



#WFA11 FEB 16-25 2023

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Months	Weeks	Days



IMPACTFUL ART, MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

🕒 January 24, 2023 📁 2023 International Film Festival

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Active participation, neutrality, abstinence. How do we participate in History? How do we deal with social issues, such as bigotry and hatred, when they do not directly resonate with us? How can art make a difference to our societies in promoting human rights protection? And how can we make the world a fairer place? *Finding Light* is a film that strives to connect the past with the present and make it relevant through dance.

By Despina Afentouli

See the feature film *Finding Light* on February 18 @12PM at Cinema Village (22 East 12th Street) as part of New York City's 11th Annual Winter Film Awards International Film Festival. [Tickets now on sale!](#)

Filmmaker Paul Michael Bloodgood explained in an interview to the journalist Despina Afentouli how *Finding Light* was “the only work” in his dance career that resonated in ways he could not fully grasp in his youth.

“Not everyone can make history, but it is given to all of us – to take part in it”, said Nobel Laureate and Holocaust

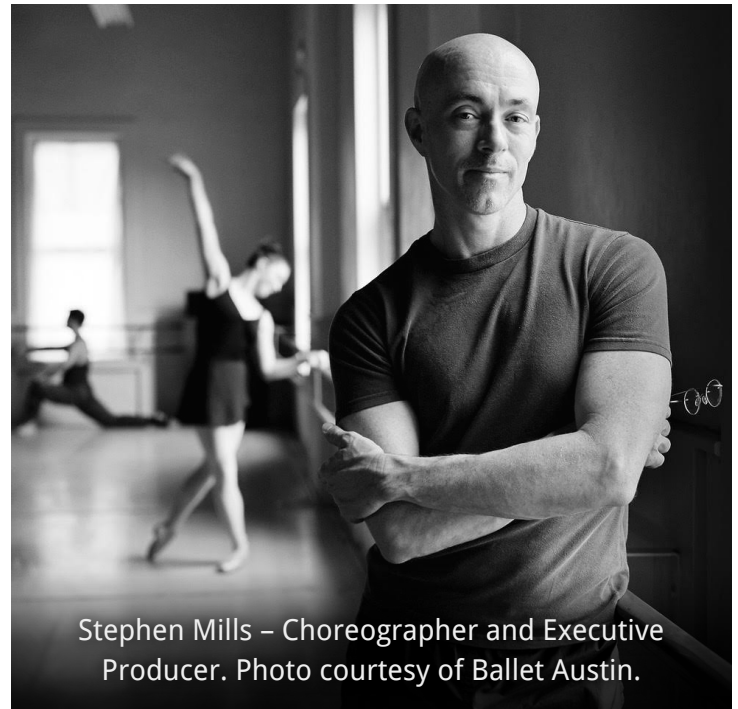
Survivor Elie Wiesel. What was your personal drive to tell the story of the Holocaust through dance?

Finding Light is the culmination of the past 18 years of my life. In 2005, I was a dancer in the original production of Stephen Mills' *Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project* – the ballet upon which many themes of *Finding Light* is based. It was the only work in my dance career that resonated in ways I couldn't fully grasp in my youth. The universal themes against bigotry and hatred were so much larger than myself that it was often overwhelming, but it also offered a sense of purpose and anchored my belief in why art matters.

In the film, Stephen explains how art doesn't change the world, people change the world – but art can start a conversation. For me, that ties back to Elie Wiesel's sentiments that we take part in how history will be written during the time we're alive, and how we choose to respond – or not respond – to injustices. We take part in history by protecting these stories, bearing witness to them and continuing to share them, and especially once Holocaust survivors are no longer with us, to share their stories first-hand.

What was the most difficult part of telling such an impactful story as the Holocaust that was not yours through dance? What have you learnt through the educational journey you experienced through the Holocaust history?

Paraphrasing Stephen Mills: For the highest impact, a person must see themselves in the art they experience. Post 9/11, I felt my contributions to society at large were no longer adequate as a dancer. I'd ask myself why was it important to entertain people when there was so much suffering in the world? Fortuitously, I found myself in Stephen's *Light*. As a dancer, a major part of our education was through hearing the testimony of several Holocaust survivors, with particular attention to Naomi Warren who was the key inspiration for Stephen's choreography. We visited Holocaust memorials, museums, read books, and watched films on the subject and would get together in small groups to discuss, in addition to dance organization-wide learning and conversation.



Stephen Mills – Choreographer and Executive Producer. Photo courtesy of Ballet Austin.

Considering the entire original cast were not of Jewish descent, I believe we did our due diligence to connect to the material as much as one could strive to make it as relatable – as fellow human beings – to those who experienced it. To be perfectly clear, I don't remotely compare my education or personal loss to anyone who experienced the atrocities of the Holocaust; but referencing the notion that one must see themselves in the art they experience – let me say with respect that this dance piece was the most important work I ever performed as a dancer, and now up to this point in my film career, *Finding Light* is personally



Naomi Warren. Photo by Hannah Neal, courtesy of Ballet Austin.

the most impactful piece of art I've had the privilege to create.

How long did it take you to produce *Finding Light* and what were the most rewarding and challenging moments while making this film?

Beginning with pre-production all the way through the 5.1 surround audio mix and art design for the film's poster, *Finding Light* took approximately 2 years to create. I received generous access to WWII era archival footage from the United States Holocaust Museum, The Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, and several others. One of our producers, Karen Bernstein, also lent material from her own documentary on the subject, as well as a short by Dutch Rall that was made back in 2005.

Dutch's footage had been lost to the digital ether and we'd almost given up our search – when to our amazement a large shoebox of film tapes was discovered in a closet at the Ballet Austin studios – a complete miracle! Not only was the raw footage from the short found, but also the speech given by Elie Wiesel prior to the dance work's premiere in Austin, a portion of which is seen in *Finding Light*. I

had already committed to making the film before any of the footage above had been found, so this "discovery" just made my original vision of the film more achievable.

On *Finding Light*, dance is a call for discussion on issues about human rights protection against bigotry and hate. How can arts contribute to the elevation of universal humanitarian values in societies and to what extent would a turn to classical studies benefit to this high cause?

Art has been and continues to be the universal language of mankind. So much expression that we feel as humans – the beauty, the pain, and everything between – can be explored through art without the limitations of the spoken word.

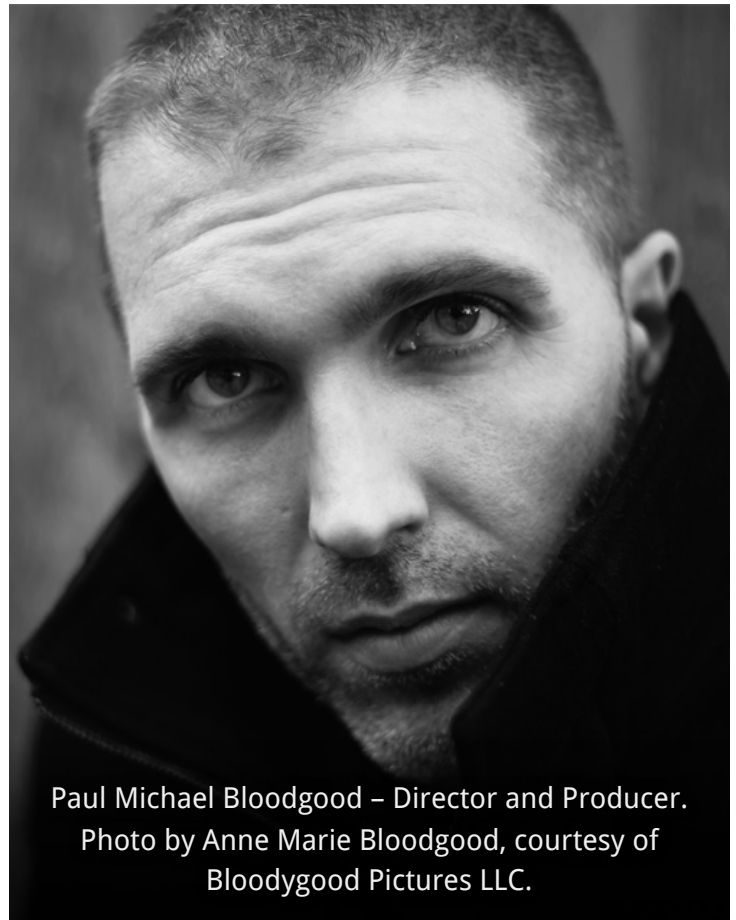
Understanding that different types of art speaks to different types of people, I believe a part of our calling as artists is to unearth these little gems of common ground that have the potential to break through racial judgement and cultural misunderstanding.

Music is one of those gems, which is why its inclusion in film is so vital and such an intricate part of the experience for the viewer. The body

language of dance is universal, and an audience filled with many cultures and spoken languages can understand what's happening on stage. Art can give us a safe space to explore commonalities in behavior that could lead a group of people to genocide (such as othering, isolating, dehumanizing) and then the hope is to then recognize those behaviors as they start happening in society again. As my film alludes to in the title, we do our best to find the light.

In your film, you said that the most universal message of the Holocaust is survival, yet hope is important to survive. But to continue living, Holocaust survivor, Naomi Warren, said that although she could not forget the Holocaust, she could not be living with it all the time. According to your opinion, how can survivors of traumatic events move from a past experience without denying it? What is the best way for self-liberation and self-empowerment?

In *Finding Light*, when choreographer Stephen Mills mentioned the universal message of survival with the dancers during a studio rehearsal – that was merely the first part of the discussion. As the film's director, I made the editing choice to allow Holocaust survivor Naomi Warren to complete the thought in the very next scene. Stephen worked very closely with Naomi through the dance work from beginning to end, so the concept of hope was always going to close the production on an uplifting note. The final section of the dance is wholeheartedly dedicated to hope because it was so important to Naomi and her specific journey. But to that end, based on hearing the testimony of many Holocaust survivors, many of them carried hope throughout their experience. If they began to lose hope, someone in their story came to their support and seemed to reinvigorate it. I believe the most self-liberating and self-empowering thing a human can do after experiencing such a horrific act is to accept what happened – but to rise above and continue to live. Surviving the Holocaust – in a way – was the ultimate act of defiance, of courage...of hope.



Paul Michael Bloodgood – Director and Producer.
Photo by Anne Marie Bloodgood, courtesy of
Bloodygood Pictures LLC.



Despina Afentouli

Despina Afentouli is a journalist-sociologist (Ph.D.). She taught journalism and media at universities. Since 2001, she has worked as a journalist for broadcast and print media and the public sector. She has experience in organizing educational seminars and cultural events. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology, a Master's degree in International Journalism, and a Bachelor's degree in European Studies and German.

ABOUT WINTER FILM AWARDS

New York City's **11th Annual Winter Film Awards International Film Festival** runs February 16-25 2023. Check out a jam-packed lineup of 73 fantastic films in all genres from 21 countries, including shorts, features, Animation, Drama, Comedy, Thriller, Horror, Documentary and Music Video. Hollywood might ignore women and people of color, but Winter Film Awards celebrates everyone!

Winter Film Awards is an all-volunteer, minority and women-owned registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization founded in 2011 in New York City by a group of filmmakers and enthusiasts. Our mission is to promote diversity, bridge the opportunity divide and provide a platform for under-represented artists and a variety of genres, viewpoints and approaches. We believe that only by seeing others' stories can we understand each other and only via an open door can the underrepresented artist enter the room.

Winter Film Awards programs are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and are made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature. Promotional support provided by the NYC Mayor's Office of Media & Entertainment.

For more information about the Festival, please visit winterfilmawards.com

📌 Aara Krumpe, Despina Afentouli, Elie Wiesel, Finding Light, International Film Festival, Karen Bernstein, Naomi Warren, Paul Michael Bloodgood, Stephen Mills.

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Spotlight on Animation at #WFA2023 ▶



Winter Film Awards

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