

FLYING LESSONS

WITH
PHILLY
ABE



DIRECTED BY ELIZABETH NICHOLS
PRODUCED BY ALIK BARSOUMIAN
FLYINGLESSONSDOC@GMAIL.COM

SYNOPSIS

PROJECT DETAILS

Flying Lessons, 2024, USA

84 minutes

English

16:9, 24 fps; DCP, 5.1

LOGLINE

When their Lower East Side building comes under siege by a predatory landlord, a young filmmaker and an aging punk artist forge an unlikely friendship. As the two women collaborate on a portrait of a creative life amidst NYC's cultural crisis, they discover what it means to be neighbors.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

After spending decades as a neighborhood icon in the previously radical Lower East Side, Philly Abe fights to survive in her now coveted rent-stabilized apartment. Philly meets Elizabeth, a bright-eyed filmmaker and newcomer to the neighborhood eager to document the psychological impact of the landlord harassment they both experience. Elizabeth soon discovers Philly's history as a punk performer, mixed-media artist and an underground film star having performed in dozens of films by Todd Verow, George Kuchar, Mary Bellis and others. Elizabeth excavates Philly's archive to explore the emotional journey of a woman trying to understand herself in the midst of NYC's cultural crisis. The two women learn to collaborate as they gradually build a relationship of trust that takes an unexpected turn when Philly is diagnosed with a terminal illness. When Philly passes away, Elizabeth grapples with the responsibility to take care of her archive; Philly's community comes together to celebrate her life and work; her landlord goes to prison; and her city continues to change.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was a young, twenty-something aspiring artist when I moved into my rent stabilized apartment in the Lower East Side of New York City. The neighborhood was so clearly fractured by gentrification, which I could not deny a role in. I was intrigued and confused by the power of both proximity and anonymity that living in the city offered. As someone who loved watching people but had a fear of being seen, it felt liberating. But also isolating. I sat on my fire escape every night watching small dramas play out on the corner below and wondered about my place in this city and what it means to be someone's neighbor.

When Steve Croman bought our building he began the process of removing one rent-stabilized tenant after another. Red doors were painted white as apartments were gutted and renovated. I received an eviction notice myself and immediately wondered about the tenants for whom the stakes were much higher. I joined the Stop Croman Coalition and became fascinated by the dynamics within the group and their ideas about activism, on which they often disagreed. I suddenly found myself in a community of people brought together by a common threat, equipped with relentless determination, but uncertain about how to succeed. I was interested in exploring the theme of gentrification through an empathetic lens - to really understand the psychological effects of what I was seeing in my environment on a daily basis. I wanted to discover the poetry of human experience within the politics of this issue. And, quite honestly, I made this film because I wanted to get to know my neighbors.

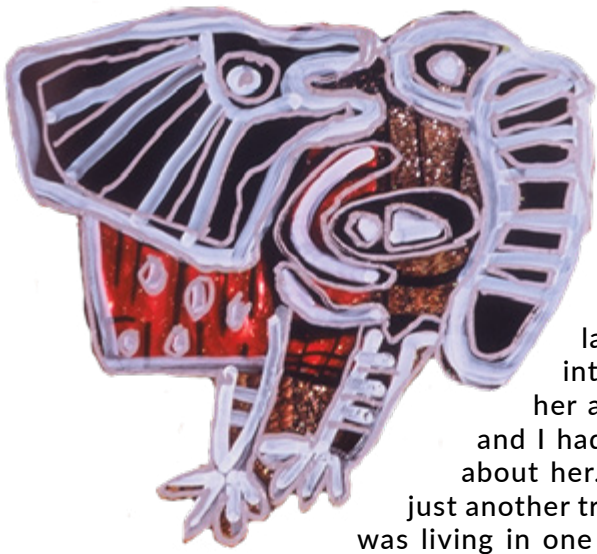
Throughout the early stages of the project, I was drawn to Philly, though I knew very little about her life. She was initially skeptical of me as I looked like the young kids who replaced the evicted tenants in our building. When I discovered her artists' name and found some of her work online, I was eager to get closer to her. She appeared to be the opposite of me in more ways than one - she desperately wanted to be seen. I came to understand that we shared a complicated relationship to gentrification; as artists moving to the neighborhood looking for an affordable place to live and work, we were both complicit -- a part of two different waves of gentrification separated by several decades. And yet we were joined together by an effort to fight against the corporate gentrification we were experiencing as harassment. Gradually, we began to develop a rapport that would evolve into an intimate relationship beyond either of our expectations. The more I got to know her, the more I became enamored by Philly's defiant mentality and fascinated by her attempts to reconcile an apparent rupture between her inner life and her environment. I witnessed the myriad ways in which she would perform her identity - both in front of my camera and in front of many others'. And yet, I was eager to get behind the performance, to see Philly in her most honest and vulnerable state.

When Philly was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, I became her caregiver and continued documenting her story through the dying process. I learned that to capture Philly's spirit, it would require me to come out from behind my camera and to risk being seen. As a result, I became a reluctant character in this film that focuses on our collaboration as two very different artists making a portrait of a life while discovering what it means to truly love your neighbor. As Philly was learning to let go of her place in this city and this world, I was learning from her how to claim my own place as an artist and community member.

After she passed away, Philly entrusted me with her artwork and her story. As I was cleaning out her apartment and organizing her belongings, I came across archival material that would offer another dimension to the film and provide more insight into Philly's life. What emerged was archaeology - an exploration of the emotional history of a woman - and a tribute to a profound and loving cross-generational relationship between neighbors.

- Elizabeth Nichols





Q & A

When did you approach Philly about your film? How did she respond?

As soon as I met Philly at a Stop Croman Coalition meeting, I imagined the film I was making would be about her. I knew I was looking for a protagonist to explore the themes of gentrification and landlord harassment, and she attracted my attention immediately. My interest in her was mysterious. There was something magnetic about her and I didn't understand what it was. She was my upstairs neighbor and I had seen her around, but never spoke to her. I hardly knew anything about her. And I was afraid of her. I got the impression that she saw me as just another transient, market-rate newcomer to the neighborhood, even though I was living in one of the few remaining rent stabilized units in the building. Was it contempt or simply indifference that I was sensing from her? I tried to find out more about her and eventually I discovered her artist's name "Kondor 8" and started to discover some of her visual and performance art online. There was one clip in particular that caught my attention. She was performing on stage with an art collective that was created "to scare away the newcomers from the neighborhood." As she was being booed off stage by young twenty-somethings, she sang: "I'm afraid of everything but I'm here, are you listening? Blow your brains out..." I was struck by her defiance and to the disconnect between her and the audience she was performing for (or in spite of). It felt like an enormous contrast to the Philly I was seeing in the SCC meetings. And it made me wonder about the audience she used to perform in front of in the neighborhood during the 80s and how they might have received her performance differently. My obsession was growing, and so was my fear of her. What if she didn't want anything to do with me? What if she told me to f*ck off? What would come of this film that I was making about her? I kept filming her from a distance during Stop Croman Coalition events and meetings. I must have filmed a dozen meetings while trying to build up enough courage to talk to her. It took me two years to approach her and when I did she told me "you are making the most boring f*cking film anyone has ever made." When I told her I wanted to make a film about her, she said: "I think that's a damn good idea."

What kind of film were you imagining at the beginning of the process and how did that change?

From the beginning, I had imagined an intimate portrait of a tenant who was experiencing landlord harassment and who joined the Stop Croman Coalition in an attempt to take down their landlord. I thought I would follow the SCC's efforts to expose Steve Croman and hold him accountable while collaborating with one of those tenants (Philly) on a film that combined non-fiction -- the story of the SCC-- with a somewhat fictional story about a tenant (Philly) that would express the psychological effects of landlord harassment and gentrification. In this concept, Philly would be playing herself, but we would co-create scenes together to tell a story about gentrification. I pitched the idea to Philly, that we would create some fictional scenes together that would get at a larger truth about her experience. She immediately rejected the idea. (Later, when Philly showed me a film she had been making with Todd Verow called "This Side of Heaven," I realized that Philly was already making her own version of that film with someone else). Our collaboration was tense at times as we were negotiating what kind of film we were making and whose vision -- whose truth -- the film was expressing. I kept wanting to see Philly "do" more and she kept insisting that if I wanted to "catch her doing what she was doing it would be not-doing." I wanted Philly to be talking less, because I wanted to get around what I saw as a performance to my camera so I could get at an emotional truth that I suspected existed in the quieter moments with her. But Philly needed to talk, to express herself on her own terms. I kept asking myself how I could be in the room and in the relationship but not in the scene because I couldn't imagine making a film in which I was a character. But Philly kept insisting that I would have to be in the film, that would be the only honest way to do this. Eventually, I learned to be patient, to listen and to learn from Philly. We both began to trust each other and stopped trying so hard to make something. We began to give into the process and to the relationship. That's when it felt like magic started to happen and what came next surprised us both. After Philly passed away, I became responsible for her archive and what I discovered there opened up an entirely new dimension to the film, one that I hadn't imagined at first. And finally, once I knew how the story ended, I accepted the fact that I was a part of the story we were telling. I had to confront my own fear of being seen and embrace the vulnerability of becoming a character that learns and grows and changes alongside Philly in the story. Needless to say, I learned and changed significantly, both personally and creatively, while making this film.

What was your experience like living in a building owned by Steve Croman?

Steve Croman bought our building after I had been living there for a couple of years. Within months, he sent us an eviction notice (which turned out to be bogus from a legal standpoint and was only meant to frighten us). It was startling. It was the first time I had been targeted in that way and I didn't know what to make of it. We sought advice from other tenants who directed us to the Stop Croman Coalition, the Good Old Lower East Side and Urban Justice, all of whom were supporting rent-stabilized tenants experiencing harassment. I learned that there was a "vacancy de-control" law that allowed landlords to turn rent-regulated apartments into market rate units if they could get the tenants out and gut renovate. This opened the door to aggressive campaigns of harassment. An entirely new profession was created called "tenant relocation specialists" who systematically intimidated and threatened tenants trying to get them to take a buy-out and leave. I learned that Steve Croman (aka the "Bernie Madoff of Landlords") owned nearly 200 buildings in the neighborhood with a business plan to buy up rent-regulated buildings, remove the tenants and turn them into highly-profitable market-rate commodities. One "tenant relocater" in particular knocked on my door and pushed his way in. He asked accusatory questions while taking photographs of me and my apartment. He told us we were being tracked by a private investigator and accused me of living in a different state while pretending to be there. We received a buy-out offer of one month's free rent. We declined. When the construction in other apartments began, the building became an increasingly toxic environment. The noise was incessant and the dust was everywhere. We would come home and discover a thick layer of dust covering everything we owned. In the winters, we went for days without heat and huddled around the oven. We went for several months without cooking gas. The impact of this experience on my own psychology sparked my curiosity about my neighbors for whom the stakes were much higher. I started to pay attention to what was happening in the building as older tenants were leaving and new tenants were coming (which led to a revolving door of market-rate tenants). This experience changed the way I understood the neighborhood I was living in. I was meeting dozens of tenants who were enduring horrible conditions and spending thousands of dollars in legal fees to stay in their homes. I also began to see just how complicated my relationship to the neighborhood was. I initially came to live there as part of a wave of gentrification -- the Lower East Side had been pitched to me as one of the last remaining "affordable" neighborhoods in Manhattan. After Steve Croman bought our building, my eyes were opening to the harm that gentrification was causing.

How did Philly's archive alter your understanding of her and the film you were making? Where is it now?

After Philly passed away, I became responsible for managing her belongings and caring for her archive. Philly's artwork is currently part of a larger collection at How! Happening, a gallery in the neighborhood that is working to preserve and celebrate the cultural history of downtown NYC. When I first looked through the archive, I realized that there was so much more there than I had known about while we were shooting together. Eventually, the archive became a significant part of the story we were telling about Philly. It took some time for us to figure out how best to integrate Philly's work with the footage I had shot with her. I knew that we were not making a biographical film about Philly's life and the archival material wouldn't serve to illustrate what she had done or the scenes she had been a part of. I simply didn't shoot that film with her while she was alive. And besides, Philly always insisted that she was a "non-linear" person. As we sifted through the archive, there were so many similar themes emerging across her work. It felt like a process of archaeology. We began to piece together an emotional history of a woman living a creative life while trying to understand herself and her place in the world. It was exhilarating to discover the number of connections and tropes that wove throughout her archive and into the footage I had shot. Ultimately, there is so much of the archive that we couldn't include in the final cut of the film. But we intend to share more of her work alongside the film to give our audience and Philly's community insight into the depth and breadth of what is there. I am so grateful to the various artists that collaborated with Philly during her life -- Todd Verow, Mary Bellis, Gabriel Baur, the Kuchar brothers and many more -- and I feel privileged to include their work in our film. I learned about a lot of artists I had not been familiar with previously and I truly feel that Flying Lessons has become a celebration of underground filmmaking.

Throughout the film we see footage from another Philly-led movie about landlord harassment, Todd Verow's "This Side of Heaven." What's the story behind that film? Did you have anything to do with it?

"This Side of Heaven" is a film written by Philly and Todd loosely based off their experience living in a Steve Croman building. I was not involved with making it. In fact, when I first approached Philly before we had any relationship with each other, I asked her if she was an artist. She told me "Yeah, I am..." I asked her what she makes and she said "Right now I am making an anti-gentrification film in my apartment about escorts, ghosts and bad landlords." I thought she was messing with me. She must have read my mind because the next thing she said was "there's no way in hell you're filming it."

BIOGRAPHIES

PHILLY ABE (Main Subject of Flying Lessons)

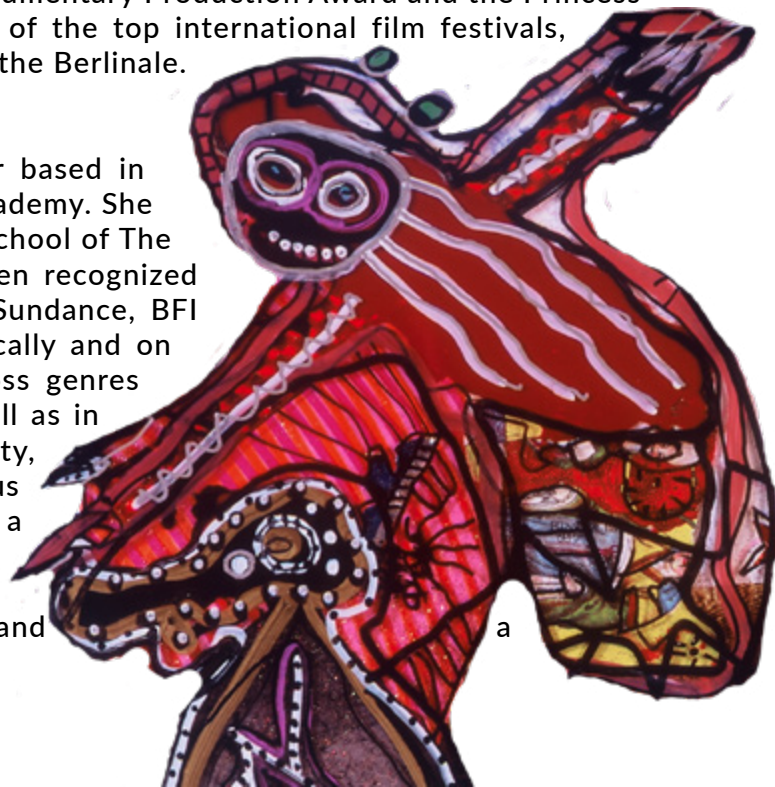
Philly Abe (July 8, 1949–January 30, 2018) was a visionary artist, performer and minor-cultural icon of the Lower East Side for decades. She was born in the suburbs of Philadelphia to a mother who identified as a “hereditary intuitive” and taught Philly to embrace magic as a way of life and a means of survival. In the 1960s, after experiencing a childhood defined by bullying amidst a culturally conservative backdrop of the 50s, Philly became a political activist and traveled the country, joining radical political movements. She moved to Toronto in the 70s, discovered a blossoming punk movement, and became a performance artist after studying under Lindsay Kemp. Eventually Philly followed her friends to New York City in 1983, as artists were moving to the neighborhood seeking cheap rent and a place to collaborate. In New York, Philly was a member of several avant garde art scenes. She was an iconic performer at the Pyramid Club as part of the boisterous drag scene of the 80s. She was a key member of ABC No Rio, a cultural center for art and radical activism located in the Lower East Side. In the 80s, 90s and 00s, Philly starred in dozens of underground films by the Kuchar Brothers, Mary Bellis, Todd Verow and others. She was the lead singer of a punk band called Eager Meat, which recorded the album “America is a Theme Park.” In 2004, she co-founded the noise/art collective Infinity SS (Saint Stanton) with Stanton Street artist friends and performed at The Knitting Factory, Arlene’s Grocery and CBGBs. Before she passed away, Philly was the recipient of the prestigious Acker Award. Throughout her time in New York, Philly produced hundreds of pieces of mixed-media art, which are now part of the archive at Howl! Happening, a gallery dedicated to preserving and celebrating the cultural history of the East Village and Lower East Side. In addition to her career as an artist, Philly was an anti-gentrification activist, and participated in the Stop Croman Coalition in partnership with the Good Old Lower East Side to confront harassment by her landlord Steve Croman.

ELIZABETH NICHOLS (Director, Cinematographer, Writer, Producer)

Elizabeth Nichols is a writer, director and cinematographer of both non-fiction and narrative films. She currently lives in Tanzania, East Africa with her partner and their two daughters, and works at Orkeswa as the Director of Strategy and the creator of Story Lab where she teaches filmmaking. Elizabeth graduated from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts in 2017 with an MFA in Filmmaking and from Harvard University in 2010 with a BA in History and Literature and History of Art and Architecture. She has received several awards and scholarships in support of her filmmaking, including being featured in Filmmaker Magazine’s 25 New Faces in Film, a New York Women in Film and Television Scholarship, the Wasserman Directing Award, the Alan Landsburg Documentary Production Award and the Princess Grace Award. Her short films have played at some of the top international film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlinale.

LUIZA PARVU (Editor, Writer, Co-Producer)

Luiza Parvu is a Romanian filmmaker and educator based in Tempe, AZ. She is a member of the European Film Academy. She holds an MFA in Film Production from NYU - Tisch School of The Arts. The films she has directed or edited have been recognized in festivals across the world - from Karlovy Vary, Sundance, BFI London, to Transilvania or Tribeca, released theatrically and on television, including on HBO. Her work spans across genres and formats, in fiction and documentary film, as well as in multimedia installation. These works explore identity, memory, intersection and transformation, with a focus on contemporary and historical labor migration and a concern for the images that shape the anthropocenic everyday. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Arizona State University’s Poitier Film School and programmer for the Mimesis Documentary Festival.



CHRIS BOECKMANN (Writer)

Chris Boeckmann is the Director of Development at Impact Partners, and a documentary writer and story consultant. His credits include *Procession* (dir. Robert Greene, Telluride 2021, Netflix), *Mija* (dir. Isabel Castro, Sundance 2022, Disney+), and *Flying Lessons* (dir. Elizabeth Nichols). From 2009-2020, he programmed at the True/False Film Fest. His bylines include *Film Comment*, *Filmmaker Magazine*, and *IndieWire*. He is currently working on *Subject*, a long-term research project looking at the repercussions nonfiction films have on their participants.

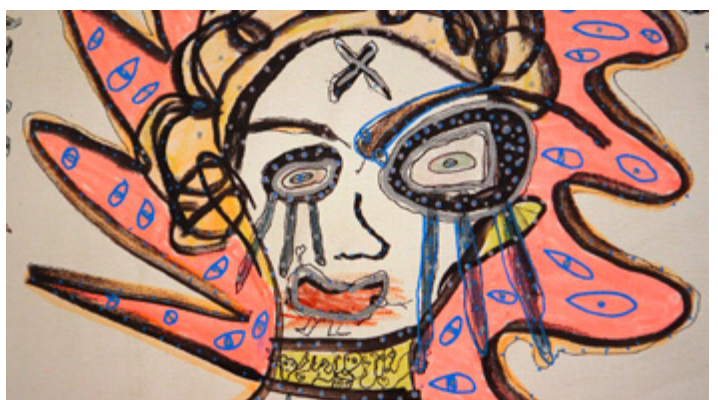
ALIK TAMAR BARSOUMIAN (Producer)

Alik Tamar Barsoumian is an Armenian-American filmmaker based in New York, where she directs and produces narrative films, commercials, and documentaries. Alik grew up in the non-profit arts organization her parents began in Los Angeles over twenty years ago, which shaped her desire to explore the human experience through storytelling. A graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts with an MFA in filmmaking, Alik's work has traveled all over the world - from the Toronto Film Festival to Rotterdam, Mumbai, and Doha - and touches on themes of identity, home, and belonging.

TODD VEROW (Executive Producer)

Todd Verow is an American film director who resides in New York City. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design and the AFI Conservatory. With his creative partner James Derek Dwyer, he formed Bangor Films in 1995. Todd has directed over thirty-five award winning features and numerous shorts, establishing himself as the most prolific auteur emeritus of the New Queer Cinema. His films have shown at film festivals all over the world including Sundance, Toronto, Berlin, Outfest, Hong Kong, BFI FLARE and SXSW. He has had retrospectives in New York, Paris, Madrid, Thessaloniki, Berlin, London, Sydney, and New Delhi. Fiercely independent, Todd Verow produces his films using whatever money he has. He was one of the first filmmakers to embrace video as a cheap and easy means of production famously declaring that "film is dead" way back in 1997. He proudly describes himself as an underground film maker in the tradition of his idols George and Mike Kuchar, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol.





CREDITS

Director, Cinematographer, Writer, Producer
Elizabeth Nichols

Editor, Writer, Co-Producer
Luiza Parvu

Writer, Co-Producer
Chris Boeckmann

Sound Recordist, Co-Producer
Lydia Chammas

Sound Designers
Gisela Fulla-Sylvestre
Henry Bellingham

Colorist
Spenser Nottage

Executive Producer
Todd Verow

Producer
Alik Barsoumian

THE ARCHIVE

Once and Future Queen, 2000, Directed by Todd Verow
Eager Meat Rehearsals, 2000, Directed by Todd Verow
Up Against a Star, 2001, Directed by Todd Verow
Take Away, 2002, Directed by Todd Verow
XX: Where Your Heart Should Be, 2007, Directed by Todd Verow
The Endless Possibility of Sky, 2012, Directed by Todd Verow
This Side of Heaven, 2016, Directed by Todd Verow
Metropolitan Monologues, 2000, Directed by George Kuchar
Jamboree Journey, 2000, Directed by George Kuchar
A Tale, 1984, Directed by Gabriel Baur
Thanksgiving Dinner, Private Video by Gabriel Baur
Agent of Paradise, 1984, Directed by Mary Bellis
Golden Bird of Paradise, Directed by Philly Abe
Transpanz Performance, NY, 1994, Philly Abe and Kasai

Philly Abe's visual artwork accessible through the archive at Howl! Happening, NYC