

The Shared Living Came First

Two films by Andrea Luka Zimmerman
+ *On The Bowery* by Lionel Rogosin

Terrassen presents a film programme by London-based artist, filmmaker and cultural activist Andrea Luka Zimmerman at Christiania's cinema Byens Lys.



Filmed over seven years in a housing estate in Haggerston in London after it was marked for demolition, *Estate, a Reverie* (2015) reveals and celebrates the resilience of residents who are profoundly overlooked by media representations and wider social responses. Interweaving intimate portraits with historical re-enactments, landscape and architectural studies and dramatised scenes, *Estate, a Reverie* asks how we might resist being framed exclusively through class, gender, ability or disability, and even through geography.

Working with and through the methods of Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed, *Here for Life* (2019) was made in collaboration with theatre director Adrian Jackson, who has translated five books by Boal. Based on stories from the performers' own lives, *Here for Life* follows 10 Londoners making their way in a world and a city framed by finance and loss. They argue for their own terms of definition as they go: singular lives, nudging towards a co-existence stronger than 'community'. The actors were cast from Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company working with people with experience of homelessness, which was founded by Jackson in 1991. Rather than being about the communities they depict, both *Estate a Reverie* and *Here for Life* were made from within it. Grounded in a common experience of living within difference, they engage with ways of being in the city, taking place within a porous and collectively focused urban environment.

On the occasion of Lionel Rogosin's centenary this year, Zimmerman will also introduce his first film *On the Bowery* (1956). Rogosin was an independent American filmmaker, who worked in political cinema, non-fiction partisan filmmaking and docufiction. *On the Bowery* chronicles three days in the drinking life of Ray Salyer, a part-time railroad worker adrift on New York's skid row, the Bowery. Working between documentary and fiction, and both influenced by the neorealism of Vittorio De Sica, Zimmerman mentions *On the Bowery* as one of the inspirations for the making of *Here for Life*. Rogosin wanted to "to film those who have been forgotten, to film from the inside, and to film with respect, clarity and tenderness." He was one of the founders of the New American Cinema movement which sought to create a cinema free from the economic and structural shackles of Hollywood and to discard standard conventions of plot and structure. He was invited to present in the second programme of the influential Free Cinema in London, who shared the same preoccupations and goals for a new independent cinema.

21.08.2024 Byens Lys

Rehearsal for Life

Andrea Luka Zimmerman and Adrian Jackson in conversation with Therese Henningsen about the making of *Here for Life*.

Therese Henningsen How did the collaboration come about and, for each of you, how did your own ways of working - in film and theatre respectively - relate to your process of making here?

Andrea Luka Zimmerman I knew about Adrian's work before we ever met, because of his work with Cardboard Citizens and because all the books about Forum Theatre and the Theatre of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal I had read in English are translated by Adrian. For me, this possibility of empathy across political and geo-political spaces was very important. For example, if you had a very different life experience, but you wanted to initiate a liberation movement, you could look at other such struggles that have manifested themselves completely differently and find something that touches you. That's the beauty of understanding each other across extreme difference, while understanding that we are fighting for a world that is livable for all. I was also inspired by the technique of not thinking of history as fixed, but rather as one which you can intervene into, for example through the idea of 'The Joker'. And then you make history again. It's like a performance or a rehearsal for life. I think this is what drew me very much to watching Adrian working with the performers. It's a very beautiful and fast technique and the performers were properly trained. That was an incredible joy for me to work with.

Adrian Jackson I knew about your work from the two films *Taskafa* and *Estate, a Reverie*. We had a sort of common touching point in John Berger. That gave us a political touchstone, and possibly a sort of methodological touchstone as well. I knew much less about how you worked and I sort of had to learn by watching you. To be honest, I don't think I really understood it until after the film was finished, because there were things which were very unfamiliar to me. Where we absolutely meet is in the respect for people's experiences and the sense that people can share them - and stories - without having lived the same one. You have used the phrase radical empathy, which I really like, and I think the remarkable group of people we ended up working with had the advantage of having it. The idea of a story becoming a *communal* story is itself quite a radical idea. They were great, and I think we made up some techniques together, which were a way of communalising the story, that gave it a texture and an ambiguity, which worked very well with your poetic style of filmmaking.

TH There was a lot that was not yet known to you and the people involved prior to the making. It requires an openness from everyone that's not easy to find in certain kinds of filmmaking today, and perhaps also in theatre making, where participants want to know a lot in advance. How did you go about carving out a space for trust and for the exploration of finding the film's form and the working processes?

AZ In the beginning we went to communities, trying to set up castings. We looked at what happens in Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous meetings, where people express a significant degree of empathy because they no longer judge and say, "come on, hold it together." They know what it's like *not* to be able to hold it together. I learnt a lot from witnessing that incredible generosity across class and across racial and gender divisions. That's the space Cardboard Citizens held with you, Adrian, because everyone had this kind of lived experience and they weren't judging each other. They wanted to perform and they wanted to tell stories and make a livable life, to claim and have a right to life that was also full of joy and vibrancy and a refusal to be pigeonholed. The other thing that was clear to me about radical community building is that it doesn't work with or for everyone. I remember early on, when we realised we needed our working teams for a reason. We have made families because we had and have no conventional family structure. Why get rid of it and punish yourself and do something in a way which reduces an approach? It opens up a space, because there's trust and there's a holding. For me personally, that doesn't work in big systems. So that's why I like to work in small environments with people I trust, even if it's difficult.

AJ I love all those guys. I've got history with all those guys. They know what I'm striving for, and they're happy to strive with me, and that's a lovely thing. I certainly think it was difficult sometimes when people from the outside came in and became part of our process who neither of us knew. That caused friction.

AZ When you collaborate and you have to explain yourself, I find it really difficult. Why am I doing this? I don't know sometimes, and it's a feeling that's denied in filmmaking worlds - to work in this way. We were lucky with Artangel, but it's usually very difficult to have this kind of process, where a camera is like a pen, like a poem, like a laser.

TH I'm interested to talk more about the work with people's own stories and questions of authorship; how to make space for people themselves to become invested in the way their stories are told and how this also guides the direction of the film. Apichatpong Weerasethakul says this about the making of his film *Mysterious Object at Noon*: "When using the term 'direct', I think about ordering things, which is true

to a certain degree. But 'conceive' means something more personal. I feel that my works are my concepts, but they branch out with the contributions of other people." That reminds me of you saying how the people you involve in your work challenge you to go to a place that you wouldn't have been able to conceive of on your own.

AJ I love the way that you can embrace people's lives, though you are ultimately the author. It's an interesting point because, for me, I would usually spend quite a lot of time in the devising process working with stories from people's own lives. However, almost as a rule, I would never have people on



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stage speak of their own lives. I'm afraid of exploiting people, having a prurient interest in people's lives, which is why I've always done things whereby you transmogrify a story so that it becomes somebody else's, so that you can never track it back as it actually is. But you do have people speak much more in their own name. Perhaps on film it becomes more dignified somehow. We both wanted to elide truth and fiction. I don't know how successful we are all the time. People will make their guesses, but that is a sort of protection of another kind.

AZ People may also become collaborators in wanting to tell their story as a form of witness. I learned that from making *Estate, a Reverie*. I show people the material before I edit it and then I show it once more in context to catch and avoid some of the ethical issues that could come up. How Patrick tells his story of the murder of his father in *Here for Life* is like a laser beam of trauma. There's no slippage in his storytelling, whereas, when he tells more casual stories, he segues and often forgets, mis-remembers and reimagines.

AJ I think ethically we come from the same place, but I can understand that something

different is happening when in the right circumstances somebody is telling of themselves in their own way, to camera. It's very raw and unfiltered. People are in control of what they're saying and know what is happening with it. Parts of Jono's life, for example, in the film become beautiful and dignifying of something which isn't very dignified. Perhaps on film you can show with crystalline clarity what trauma is like. Perhaps it is that on stage acting is going to creep in and it's going to spoil it. Also you have to recreate it and you only have to do things once for film and therefore they have an authenticity which is sort of unknown on stage.



AZ That's really interesting, because this is probably why you're not doing it on stage, because it would re-traumatize people over and over. Film is a form of prayer for me. I feel like I'm praying towards or for a new world, a world that has tenderness and care but also feistiness. How is something told, how we are allowed to speak, and who is allowed to speak in what way? What we bring as makers in collaborative work is also the skill of dramaturgy, in your case, and in my case it's a kind of cinematic structure. But we need these kinds of structures even if we tear them apart for an experience that travels beyond just this group. For the playfulness between authenticity and honesty and wanting to share something. The way in which stories can be worked out almost as a poetic framing device. For me, this is what was so powerful and why I really loved the scene when Kamby and Errol are overlapping when they're telling.

AJ That's a moment which is a real blend of our various skills. I love the sort of competitive quality of it. They can't stop themselves. That works very well and they speak of themselves and their own power as individuals.

TH My impression of your work - with Cardboard Citizens, Adrian, and from *Estate*, *a Reverie* and your other films, Andrea - is that there's a kind of fluid relationship between life experience and the work being made, and how one shapes the other and vice versa. It seems important to nurture processes of making that allow for the experiential. Of course we are *working* and there's a focus but there's also an allowance for a shared time and space that goes beyond the work itself. In the case of *Here for Life* it was made possible with the support of Artangel, so there was a financial structure around it. I've only been involved with Cardboard Citizens for this project, but had a sense of a community and a shared space, where I felt that there was an energy in the place itself, where individual encounters can become possible. That was inspiring about *Estate* as well. That's how I like to think of filmmaking, that it's part of life and part of something that also shapes me as a person through encounters with different people.

AJ I think the most jarring moments came when industry norms were imposed upon us. Suddenly very hard lines appeared and it was difficult to retain any sense of autonomy and relaxation. It's about collaborators, and people wanting trust. It's not dissimilar in theatre. It's about being allowed to have a vision. When that vision is encroached upon, it's uncomfortable and unproductive. It's also divisive.

AZ When normative structures come along, suddenly you are asked to compromise and harness things in a certain way. We were lucky that Artangel is not like that. I understand of course that you can't just have free flow because you also have to craft. It's not random. We shape our works very carefully. The problem of culture is the homogenising force. It's sad that the possibility of vernacular ways of speaking is disappearing, while all the time those in authority pretend they're ever more inclusive. I really believe that the *social* aspect of filmmaking makes poetry possible. I personally don't need the industrial structure because I have the social aspect and, knowing that is possible in collaborative spaces, that's all we need, right? It's not about scarcity, it's abundance.

AJ There's another thing which we haven't talked about, which was the setting of Nomadic Gardens and how important that was, the temporary space of freedom that those guys had created. That chance appeared and we grabbed it. We were able to tap into a beauty which other people had created. I found it very difficult to think about the film without that space. Where would we have gone? It was an outdoor space set against the backdrop of the financial city and the world. Beautiful people.

TH I also wanted to talk about the playfulness. There's humour, joy and a daring in how the performers approach telling

their stories. There's a willingness and an expectation that you take part in a way that pushes boundaries both for yourself and for the process. Often there's such a caution in how we engage with each other, and I don't think that daring has to do with exploitation. It has to do with trusting that people can go to different places and that we can do that together.

AJ Humour is important as a way of dealing with trauma, and it allows trauma to coexist with it, which a grimmer form of filmmaking would not allow. In fact, you're honouring the trauma more through playful bravery.

AZ You can insist on playfulness and still be alert to the possibility of enacting violence, of putting people in harm's way. Sometimes, for those of us who work with real survivors at the edge of these industries, there's a survival in practice. We will have thought of safeguarding in ways that the industry has never thought of and yet they are trying to limit some of these possibilities. It reduces experience, not just the experience of people's lives, but also how they can be expressed and how they can be dreamed through and with. For me, it's important that we keep these spaces open and that we actually take lead from the experiences of the people we work with, in order to try and find other ways that are sensitive to understanding how not to reproduce harm, while also not simply staying silent and banishing experiences into the private realm. We need to find ways of sharing experiences so that we do not feel alone. I learnt to speak because others had done so before. I realised what I experienced was not unique and was not my fault.

AJ I'm grappling with this in every project I do nowadays, because the fear of touching certain subjects and retriggering people means that people just don't ask the questions. It is the community which will make things safer, not a set of rules. It's as simple as that, but now people are operating on sets of rules. You can't control what people's reaction will be to their stuff and you may get it wrong sometimes, but the times you get it right, in terms of the therapeutic effect of telling your own story, outweighs it completely. That's my experience. Sometimes people who have had traumatic experiences become compulsive re-tellers as a kind of tick, almost an inherent therapeutic sort of thing. I think that's what's beautiful about the people in the film. It's unsensationalized. It isn't about people boasting or compulsively revealing themselves because that's the only way they've been able to get attention. It's much deeper and more honest than that.

AZ There was a space for listening, including for ourselves. All of us share pain, which we had to work through and which we recognized in others. I have no problem if someone comes in drunk and needs to sleep it off while we are filming another scene, whereas the infrastructure of filmmaking says this is not allowed on set and therefore

we have to say no. But we learned that from the NBA in the AA Meeting workshop we did. Nobody can be excluded, even if they return to an addictive behaviour for a moment. We didn't work with people when they're in addiction or when they were drunk, but they were there and had to be there. To watch and just be there. For me it was important to afford that possibility of care.

AJ There was a level of messiness which wouldn't have been allowed elsewhere. There's a risk that people are influenced by various things, whether it's a mental state or a drug-induced one. Normally those people would be ruled out, and here there's the possibility that they could still participate and thereby you might hit another kind of truth.

TH Again that goes back to things often working according to a certain set of rules and becoming reductive. It's more interesting if it's relational and something to navigate as you go along. People don't just sign a release form and then it's sorted. There's a constant negotiation that has to happen according to each particular person and each particular process, and then things become possible that are not easy and make stories come to life in a different way. We can take risks and what or how something is being told can be difficult, but that can come from a place of love and care.

AZ I really love the filmmaker Sarah Maldoror. Her films are so deeply political and full of poetry. She has one scene in *Monan-gambé*, which is about the violence that's enacted on a body that's been murdered. You don't see the people enacting the violence, but you see the body being in that space. Our scene of Richard hitting Jake reminds me of this. How to create a scene when you punish someone, when you hit someone you love, and you feel really bad for it? We touch upon something that is deep and recognizable, yet it's done in a way that we don't have to show. Something is hidden within its showing, but it's all present. I want to develop these ideas much further.

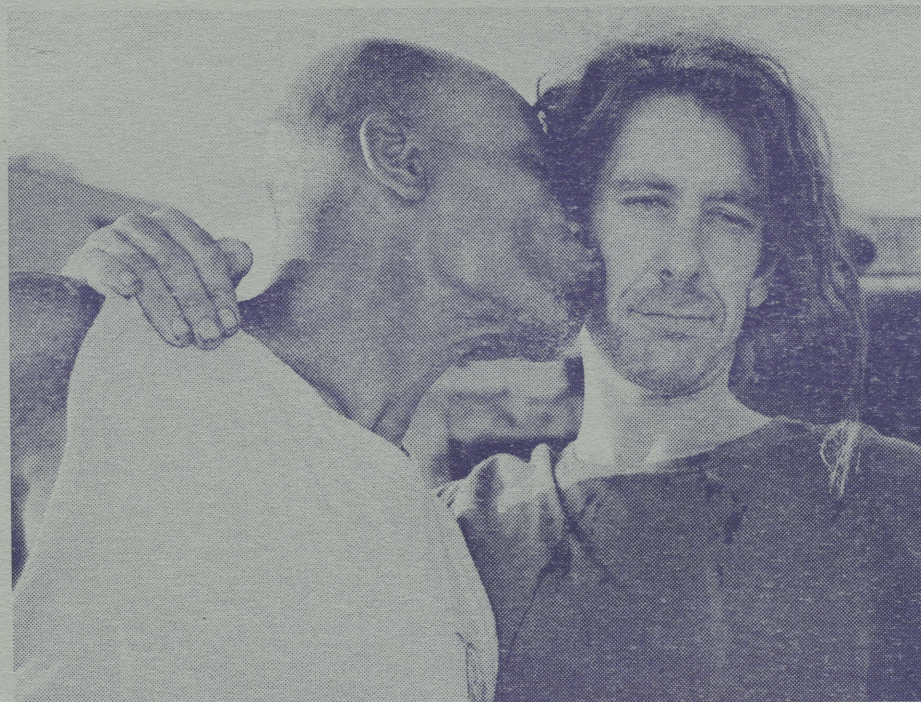
AJ You said something quite late on in the process, which is that you're making films of a world that you want to exist, and I suppose that's not a thing that I have done before. I hope that there's a sort of community that I want to exist, but I'm more brutal than that in wanting to represent fractured relations

and reality. And that was a help for me to understand this running theme in your work, why you make the films that you make.

AZ I understand the fracture too. There's no coherence possible in the world of filmmaking or theatre making.

- (1) Still: *On the Bowery*
- (2) Press still: *Estate, a Reverie*
- (3) Behind the scenes: *Here for Life*
- (4) Behind the scenes: *Here for Life*

(what is) TERRASSEN? Terrassen is a roving cinema in Copenhagen that engages with the social life of film. All screenings are free and open to everyone. For information on past and future screenings visit www.terrassen.bio. Terrassen is supported by Statens Kunstfond.



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16.00

On the Bowery
Lionel Rogosin
1956, 66 mins.

Introduced by Andrea Luka Zimmerman

18.00

Estate, a Reverie
Andrea Luka Zimmerman
2015, 83 mins.

Introduced by Gareth Evans
Conversation with Andrea Luka Zimmerman

20.30

Here for Life
Andrea Luka Zimmerman & Adrian Jackson
2019, 87 mins

Introduced by Gareth Evans