

Engaging in Community Activism Through Visual Storytelling

Chloe Johnston, Jack Dunphy, and Stephanie Duran

Faculty Advisor: Chrissy Guest

Documentary film creation often focuses on the unseen and unheard: people telling stories in new formats in order to share their truth. The camera is the most objective eye, allowing for the perspective of their subject to be seen without a filter. In working with a local theater company, *Civic Ensemble*, a new form of documentary storytelling became apparent — one that focused not only on the person as a subject, but the person as a creative artist themselves.

The creators of this documentary approached this project with the question of advocacy in mind. How does one both inhabit a space and showcase the talents of a young, burgeoning community without becoming an outside voyeur? As filmmakers and activists, we decided to create this film because we felt that there was a missing piece in the documentary landscape where the underprivileged children of Ithaca could be allowed to shine.

Civic Ensemble is a local theater company that focuses on the concepts of theater of the oppressed and form theater. In their new youth group, the students of Civic Ensemble are embarking on their own journeys of creation. The company itself was founded on centering oppressed voices in an artistic landscape — one that until recently has often been barred from queer people and people of color. Theater has a rich tradition of welcoming those who are often seen as different, but has not always been open to telling those stories. In an attempt to elevate these voices, this documentary will focus on both the stories they create, the ones they live, and how the two intersect. The creative arts are revolutionary only when put in the hands of visionaries. The sense of community Civic Ensemble provides is meant to curate those visions. It is a unique theatrical experience in Ithaca that will bring new life into the community. As such, it is important to document.

This work came into existence through the collaboration of a group of Park students and the Civic Ensemble theater company. It is an extension in the experiment of educational unification among students from all walks of life. Through the documentation of their creative process, the stories of these students are on display thrice-fold. As they work to perform a piece of form theater, the process is filmed and edited in order to tell their story through another medium. This explores not only the meaning of performance, but the vulnerability of visibility. What does it mean to put oneself onstage and create works of art that are deeply personal, especially at a young age? How does the form of theater allow for the stories of minority-identifying individuals to take center focus? This documentary is meant to explore the magic of the artistic world and how that intersects with modern culture. It is meant to uplift the power of young voices by giving them a new avenue to explore their own conceptions of identity and community. In short, it is a love letter to the arts and to artists — in whatever form they may exist.

The students of Civic Ensemble have already designated a world in which their lived truth is a central focus: this documentary is meant to highlight their experience and the community they have created.