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The Hollywood ~~11~~.
The story of one.



WITNESS 11

METAPHORA STUDIOS presents

OLEG LIPTSIN in a short film by SEAN MITCHELL "WITNESS 11"

PAUL GUADARRAMA, MATT SHELTON, TATJANA DZAMBAZOVA, DEAN ENCIROLI, PHILIP ESTRIN,
JOHN SCACCO, STEVEN MANN Written by SEAN MITCHELL, based on a true story

Produced by HELEN JANG MITCHELL and SEAN MITCHELL, Director of Photography CHRIS LAWING,

Music by LARRY GROUPE, Directed by SEAN MITCHELL

Witness 11 is a short film by San Francisco-based filmmaker Sean Mitchell which recreates Brecht's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. With any luck, it will be coming to a festival near you soon. In the meantime, Sean kindly took the time to answer a few questions via e-mail.

Could you maybe say something about the genesis of the project – where the idea for it originated?

I had just finished a feature-length screenplay on a different historical event, the last fatal duel in Scottish history. I wrote that screenplay to be my directorial debut. But, as is often the case, the producers and financial people interested in the project wanted to see me direct a short, narrative film first. Although I've been a cinematographer for over twenty years, writing and directing are newer disciplines for me. So, I was looking for a short film to do, preferably one that was also a historical piece. One evening I was watching a documentary, with my wife and co-producer, called *Theater of War*. As you might know, the documentary centers on a staging of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* in New York in 2006. Among several incredibly interesting things, like seeing Meryl Streep's process in preparing for the role of Mother Courage, the documentary deals with Brecht's testimony in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947. Being a filmmaker, I was familiar with the "Hollywood Ten," but never realized Brecht was even in the United States at the time, much less testified at the hearing. For those well versed in Brecht's work and life, this is old news, but for me it was something I didn't

know anything about and felt there were many others who were like me. History has simplified the event to the "Ten" but has glossed over the eleventh witness. And what Brecht did with his testimony, the way he answered the questions, which seemed to be informed by his work on *Life of Galileo*, was so brilliant, I was hooked. As Carl Weber, a former assistant director for Brecht, put it, "It sounds like a comedy written by Brecht."

My wife suggested it as a possible short film and I thought it was perfect. So, I contacted Carl Weber, who is a professor in Stanford University's theater department. He agreed to become an advisor on the film and we were off and running. In fact, Carl was going to play the role of the interpreter, but had a 104 degree fever during the first day of production, so I had to quickly re-cast.

How did you go about financing the film, casting, and now exhibiting/distributing etc.?

The film is mostly self-financed. Unfortunately, in the U.S., most short films are financed this way because short films generally don't make money, so business people don't want to come near them. Although we raised \$5,000 on Kickstarter and received a grant from Berkeley Film Foundation for \$2,000. The rest of the \$30,000 budget came out of pocket.

I cast the film locally, all with actors from the San Francisco bay area. In fact, most of them out of Shelton Studios, a method acting school started by noted acting teacher Jean Shelton in 1961. Danny Glover, Peter Coyote, and Howard Hesseman were all students of Jean's, among many others. Francis Ford Coppola used to sit in on her classes to "brush up." I've taken classes there over the years, so it was a natural place for me to start casting. Jean Shelton's first husband, Wendell Phillips, was blacklisted. So the project

had personal meaning to the folks at Shelton Studios. Jean's son, Matt Shelton, was our casting director and also plays the role of Dalton Trumbo.

As for exhibition and distribution, we're sending *Witness 11* out to film festivals right now. This is the beginning of the process. We'd also love to see it air on PBS at some point, as well as internationally.

How did you go about editing the transcript down for the film?

Brecht testified for something like 50 minutes. An audio recording of his testimony is available online, but it's incomplete. Even the written transcript has gaps in it, so it's hard to say how long he testified. At any rate, this is much, much longer than any of the other witnesses, because the others didn't answer questions and were arrested almost immediately. Our film is only 21 minutes long and of that, the testimony takes up about 12 minutes. So, I had to edit it down. It was a tricky process, but I started by looking at the moments where Brecht got the gallery (audience) to laugh. I first focused on these moments because these were the dramatic events in his testimony. This is how Brecht turned the tables on the Committee. So, I started there and worked outward, making sure to include key things that Brecht did and did not do. He did not, for example, "name names" of members of the Communist Party, even though the Committee asked him to do so. Another example would be Brecht's testimony regarding the song "In Praise of Learning." The music was written by Brecht's friend, Hanns Eisler, and as we point out in the film, the lyrics were written in German by Brecht. Brecht says "I wrote the song; Hanns just wrote the music." To some, this is an indication of Brecht's arrogance. However, upon slightly closer examination, I don't see how anyone can read this statement

as anything other than Brecht covering for his friend while on the hot seat. An action that speaks volumes about Brecht.

Am I right in thinking that Stripling is a central figure who almost, but not quite, seems on the brink of realizing the absurdity of his situation?

Ha! Well, in our film you can certainly read it that way. In reality, I don't think Stripling did realize the absurdity of his situation. He only seemed to realize that these "Commies" were slippery characters. Stripling wrote a book a couple years after the hearing called *The Red Plot Against America*. In it, he makes his case for the so-called Communist conspiracy. His views are quite clear. By the way, many people assume the committee was headed by Joseph McCarthy, after all, this period is called the "McCarthy era." But McCarthy was a Senator and the HUAC Hearings were, by definition, in the House of Representatives. The committee was chaired by J. Parnell Thomas, McCarthy's role model and hero. Richard Nixon also served on the Committee. In an interesting twist, J. Parnell Thomas was indicted on charges of conspiracy to defraud the government only ten months after the Hollywood Ten Hearings. He was accused of putting friends on the Congressional payroll, who did no work, and in return shared their salaries with him. He was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months in prison. Two of his fellow inmates were Lester Cole and Ring Lardner Jr., members of the Hollywood Ten who were serving time as a result of refusing to testify in front of Thomas and HUAC.

And as for Brecht – does he treat the whole thing as "theater"? Could he then be accused of having abandoned the others?

In the film, Brecht answers questions honestly until he feels something



Oleg Lipstyn as Brecht

inappropriate is asked. Then, he lights his cigar and treats it as theater. In my opinion, this reflects reality if you look at what Brecht did. This was highly controversial at the time, and among surviving blacklisted victims and their families, it remains controversial. The key reason for the controversy in Brecht's case centers around the fact that he answered questions at all. In the view of the "Ten," this legitimized a committee that was asking questions about political affiliations, protected under the 1st Amendment. But Brecht wasn't a U.S. citizen and did not have the same legal rights as the Ten. In a situation where two options are presented: don't talk and go to jail, or, talk, name names, rat on your friends, and save yourself, somehow Brecht found a

third option.

This alternative is the film's theme which is simply that creativity can overcome tyranny.

Finally, how do things stand right now with the project?

The film is finished and we're sending it out to festivals. We're hoping to get into the Berlin International Film Festival, and others. Wish us luck, because it's a difficult process. With so many short films out there these days, it's easy to get lost in the shuffle.

For a behind the scenes photo-book see <http://www.seanmitchell.net/witness-11book.php>

Username: Witness11 Password: Brecht