

Speaking for Shapiro

Telling Eight Million Stories Eight at a Time

A tabla virtuoso, a singing poet, an organist, a Noh performer. That's half of them. An instrumentalist, a Broadway actor, a concert pianist and a dancer. These are the subjects of Bert Shapiro's latest film, *Speaking for Myself*, and the latest in the cast list of people he finds intriguing. "Passion. That's the prerequisite, that's the trigger," Shapiro says, sitting at his editing screen in his studio nestled in the wooded cliffs of Pipersville, where he's finished all 13 of his previous films with focuses ranging from a Hollywood hairpiece-creator to cigar-makers, from fencers to organ-builders. "I'm interested in what's behind the façade of appearances and what drives a person to create, to succeed. I ask, and I'm lucky. People talk to me and tell me things."

The art of listening is how Shapiro conceptualizes each film, and the pursuit of finding what lies beneath the words is what drives the

82-year-old, who, after a long career in educational publishing, became interested in making documentary films. In 1995, instead of settling into retirement, Shapiro began working full time, learning camera work and non-linear editing, and launched his own production company, Pheasants Eye. For a fellow who can't even type, technology continues to be challenging: "I compensate by having good friends who can help."

Friends like Loic De Lame, his "very talented" cameraman and editor, whom Shapiro describes as "not a Hollywood type but he [De Lame] knows what the power boys do and how they do it." How the duo did it on *Speaking for Myself* is through freestyle storytelling. No script, no plan of action, not even a shooting schedule. The cameras simply started rolling, and there were no retakes.



The challenge to stay authentic, allowing the artists to indeed speak for themselves, came during Shapiro's conversations and in Loic's subtle editing. The choice of what to ask and what to delete is always intentional. Because while there may have not

been a plan, there was always a goal: to advocate for the artists whose dreams are powered by commitment and challenged by disappointments and dead-ends. The scales tip when the successes are weighed down by what review doesn't make the paper, what film doesn't get screened, whose music doesn't get played, who doesn't get the part. An artist's life, Shapiro says, is more than the sound bites in a two-minute TV news segment or a two-column review in the New York Times.



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In Shapiro's film, audiences learn just how important it was for Noh-performer Toshinori Hamada to reinvent himself in Manhattan and how tabla-virtuoso Samir Chatterjee sees limitless opportunities in a city with only geographical boundaries. Organist Renee Anne Louprette feels "pushed by a city that can pressurize you," and actress Irma Sandrey loves the "gorgeous risk" she takes at every performance. Eclectic instrumentalist/composer Elliott Sharp is grateful for a place where he can "exist on the fringe...in this strange corner" in the same forgiving town where pianist Jenny Lin hears 24-hour "inspirational noise." And along the streets where poet/singer Tracie Morris feels rhythm beneath her feet, Baroque-dancer Carlos Fittante can strut the pavements behind a mask. And no one much cares.

That's probably because every New Yorker is on his or her own stage, whether a street performer doing shtick in front of Saks Fifth Avenue or an office assistant animatedly talking on a cell phone on a lunch break. Between each of these eight vignettes, New Yorkers – in all their honest, brash, idiosyncratic behaviors – are seen living the life the camera has captured.

This is Bert Shapiro's love letter to his city and all her actors. **dt**

Speaking for Myself will show at 7:30 p.m. on Nov. 8 at the County Theater in Doylestown. Admission is free for current members.

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