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London Feminist Film Festival - Talk Back Out Loud

A story of 8 women with a history of trauma, shame and stigma. What they didn't have then and what they have now is theater.

Interview with Director/Producer Kaori Sakagami

Congratulations! Why did you make your film?

I made this film in the hope that silence around the issues of violence would be broken at many different levels. The film is about an American all-women theatre group originating in San Francisco County Jail called The Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women. They make original plays based on participants' own experiences.

The first time I saw their performance, I was blown away. Soon after that, I joined as a volunteer and saw the process of making it. I was even more blown away. Then they started working with women diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. I realized both groups -- incarcerated and HIV+ -- have been long silenced and the theater is a great way to break their silence.

Imagine I'm a member of the audience. Why should I watch this film?

I have made a series of documentaries on violence over 2 decades. What I found out was that most of the perpetrators had experienced serious traumas yet were never treated. I also learned that no matter how hard it gets, facing one's own trauma is

necessary for their healing. It is not easy as you can imagine and many struggle with articulating their experiences. Creative expressions such as theater could be vital for accelerating its process and this film is about that.

There are 8 protagonists in this film and their voices are very diverse. It shows how their creative process helps the women to develop their own voices. At the same time, creative expressions affect audiences. In the film you will see interactions between actors and audience such as dancing together and a talkback from the audience side like the woman revealing her own HIV status for the first time in public. I find it quite provoking and moving and see the potential of transformation on different levels.



Talk Back Out Loud

How do personal and universal themes work in your film?

My long lasting theme, unlearning violence (being conscious about violence around us and to learn non-violent ways), definitely comes from my own experience with a cycle of violence; being from victim to perpetrator.

I started out as a victim. For example, at the age 14, I was beaten up by a group of 15 students at junior high school in Tokyo and ended up with a swollen face, cigarette burns and bruises. It happened in the middle of school where teachers and other students walked by. Nobody intervened. This experience left me with a serious emotional scar — despair and distrust of people. But when I think back now, I had already been wounded because I was exposed to daily abuses in a very dysfunctional household as well as bullying at a daily basis and there was nobody that I could turn to. So what this beating did to me was to deepen my wound to keep me silence for a long time.

I also became a perpetrator. I was very abusive toward my younger brother for years. Especially since this incident, I turned all my anger and frustrations toward him. My sweetest younger brother became eventually a troublemaker and I felt guilty for a long time. Now I have a son. I do not want him or anybody else to repeat this cycle. I desperately need to know how to stop the cycle. So unlearning violence is my own personal theme as well as one of the critical social issues.

How have the script and film evolved over the course of their development?

This film evolves around the Medea Project's original play on women living with HIV/AIDS which was performed in 2010. It unravels the process of making it by juxtaposing with 8 women's testimonies and earlier images of their workshops in jail settings.

It is a documentary so I did not have any script to begin with. But in 2006, when I started the project, my idea was to make a film about the jail-based women's theater. However in the midst of production, the Medea Project went through a big transition from working with women who were incarcerated to women with HIV/AIDS. So, it forced me to sort out and reshape my original idea and it was tough.

Also, permission to make a film did not come easily. Although Rhodessa Jones, the founder and director of the Medea Project, and her partner accepted me as a volunteer videographer, my role was to shoot their activities strictly for their archival purpose.

For the first couple of years, it was not clear if I could ever be allowed to make my own film about them. After four years of building relationships and keeping negotiations, they finally said ok in 2010.

And then comes the issue of disclosure of HIV/AIDS. Many of the newly joined participants with HIV/AIDS were not fully open about their HIV status, especially at the beginning. For them, being shot over a long period of time for a film which would be shown widely was different from getting up on a stage for a limited number of audiences and for a limited period. So I had to convince them. Reactions varied with people, but for some, it took many months to trust me (and the crew) and to understand the significance of the film.

Then when it comes to shooting, we had to be very careful where and how we would proceed. Especially at the beginning, it was impossible even to shoot interviews at their own apartments because their roommates or/and family members were not aware of their health status. With some women, we had to wait for more than one year to do the interview.



Talk Back Out Loud

What type of feedback have you received so far?

Just like the title of the film, I wanted to see and hear the audience's reaction. So I decided to travel with this film whenever and wherever possible to engage direct discussions. Since the release of the film in 2014, I have visited so many film theaters, drug recovery centers, juvenile facility, prisons, universities, hospitals, shelters, conferences, etc...; mostly in Japan, but some in the US and Australia.

Depending on the type of screenings, reactions vary. But particularly marginalized women (and men) react overwhelmingly positively. Many of them get emotional and say "I am just like Marlene but I cannot articulate like her" "I know exactly what Sonia is going through" "I feel so relieved that I do not have to feel shame for what happened to me." Those reactions always make me realize issues dealt in the film are universal and we have so much to deal with.

As far as the general audience, they almost always resonate with some protagonist(s) and tell me that they receive a general message like not to give up in any circumstance. Also I often hear that this is the first time we hear stories about the women with HIV or/and incarceration, and that they feel strong empathy with them.

Occasionally I get "Why are you interested in such a marginal issue?" or "We do not have the same problems here" type of reactions. When I hear that in a talkback session, then I try to direct the question to the other audience members rather than answering it by myself. There is always someone in the audience who is familiar with the issue(s) and who is willing to talk, so we have seen incredibly moving and dramatic discussions.

Has the feedback surprised or challenged your point of view?

Of course! If they do not surprise me nor challenge me, then I see no point making a documentary film. What strikes me the most is that wherever talkback sessions are held, people talk openly about their personal issues in relation to the film such as HIV status, victimization of sexual violence, child abuse, substance abuse and domestic violence, etc... One Japanese film critic called it the "Talk Back phenomenon." It has given me and many tremendous hope.

Whilst editing this film, I did a series of work-in-progress screenings in Japan and US by inviting different groups whose issues are addressed in the film such as women with HIV/AIDS, addiction, incarceration, sexual victimization, mental health issues and prostitution. There I got the most striking and challenging reactions. These work-in-progress screenings definitely have helped shape this film.

What are you looking to achieve by having your film more visible on www.wearemovingstories.com?

I would like this film to get exposed mainly to people with traumatic experiences but not limited to them. Social workers, medical doctors and nurses, legal professionals, counselors, artists, educators, prison officers... I think the film is relevant to anybody who works in the human services field and I hope the film helps audience to see those women as one of us.

Who do you need to come on board (producers, sales agents, buyers, distributors, film festival directors, journalists) to amplify this film's message?

I am happy with the distribution on the domestic level, although we could always improve with help of campaigners and bloggers to promote the film and talkback sessions. As far as international level, I love to hear more from film festival directors and journalists who like my works and are willing to promote them. Also we are seeking international sales agents and distributors – it is almost impossible to promote the film abroad without their support.



Talk Back Out Loud

What type of impact and/or reception would you like this film to have?

I would like to see more authentic discussions on the issues of violence not only in Japan but also at the international level. And I hope more collaboration will take place: I always invite local guests in different fields to talk with or host workshops. By doing so, I hope people will develop more empathy toward “others” and try to use accessible mediums such as poetry, video, music, dance, comics, games and so on to make a difference where they are.

What's a key question that will help spark a debate or begin a conversation about this film?

What are the issues your family, your community and your society avoid talking about? Do you see any relationship with violence? If so, how do you think you could break the silence?

Would you like to add anything else?

The process of the Medea Project is inspiring. As the film has gotten a lot of attention in Japan where silence over traumatic experiences is extremely prevalent, I am sure any other societies and cultures facing similar issues will find it intriguing.

What other projects are the key creatives developing or working on now?

I have been working on another independent documentary feature film "Prison Circle" on the therapeutic community inside a men's prison in Japan. It took me 6 years just to get approval from the authority. I already spent 2 years in the prison shooting and now I'm getting ready to edit.

I am also working on a couple of commissioned documentary projects including substance abuse and recovery and popular theater in Japan.

Lastly I am planning to make my first fictional feature film entailing women's friendship, trauma, re-encounters, and acceptance set in the US, Mexico and Japan.

Interview: August 2017

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TALK BACK OUT LOUD

A story of 8 women with a history of trauma, shame and stigma. What they didn't have then and what they have now is theater.

Length: 119 minutes

Director: Kaori Sakagami

Producer: Kaori Sakagami & Ayumi Aso

About the writer, director and producer:

Kaori Sakagami-- An award winning Director/Producer. Based in Tokyo. Studied in Japan, US, Colombia, Peru and Chile. MA in International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh.

Ayumi Aso – Based in Tokyo. Freelance Producer for Japanese TV over two decades. Studied Media Management at New School University

Key cast: Rhodessa Jones, Edward Machtinger

Looking for (producers, sales agents, buyers, distributors, film festival directors, journalists): film festival directors, sales agents, international distributors, buyers, journalists and film bloggers

Social media handles:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/talkbackoutloud/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TalkBackDoc>

Other: Film website: <http://www.talkbackoutloud.com>

out of frame website: <http://outofframe.org/en>

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