

A Cinema Guild Release

Ifavor Entertainment, Inc. and Trigger Street
Present

SHAKESPEARE HIGH

Directed by Alex Rotaru

U.S.A., 2011, 81 min., Not Rated

Opens in New York March 9 (Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center) with additional cities to follow

*Best of the Fest winner, 2012 Palm Springs International Film Festival

*Official Selection 2011 Tribeca Film Festival

Press stills: <http://www.cinemaguild.com/downloads>

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Short Synopsis

Shakespeare High is a riveting documentary about a socio-economic cross-section of teens in Southern California that study Shakespeare to compete in a drama Festival run by the many hundred-strong volunteer teacher organization: DTASC (Drama Teachers Association of Southern California).

The film focuses primarily on under-served teens, highlighting the life-changing effect that this activity and competition have for them. It underscores the necessity of an arts curriculum and its effectiveness in saving lives and keeping young people engaged and in school.

Highlighted are a compelling group of teens with dramatic personal stories, including: Tosh, African-American, a sophomore; Luis, Latino, a sophomore; and Chris, Latino, a senior - all three former gangbangers from East LA's Pacoima Valley on their last stop before juvenile prison. Nicole lives in Hesperia, an isolated, low-income desert community, and comes from a struggling family. Tommy was raised by his single mother in Hesperia after his parents - former prominent skin-heads - separated. Galvin and Melvin are African-American twin brothers who witnessed their father murder their mother and grandmother following an acrimonious divorce. Through their love of drama and involvement in DTASC, these determined kids - and others like them - overcome their difficulties and create the enduring foundations of better lives for themselves.

Several stage and screen celebrities, including Kevin Spacey, Val Kilmer, Richard Dreyfus, and Mare Winningham - all DTASC alumni/ae - appear in the film to discuss and teach students hands-on the magic of drama and Shakespeare.

Long Synopsis

Shakespeare High is a feature-length documentary about a determined group of teens in Southern California whose immersion in high-school drama programs compels them to overcome difficulties and create better lives. The film demonstrates that arts education, specifically drama in public schools, is not a luxury but a necessity.

The film follows several teens from all over Southern California, as they prepare and then compete in the 90th Annual DTASC (Drama Teachers Association of Southern California) Shakespeare Competition. All of these teens face challenges at home including poverty, gangs, drugs, lack of mentorship/parenting, and the trials and tribulations of adolescence. They tell their inspirational personal stories and we see the impact that arts education has on their lives by providing community, focus, passion, communication skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness.

Some of the teens featured in the film include:

1. In East LA, Tosh an African American sophomore, formerly a gangbanger, was on the verge of dropping out of high school. A self-described bully and violent teen, Tosh joined the drama club, and as a result stayed in school, achieved exemplary grades and is preparing to go to college. His high-school principal states that Tosh now “expresses himself through art rather than violence”, and Tosh says that “without theater I have nothing”....
2. Taco – Tosh’s scene-mate had been kicked out of his local school because of truancy and gang participation. After being taken in by relatives Taco began attending his new school with a drama program. Taco talks about how studying and performing Shakespeare and acting has changed his life. He has decided to become a psychologist and wants to attend Cornell University.
3. Nicole, an earnest teen, lives in Hesperia, an isolated, low-income desert community. She comes from a loving, but impoverished family, and her mother suffers from a terminal disease. She can’t afford to go to a four-year college and despairs that she’ll never leave Hesperia. When she is with her drama group, rehearsing and performing, Nicole feels energized, optimistic and full of life. Her passion for drama propels her to work hard in school and think about her future, and her compassionate and dedicated drama teacher encourages her and guides her.
4. Tommy, an energetic, spry redhead, was raised by his mother in Hesperia after his former skin-head parents separated and his father left his family. Until he found drama, Tommy mostly played video games and spent aimless time with his friends. Upon joining his high school drama program, his passion for comedy developed; he now lives and breathes drama and is focused on his future. We see Tommy and his drama friends rehearsing day and night for the DTASC competition, in the desert, at school, while driving in the car...it is their consuming passion.
5. Galvin and Melvin are new to drama. African American twin brothers, they excel at sports and academics. They live with their aunt and uncle because a few years ago their father murdered their mother following an acrimonious divorce. They are both natural leaders and

achievers but prior to studying drama they lacked the emotional outlet needed to help them deal with their family tragedy. By joining their drama program and rehearsing Othello, they are finally able to access their deepest emotions, as well as their deepest fears and insecurities.

- ❖ These are a few of the stories in Shakespeare High which shows talented and passionate kids working together toward a common goal that reflects and transcends their ethnic and socioeconomic divides.
- ❖ The teen's stories are interspersed with commentary from well-known celebrities including Kevin Spacey, Val Kilmer and Richard Dreyfus, all of whom are alumni of the DTASC program.

The teens and celebrities demonstrate that their lives have been changed through their arts education program at their local school. These already thin budgets are sadly being depleted in California and throughout the country. As funding for education diminishes, arts programs are the first to be cut.

By telling these striking, dramatic and inspirational stories, and through our outreach, we plan to start a national discussion about the necessity of funding arts education, especially for underserved children, and then find and inspire major funders of arts education to endow public and public charter schools with arts education budgets.

We strongly believe every child in every school has the right to a well-rounded education, of which the arts are an essential ingredient. Beyond having great value in and of itself, the arts promote the health and well-being of children, including academic and personal growth, critical thinking and analytical skills, and the motivation to stay in school and excel. A high quality arts education is central to a complete education.

Social Change Goals

Shakespeare High will be an agent for social change with the ultimate goal being to perpetually fund arts education in public high schools in the U.S. We are at a critical turning point in our country's education system and to quote President Obama, "now is the time to reinvest in arts education and reinvigorate the creativity and innovation that made this country great." Our vision for Shakespeare High is to inspire and propel educators, policy makers, students, citizens, foundations and private sector funders to systemically change the American educational system and continuously fund the arts. Decades of research have shown consistent links between academic and personal success and high-quality arts education and we hope to use the film to illustrate the positive impact and necessity of arts education in our schools. We are off to an excellent start in our mission as Shakespeare High was featured at National Arts Advocacy Day in April 2011 and has a variety of theatre, literacy and charter associations interested in partnership and collaboration.

Director's Statement

Growing up in Communist Romania, my love of the arts was the one thing which allowed me to show up, study, and eventually excel in school. Even when my surroundings seemed hopeless, I found endless hope and inspiration in theater, music, literature, and film. I was especially affected by the works of William Shakespeare, to which I was exposed at a very early age by my parents: Maria, an actress, and Eugen, a playwright. Many parents in their generation used exposure to the arts to insulate their children - teenagers in the dreaded Communist Eighties! - against the intellectually oppressive environment of the time, and to stimulate the unimpeded growth of our imagination and self-worth. When I came to the US on a college scholarship, a few years after the fall of Communism in 1989, I began noticing that the same principle applied here, even though - of course! - the challenges thrown in the path of teens growing up in the US are essentially different and extremely diverse. The passion for the arts and education survived my various transformations and eventually carried over to filmmaking. It first took shape in PBS P.O.V.'s **The Hobart Shakespeareans**, which I co-authored with my mentor, doc giant Mel Stuart; then in **They Came To Play**, a film about the Van Cliburn Amateur Piano Competition which, I'm glad to say, was very well received here in New York and elsewhere; and in **Kids With Cameras**, which shows children on the autis spectrum using filmmaking and theatre arts to connect and communicate with the world, and was recently selected by the Department of State to represent US values abroad in its American Documentary Showcase. With **Shakespeare High**, the cycle is complete, on what I pray the audiences will agree is a strong, upbeat note, despite the current budgetary climate which has arts education against a wall and denied funding. I can only hope that the simple lessons of our film will be used by parents, educators and - why not? - legislators, empowering other teens to become, in their turn, part of "the happy few" - since this kind of achievement is indeed accessible to everyone.

About the Filmmakers

Executive Producers: Kevin Spacey and Dana Brunetti (Trigger Street Productions); Dean Devlin and Eugen Rotaru.

Alex Rotaru - Director & Producer – Alex was born in Bucharest, Romania, to actress Maria Rotaru and playwright Eugen Rotaru. After an early career as an award-winning teenage actor, he fell in love with science, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics, first in his class, from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He interrupted his PhD studies in Physics to get an MFA in film from USC. He has directed the documentaries *They Came to Play* and *Kids With Cameras*, and is prepping his first narrative feature.

Brad Koepenick - Producer - Brad developed innovative education techniques for young actors/film makers, and autistic children. His successful work led to many teaching honors, including the 2006 HART VISION AWARD / California Charter Teacher of the Year, and to being asked on the board of directors for California Educational Theater Association, Drama Teachers Association of Southern California, California Charter Association Member Council, and Actors For Autism.

Lori Miller - Producer - Lori's most recent film is the documentary, **They Came To Play**, about the Van Cliburn Amateur Piano Competition. She graduated from Barnard College, and Columbia Business School, and has produced several feature films, including: **Panic**, **Perfect Opposites** and **The Last Supper**.

Ronnie Planalp - Producer - Ronnie's career has spanned senior roles in investment banking, publishing, the internet, recorded music and film. Her most recent corporate role was as the Director of Film for the Producer's Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT) based in London. She is the Executive Producer of **They Came to Play** and has produced or associated produced five plays: **Exit the King** (Tony winner on Broadway), **The Mountaintop** (Olivier winner in the West End and now on Broadway), **The Misanthrope** (Olivier nomination in the West End), **Legally Blonde** (multiple Olivier awards in the West End), and most recently **White Noise**. She is a Vice President of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, a member of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's (NY-D) finance committee and a member of the tri-state finance committee for the Democratic National Committee.

Brian O'Connell - Co-Producer & Cinematographer - Brian is a graduate of the NYU film school. He began his career in New York City working as a film electrician, gaffer, and then cameraman on numerous film, television, and commercials projects. He moved to Los Angeles working as a Director of Photography for N. Lee Lacy, a seminal commercial director. After years of shooting commercials, Mr. O'Connell became a director/cameraman filming a wide variety of projects but specializing in directing kid's commercials.

Nathaniel Blume –Composer – Nathaniel has composition degrees from Butler University and Carnegie Mellon University in addition to a graduate certificate in scoring for film from the University of Southern California. He has worked as an orchestrator on the HBO mini-series **The Pacific** and the Warner Bros. feature **Life As We Know It**. Currently he writes additional music for the ABC television series **No Ordinary Family**. **Shakespeare High** represents Nathan's first full feature film score