

TH!NKFilm

In association with

HBO/CINEMAX
DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Presents

SPELLBOUND

Directed by Jeff Blitz

Produced by Jeff Blitz and Sean Welch

Academy Award® Nominee Best Documentary Feature

For information, please visit:

www.thinkfilmcompany.com

www.spellboundmovie.com

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RUNNING TIME: 97 minutes

Rated G

SPELLBOUND

Awards

Best Documentary Feature Nominee, Academy Awards

IFP/Independent Spirit Award Nominee, Truer Than Fiction Award

Best Documentary Feature Nominee, International Documentary Association

Best Documentary Feature, SXSW Film Festival

Audience Award and Special Jury Prize, IFP/Los Angeles Film Festival

Best Documentary, Santa Barbara Film Festival

Best Documentary, Woodstock Film Festival

Golden Maile Award, Best Documentary
Hawaii International Film Festival

Audience Award for Best Documentary, Sarasota Film Festival

Best Documentary, Best First Feature and Audience Award
Portland International Film Festival

Audience Award for Best Documentary
San Francisco Documentary Film Festival

Judge's Choice and Audience Awards for Best Documentary
Texas Film Festival

Roxanne T. Mueller Audience Award for Best Film
Cleveland International Film Festival

Audience Award and Filmmaker's Award, Durango Film Festival

Newport Beach Film Festival **Best Documentary Feature Film**

SPELLBOUND

THE FILMMAKERS

Director/Producer/Camera	Jeff Blitz
Producer/Sound	Sean Welch
Editor	Yana Gorskaya
Composer	Daniel Hulsizer
Additional Producer	Ronnie Eisen
Graphics	Adam Byrne/Yana Gorskaya
Rerecording Mixer	Peter Brown
Sound FX Editor	Joe Dzuban

THE SPELLERS

Harry Altman	Angela Arenivar
Ted Brigham	April Degideo
Neil Kadakia	Nupur Lala
Emily Stagg	Ashley White

SPELLBOUND

About the Production

SPELLBOUND is an award-winning documentary that presents the intense, real-life experience of the National Spelling Bee as illustrated by the stories of eight driven, young spellers who compete for the top prize. Through the keenly observant and humane vision of director Jeff Blitz and producer Sean Welch, the audience shares the private lives of the students as they train for and compete in the ultimate intellectual showdown, discovering not only their individual personalities, their obsessive study habits, their sometimes heart-breaking, sometimes inspiring family dynamics, but also the story of America itself. From the hardscrabble plains of Texas to the manicured lawns of Connecticut, from the redneck Ozark countryside to the troubled inner city of Washington, D.C., SPELLBOUND follows the dramatic journey of eight anxious, yet courageous, young competitors as they wrestle with the impossibly difficult words and enormously big dreams that define the National Spelling Bee. SPELLBOUND, a THINKFilm release presented in association with HBO/Cinemax Documentary Films, was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 2002 Academy Awards, and has won over fifteen other Best Documentary awards at film festivals throughout North America.

The idea to make SPELLBOUND occurred to Jeff Blitz in May of 1997, when he saw the final rounds of the National Spelling Bee on ESPN. Although the “Bee” is televised annually, Blitz, a graduate student in film production at USC, was watching for the first time and was -- literally -- spellbound. “I was hooked immediately,” Blitz recalls. “I think there’s such a natural drama built into the competition. Everyone tries to

spell along with these extraordinary kids and, inevitably, fails.” He was fascinated by the constant threat of sudden elimination and speculates that his interest in making a documentary about the National Spelling Bee stemmed from his love of the old mystery movies he watched on television when he was growing up. His favorite, "And Then There Were None," shaped his early sense of storytelling. In that classic movie, a group of people of various and incongruous backgrounds gather at a mansion on a remote island, and, one by one, are killed off. This intriguing dramatic device came to mind on that day in May 1997, as Blitz watched the spelling contestants eliminated one by one, until a single champion remained.

As much as Blitz responded to the suspense of the situation, he realized that a story about this quintessentially American event could also be a story about our country at this time. The contestants come from different places and represent different parts of the population, making the National Spelling Bee a classic melting pot of nationalities and classes. Intrigued by its many aspects and meanings, Blitz made a point of watching the competition the following year when it aired on ESPN. Once again, he was captivated by the event’s tension and drama. But, it occurred to him that as fascinating as the Bee was, the audience met the spellers only in the final rounds and knew nothing of their backgrounds, their families, or their individual dreams. This realization inspired him to make a documentary film that would tell the personal stories of some of these brave and dedicated young spellers.

At the time, Blitz was out of school and working for the Writers Guild of America. His job was to research the secret work histories of screenwriters who had been blacklisted in the 1940s and '50s. The assignment refined his sleuthing skills and

prepared him to begin his serious research on the National Bee. First, Blitz had to identify his “cast.” He studied the pool of potential contestants, printing out charts of the 1998 spellers and narrowing the list to those who had made it to the second day of competition. From that group, he identified spellers who were qualified to return in 1999 and began contacting the two dozen families on that list. At the same time, Blitz corresponded with spelling coaches and representatives of the National Bee, looking for tips on up-and-coming spellers who had not been a part of previous competitions. The chart became a jigsaw puzzle of sorts, as Blitz tried to find the right balance for the documentary.

Blitz decided he needed a partner for this endeavor and turned to his old friend and producer, Sean Welch. Blitz and Welch had worked together on the short film, "Wonderland" starring George Segal. Blitz pitched the idea to Welch, who, at first, was not convinced that a documentary on the National Bee would be all that interesting. Later, when Blitz invited Welch to his apartment to have the deciding conversation on whether or not they would go forward with the idea, Welch saw that Blitz had plastered his apartment with printouts of his research, photos of the spellers, family stories, and maps of the U.S. with different colored push-pins. “Jeff is such a masterful storyteller,” Welch explains, “that as soon as he began to explain to me the beautifully complex American stories he wanted to tell and the rich mosaic he had in mind, the film became clear to me and I wanted to do it, whatever it took.” Impressed and inspired, Welch signed on as SPELLBOUND’S producer.

All through film school, Blitz had secretly yearned to serve as director of photography as well as director on a short film. He made up his mind to photograph

SPELLBOUND himself, which necessitated the purchase of a Canon XL-1 camera -- the team's first plunge into major debt. With Blitz behind the camera, Welch was drafted as SPELLBOUND'S sound man. Blitz called his former roommate, sound man Peter Brown, to teach Welch how to record and mix. Practicing their new skills, Blitz and Welch spent many hours walking around their neighborhood in Los Angeles shooting their neighbors picking up the morning paper or watering the lawn.

With their "crew" in place, the team turned their attention to finalizing their selection of subjects. They experienced their first big break in February, when two families in the St. Louis area agreed to be profiled. Georgie Thampy, a brilliant eleven year-old who had placed 4th in 1998, and John Stoecker of Rolla, Missouri, consented to be featured in the documentary. John had placed 10th in his 1998 regional Bee and his older brothers had been to the nationals. Blitz and Welch hit the road, propelled by optimism and travel vouchers for free flights on Southwest airlines. But their production got off to a rocky start. The authorities in charge of Georgie's regional Bee placed restrictions on the filmmakers, permitting Blitz to shoot only Georgie. Although Georgie won, there wasn't enough coverage of the event to be useful. Subsequently, Georgie's family got cold feet about participating and quietly backed out.

Blitz and Welch hoped John Stoecker's family would be more accommodating. They were warm and funny and completely comfortable opening up to Blitz. But the worst kind of disaster struck when John failed to win his regional Bee. Spelling too fast, John dropped a syllable in "monotonous," and was eliminated. Victory went to Ted Brigham, an unknown speller from Stoutland, Missouri. Blitz and Welch were devastated. But, as Blitz points out, "People who work on documentaries are people who

love to solve problems and who are undaunted by obstacles. While Sean and I hated losing Georgie and John, we never lost hope that other great stories would be waiting in the wings.” In fact, Ted Brigham’s story was very intriguing: he was a brilliant kid trying to find his place in a rural community that did not seem to value his intellect. Fortunately for the filmmakers, his family agreed to be profiled and SPELLBOUND began to fall into place.

The filmmakers traveled to Perryton, Texas, to follow Angela Arenivar through her regional match. Angela's story was astounding. Her parents had illegally crossed into the United States from Mexico many years earlier. Angela's father, Ubaldo, who worked as the main ranch hand on a huge property, and his wife, never learned to speak English. Angela's attempt to become a spelling bee champion was a goal she had set for herself and one she would have to accomplish entirely on her own. Determined to overcome the incredible obstacles she faced, Angela regularly studied, inventing games to teach herself the spelling bee words. For her, mastery of the English language, and a victory at the regional bee, would represent assimilation and the achievement of the American Dream. After spending a few days with Angela and her family, Blitz and Welch were so enthusiastic about their project that they applied for new credit cards to fund the documentary and embarked on a cross-country search for more spellers.

They traveled to Missouri, Texas, Connecticut, Central California, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Washington, D.C., Florida, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. By the end of production, they had covered twelve stories that would eventually be cut down to the featured eight. The filmmakers found that working with kids presented interesting challenges. Their first concern was that the young spellers in the documentary feel

absolutely comfortable with the camera. Instead of subjecting them to straightforward interviews, Blitz tried a more informal approach. Whenever possible, and with the approval of their parents, Blitz filmed the spellers in their own rooms and instigated a lively conversation. “Rather than slog through a list of questions, I would try to just talk to them. All that’s required, really, is good listening. The rest follows naturally,” he explains. He found that the kids had no problem being themselves. Their parents, on the other hand, had to be eased into the situation and needed time to become comfortable with the crew, which expanded when it was time to shoot the National Bee in Washington, D.C. Blitz and Welch were joined by two friends, Mac Carter and David Gruenberg, who operated additional video cameras. Carter actually operated two cameras simultaneously. Blitz and Welch also hired a local crew to cover one final angle of the competition. By the time they finished shooting, they had over 160 hours of footage.

With filming completed, Blitz & Welch turned their attention to post-production. Blitz recruited Yana Gorskaya to edit the film. For the next two years, Gorskaya worked out of Blitz’s apartment on a Final Cut Pro system, while the filmmakers dedicated themselves to fundraising.

As the finished documentary emerged, the film’s themes became apparent. Blitz and Welch had been asked many times if they thought the Bee was a waste of time: people wondered if spelling was an irrelevant skill in an age of computer spellcheckers. The answer to that question is at the heart of SPELLBOUND. “People who raise these points miss the nuances of the Bee,” says Blitz. “From a purely academic perspective, top spellers master incredible memorization skills, learn word origins, root languages,

and the history of English. But they also learn the value of determination: these kids are usually self-starters whose energy and devotion are rewarded with participation in the Bee, with meeting like-minded kids, and with being treated like champions, win or lose.”

Blitz, whose mother is from Argentina, points out that the film’s most meaningful theme for him is the pursuit of the American Dream. Many of the spellers are children of first-generation families. He calls their incredible desire to achieve “understandable, astonishing, and sometimes bittersweet.” Their optimism and their belief in the value of diligence and labor prove that the immigrant work ethic -- the very one that built America -- is alive today in a new generation.

The National Spelling Bee is a competition, and the spellers, a rare breed of intellectual athlete, are trained to compete. Yet the Bee does not have a cut-throat, survival-of-the-fittest, atmosphere. SPELLBOUND illustrates the wonderful strength and resiliency of the spellers. Win or lose, they are victorious in the end because the skills they have learned will be theirs forever. As Blitz emphasizes, the real competition in the Bee is not “kid vs. kid,” but “kid vs. word.” “Whenever a kid fights back against the big, bad dictionary,” he says, “it’s a moment of triumph.”

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ABOUT THE SPELLERS

Angela

Angela's success at spelling is all the more remarkable because her parents, Mexican immigrants who settled in the Texas panhandle, speak almost no English. While other kids benefit from spelling coaches and software programs, Angela has taught herself to excel. But will the grueling final rounds of the Amarillo Bee result in Angela's staggering victory or surprising defeat?

April

From behind the counter at the "Easy Street" bar, April's father tells us that his life hasn't been a real success story. Will April's be different? She would spend between eight and nine hours each day during the summer studying from her dictionary and spelling materials. For a whole year this has been her one goal: to win the National Spelling Bee.

Ashley

The oldest daughter of a single mother in D.C., Ashley turns to prayers to get her through the day and spelling to give her life focus. When she won the citywide spelling bee her mother said, "It was the happiest day of my life." But now she's going to the Nationals. Will her teacher's homespun efforts and invented spelling games be enough to help Ashley realize her big dream?

Emily

In between equestrian practice and singing in her a cappella group, Emily whiles away her days in New Haven, practicing spelling with her mom. Her first year at the nationals, Emily was one of the first kids out. The next year, she placed 10th. Now, her goal is to do better. But nerves have set in and she wonders how she'll face her friends if she doesn't improve her rank.

Harry

With his one-of-a-kind approach, his joke-telling, and his quick wit, Harry nearly steals the show. His incredible expressiveness let's us share in his thought process as he battles through words like "Cephalagia." But in the 4th round, when he comes up against "Banns," a word that means nothing to him -- is he up to the challenge?

Neil

Neil is an East Indian boy living with his parents and sister on the posh San Clemente coast. Neil's father has worked out an incredible system for Bee preparation that involves studying all the words of former championships, computer programs and multiple spelling coaches. "When you fight in a war," Neil's mother says, "everybody has the same goal." Can Neil handle the pressure of his own and his parents' wishes?

Nupur

After being eliminated in the "killer 3rd round" of the 1998 Bee, Nupur returns this year more determined than ever. Her parents try to balance her interest in spelling, saying, "To be the best speller is not the most important thing." But Nupur's mind is made up. Her biggest obstacles for a return trip to the Bee are three boys who have teamed up to unseat her as school champion. Will she beat them at their own game?

Ted

Growing up in his family's doublewide trailer, Ted has been trying to find his place in a rural Missouri junior high school that prizes basketball prowess above all else. Ted's gifts are his intelligence and idiosyncratic world view; talents that are not embraced by his school. Will Ted find his place with success at the Nationals?

SPELLBOUND

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Jeff Blitz

Jeff Blitz grew up with a halting childhood stuttering problem that gave rise to an early fascination with speech and storytelling. Jeff didn't let his lack of fluency stop him from taking on high school debate; he eventually became president of his team and won several New Jersey state championships. That interest in language developed into the study of creative writing as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins. There, he had the great fortune to study with the novelists John Barth and J.M. Coetzee. Soon, Jeff's approach to storytelling brought him away from fiction and into graduate study at USC film school where he won the school's prestigious Presidential Fellowship and directed the award-winning short film, WONDERLAND, with George Segal. Since graduating, Jeff has worked at the Writers Guild of America, west, researching the secret screenplay histories of writers blacklisted in the 1940s and '50s. SPELLBOUND is his first feature film and his first documentary.

Sean Welch

Sean Welch moved back to Los Angeles after spending his more formative years in Berkeley, CA, working as a carpenter and playing semi-pro soccer. Since returning, Sean has worked on feature films (CRIMSON TIDE and FACE/OFF) and begun producing commercials. In addition to work, Sean has made traveling and photography a priority

and has backpacked through South America, Europe, North America, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East believing that "his journeys are the midwives of thought."

Yana Gorskaya

Originally from Russia and raised in Oregon, Yana relates to many of the spellers and their immigrant work ethic. Gorskaya's credits include the upcoming IN THE NAME OF LOVE, an exploration of Russian marriage agencies directed by Shannon O'Rourke and executive produced by Sydney Pollack. She's currently wrapping post-production on SONNY BOY, a profile of actor, civil rights activist and Golden Gloves Boxing champion Virgil Frye. Gorskaya received her B.A. from Columbia University and her M.F.A. from USC.