



CASTLES IN THE SKY

A short film by Pearl Gluck
Written by Pearl Gluck with Malky Goldman

(USA, 2022; English and Yiddish)
TRT: 33:00

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Synopsis:

Living in a cloistered Hasidic milieu in Brooklyn, Malke is a Holocaust survivor and a beloved sex-ed teacher who has never been able to have children of her own. However, Malke has secretly been slamming poetry in New York's Lower East Side for the last three decades, defying all communal norms and laws. One day her transgressive pursuits are discovered by one of her bridal students. Is Malke willing to risk it all for her poetry?

The film includes live readings from poets such as Venus Thrash, Julia Kasdorf, and Everton Sylvester as well as featuring poetry by Yermiyahu Ahron Taub and Esther Hoffman as Malke's work and is an homage to the enduring, cross-cultural, and healing power of poetry. This is also Lynn Cohen's last performance before her passing in 2019.

Long Synopsis:

Castles In The Sky is a short film about a Hasidic sex-ed teacher, Malke, who guides new brides on how to have sex effectively, not necessarily based on the laws of science, though that does play a small part, but more deeply based on laws of her faith, specifically the ultra-Orthodox Jewish interpretation of “*p’ru u’revu*” [the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply”]. Though she has helped encourage four decades of women to birth new families in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Malke has never been able to give birth to a child of her own. This is because she is a Holocaust survivor who is a victim of Josef Mengele’s infamous and unethical Nazi experimentation on twins and their reproductive organs. Everyone knows this about Malke’s haunting past and they know how this made her even more committed to the continuity of her Hungarian Hasidic lineage which was so brutality truncated. What they don’t know about Malke, however, is that she has been keeping a secret.

As it turns out, Malke is also a slam poet. Every first Wednesday of every month since 1973 when she discovered the Nuyorican Poetry Cafe, she has been sneaking out of the secluded Hasidic environs of Brooklyn and taking the subway to the Lower East Side to slam her own erotic poetry. What she cannot express within the confines of her faith-based world – whether it be her feminism or her devotion to scientific research as either may challenge her faith, she explores it in her poetry. The balance seems to work for her, until one day her secret (and perspective) is discovered by one of her devout bridal students. In the end [spoiler alert], instead of ousting her from the community, her Hasidic protégé, Shayndi, and her newest bridal student conspire to encourage Malke to teach them how to write poetry as well as teach them the laws of faithful sexuality.

Director's Statement:

The film explores my relationship to my Hasidic past, the women who helped me form my own feminist interpretations of the faith, and my own history as a slam poet and slam hostess in the Lower East Side in the early '90s at the KGB Bar and the Nuyorican Poetry Café.

My great aunt Malke, herself a survivor of the Holocaust, and herself unable to have children because of the experimentations in Auschwitz, would always warn me not to “build castles in the sky” with my artistic aspirations. What husband will want to support this life I have chosen as a poet and artist, Malke would ask me, as she sipped her black coffee through her cubed sugar in the morning, secretly reading *The New York Times* cover to cover (before anyone in the family caught her engaging in secular pursuits). Malke was worried that I, too, would not have children if I continued in this seemingly peripheral path.

This project is my filmic approach to asking questions about sex education in the Hasidic world, the impact of survivors (and unethical experiments) on the next generation of women, and the hope for the integration of creative expression into a world so deeply informed by genocide and dogma.

Pearl Gluck Bio:

Pearl Gluck is a filmmaker with a blend of professional and teaching experience. Gluck's work has been part of the Sundance Lab, Cannes, PBS, and won prizes such as Best Actor, Best Film, Best Debut Feature and Best LGBT Short at festivals worldwide. Her first documentary feature, *Divan* (2004) opened theatrically at the Film Forum in NYC and premiered on the Sundance Channel. She teaches screenwriting, directing and producing in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State University. Through her courses and her award-winning films she explores themes such as autobiographical film and representations of gender, class, and faith in cinema. Gluck is currently in post-production on her short film, *Castles in the Sky*, starring Lynn Cohen. Her feature film, *The Turn Out*, blends documentary and fiction storytelling to address the underreported issues of domestic sex trafficking at truck stops, is currently screening at film festivals and won Best Debut Feature at the Female Eye Film Festival in Toronto, Canada, as well as the American Tracks Music Award for the film's title song, *Heaven Spelled Backwards*.

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