'The Roxy' is abandoned, 'The Skate Key' is a glass factory and 'Empire' is a storage facility. Branch Brook has the names of closed rinks graffitied on its back wall; a memorial to these once great places or a reminder of what is to come? The Rink is a tribute to spaces of diversion in American cities, places where citizens can congregate, create community, and enjoy life outside of the stigma normally associated with urban areas.

For further information visit www.therinkfilm.com. To get in touch with the filmmakers please contact Sarah Friedland (917-859-8328) or Ryan Joseph (917-519-0091) or send an email to therinkthemovie@gmail.com.

About the filmmakers:

Sarah Friedland- Director/Producer

Friedland began her career as an editor, working on many projects including the Emmy nominated film, "The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo" by Amy Stechler. Her short, experimental documentary, "Breath on The Mirror," screened widely: Anthology Film Archives, San Francisco Film Festival, Athens Film Festival, and the Scanners VideoFestival at Lincoln Center.

Friedland's first, feature documentary, "Thing With No Name," premiered at the Los Angeles Film Festival and screened at over 50 festivals internationally and nationally. Her work has been supported by grants from the Jerome Foundation, the Paul Newman Foundation and the William H. Prusoff Foundation. She is currently producing a feature documentary entitled, "Jeepney."

In 2009, Friedland was named one of the "10 independent filmmakers to look out for" by Independent Magazine. She is currently an Assistant Professor at John Jay College in New York City.

Ryan Joseph- Producer

Ryan Joseph was born in Trinidad, West Indies and now resides in Jersey City, N.J.. He initially started work as a photo assistant after graduating with a B.A. from Lehman College with a concentration in graphic design and photography. He has been a freelance documentary photographer for seven years and is a recent graduate of the MFA program in Integrated Media Art at Hunter College, with a concentration in documentary filmmaking and photojournalism.

Ryan's work has been displayed at Aljira - Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, New Jersey, The John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, in Baltimore, Maryland, among other venues. He was published in The New York Times, Jet Magazine, En Foco Photogra-

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