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The Doc Doctor's Anatomy of a Successful Film: "Divan"

December 26, 2007 | By [Fernanda Rossi](#)

About this new column: Many filmmakers ponder in anguish, How do other people—celebrated people—do it? Am I taking too long to make this documentary? Does everybody spend as much money as I am spending, or am I spending too little? And when filmmakers share their lessons learned in in-

terviews in the glossy trade magazines, their tales seem to follow the arc of otherworldly heroes rather than real documentary makers, i.e. human beings like you and me. So starting this month, the Doc Doctor decided to go out into the world (this real world) of filmmakers who are successful and find out how they made it. Each month, her "anatomy" will be a chance to learn from their hits and misses in real life examples.
—Fernanda Rossi, story consultant a.k.a. the Documentary Doctor



An Antique Road Show: In "Divan," filmmaker Pearl Gluck uses a sofa to chart her Jewish heritage.

Case Study No. 3

Divan, produced and directed by Pearl Gluck

Running time: 77 minutes

Film Vitals

Logline: In an effort to reclaim an ancestral sofa upon which esteemed rabbis slept, Pearl Gluck travels from her Hasidic community in Brooklyn to her visit her roots in Hungary. Along the way, she meets a colorful cast of characters. *Divan* is a visual parable that offers the possibility of personal reinvention and cultural re-upholstery.

Locations: The film was shot in the U.S., Hungary, Ukraine, and Israel, and it was edited in New York City.

Length of shoot: The film was shot in 3 months spread over about 7 periods of filming.

Length of editing process: Roughly 9 months in total editing time over a two-year period.

Length of time from pre-production through locking picture: 4 years.

3 years in distribution and counting

Money talk:

Total budget: Low six figures excluding P&A (Publicity and Advertising)

Funding sources included grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, grants from family foundations such as Eva & Lucius Eastman Fund, and in-kind contributions.

The budget was split evenly between travel costs, production, and post-production expenses.

Filmmaker's History

Where the idea came from: While travelling through Hungary on a Fulbright Grant, Pearl Gluck filmed people telling Yiddish stories on a Hi-8 camera. Little did she know that her hunt for stories would inspire a search for her family's lost sofa, which would become the narrative that animates this autobiographical doc.

Film school: No. Not yet.

Relevant studies: In addition to 12 years of Hasidic girl's school, Gluck majored in European Studies at New York University.

Beyond academia: In addition to being a published author, Gluck teaches Yiddish and makes video art.

Survival strategy: To pay the bills, Gluck works as a director and editor, on projects ranging from docs to commercials to not-for-profit work. She also previously served as a film and literary curator for the Jewish Community Center.

Previous films: She produced and directed *Great Balls of Fire*, a short about 9/11.

Smart Move

Filmmaker Pearl Gluck chose to tell stories about the Hasidic community of her youth. But to present the tradition of Hasidic storytelling in a more universal light, she hired a crew that was not as well-versed in all things Jewish as she is. The editing process is a case in point: the editor is married to a rabbi, but the interns working on the film included an ex-Catholic school girl, a Somali filmmaker, and a Hungarian painter. That combination gave Pearl several pairs of fresh, to say the least.

Pearl also made good use of her academic background in order to get support for the film, which was her first feature-length endeavour. Presuming that she had little chance of obtaining media grants, she applied to foundations that would be interested in the project as a Yiddish and ethnographic cultural pursuit.

Never again

"Never cut corners on sound!" says Pearl without hesitation. One shoot returned great footage, but the sound, which was done as a favor by a friend, was totally muffled and rendered the sequence unuseable.

Film's Successes So Far

Divan was shown in more than 40 festivals, including the Tribeca Film Festival. The film subsequently enjoyed theatrical release at the Film Forum in New York City. Zeitgeist Films picked it up for distribution. It was broadcast at Sundance Channel and on Israel's Channel 8. Home use DVDs are currently available through the film's official website as well as through Amazon, Netflix, and the Zeitgeist Films website.

Most Memorable Moments

The film's crew had problems at a Ukrainian border outpost. An immigration official claimed that their passport stamps were not in order, and then they threatened to confiscate valuable equipment. After a highly flirtatious exchange between Gluck's local fixer and a border guard, some U.S. currency changed hands, and the crew and all the equipment were allowed to leave the country.

On a very different note, Gluck adds that, because her film is at heart a personal documentary, family support meant a great deal to her. At a screening of the film at the Tribeca Screening Room that was attended by Jane Rosenthal among others, one of Gluck's brothers showed up with 10 Hasidic friends to show his support.

Will Relapse?

"Of course," says Gluck. She is about to shoot a narrative short on the interaction between Brooklyn's Hasidic and Polish communities. She is also completing a first draft of a feature to be based on the short. Her second doc, *Williamsburg*, a walking tour of a Hasidic neighborhood, played on French TV. She also co-wrote a short that premiered at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival.

Doctor's Credentials: Story consultant Fernanda Rossi has helped filmmakers craft the story structure of their films. She has doc-tored over 150 documentaries, fiction scripts and fundraising trailers including *Recycled Life* by Leslie Iwerks, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2007. In addition to conducting private consultations, lectures and seminars, she has served as a festival juror and grant panelist on numerous occasions. Fernanda also writes the bimonthly column "Ask the Doc Doctor" published by *Film Arts* magazine, and is the author of the book *Trailer Mechanics: A Guide to Making your Documentary Fundraising Trailer*.

Related Links:

To view the trailer for the film *Divan*, go to our ["Watch"](#) page.

Buy a copy of the DVD at the film's [official website](#).

The Doc's previous "Anatomy" columns revealed the stories behind the successful documentaries [Rock in a Heart Place](#) and [Kiran over Mongolia](#).

Finally, the Doc will be presenting her signature workshops on structure and trailers in Boston and Atlanta in January 2008. For details, please visit her website [Documentarydoctor.com](#).

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