

THE LITCHFIELD COUNTY TIMES

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It's Magic in Millerton

WRITTEN BY KATHRYN BOUGHTON

For all but a lucky few who never seem to lose their psychological footing, adolescence is a minefield of emotional ups and downs, of uncertainties and anxieties—of wanting to fit in and not being quite sure how to achieve that.

In his charming new documentary, "Magic Camp: Welcome to the Real Hogwarts," director Judd Erlich, a Manhattan native whose parents have been long-time weekend residents of the Millerton, N.Y., area, explores the world of one group of teenagers, a group that almost by definition is outside the "norm." These are young people, mostly boys, many pudgy, geeky and socially awkward, who are fascinated with magic and who seek to find their place in their evolving world by attending a camp dedicated to conjuring.

"The Magic Camp kid is a special kind of kid," said Mr. Erlich in a phone interview from his Brooklyn home this week. "These are adolescents who have issues they are dealing with. They may not fit in entirely at home and Magic Camp is this place where it is safe to be themselves.

"Magic attracts a different kind of kid," he continued. "These are not the captains of their football teams, perhaps not the most popular kids in their schools—but very often people who are coming of age are pushed to conform, to be like everyone else. Magic Camp gives them just the opposite message, that they need to embrace their differences, their quirkiness, because that is the only thing that will set them apart. You are not going to get anywhere by emulating everyone else. The film becomes about the process of adolescence and growing up—that is what people really related to in this film."

Clearly people do relate to it. Online reviews from theatergoers laud it. "God, this movie is good," wrote one. "It concerns a fascinating group of eccentrics—kids learning to do magic; and the professionals volunteering to teach them. Everyone is more than just quirky. They're gifted and dedicated/obsessive artists, performers, sticklers."

"It is whimsical, heartbreaking and hilarious," wrote another. "And yes, the magic is breathtaking. That stuff is fun."

"Magic Camp" was a natural for the 42-year-old Mr. Erlich, whose previous credits include 2006's "Mayor of the West Side"—another coming-of-age story of a teenager with multiple disabilities that was nominated for an Emmy Award for Best Documentary, and 2008's "Run For Your Life," which also garnered an Emmy-nomination.

"I knew Tannen's to be such a special and unique place," he said. "They had been approached before to do reality things, but they never trusted what those shows would do. But they gave me full access, which is all a documentary filmmaker can hope for. People always ask me if they were worried I would reveal the secrets of the magic, but they really trusted me to do the right thing.

"The kids were forthcoming about who they were more than they would have been at home because the camp is a judgment-free zone," he continued. "It's a place where it is okay to experiment and



Judd Erlich will debut his documentary, "Magic Camp" this weekend at The Moviehouse in Millerton, N.Y. Below, a young camper in the documentary.



find out who you are. We had trouble with one camper out of whole lot—that's the extreme minority. The fact they have gone to camp gave everyone a certain level of trust—that coupled with fact that these kids want to be performers made it easy to get access to filming them."

Tannen's is one of the best-known names in magic. It has been in business in Manhattan since 1925 and has operated the magic camp since 1974. The camp is currently held every July on the Pennsylvania campus of Bryn Mawr, in what Mr. Erlich calls a "magical setting reminiscent of Hogwarts." Notable graduates include David Blaine, Joshua Jay, Steve Cohen, Darren Romeo and Academy Award-winning actor Adrien Brody. Past guests and counselors include renowned magicians David Copperfield, Criss Angel and many more.

Tannen's has long been part of Mr.

Erlich's life. "I grew up in New York City near the Flatiron Building on 22nd Street," Mr. Erlich related. "Tannen's Magic shop, the oldest magic shop in city, was near there and I got into magic. Not a lot of people lived downtown then and there were a lot of novelty shops and magic shops that are not there anymore. Tannen's has just moved to 34th Street where it has a very small store on the sixth floor of a building. You really have to know where you are going, but it is still around and alive and well."

While many of the children who go to Tannen's Magic Camp are serious about a future in prestidigitation, it was never Mr. Erlich's goal. "There are kids who take off with it and others for whom it is more of a hobby. I perform sometimes for my kids," he said, "but I never really went into it. But I loved seeing the many magic and film connections. Steve Martin, Woody

Allen, Orson Wells, Johnny Carson, Dick Van Dyke—all these guys were obsessed with magic and then went into film. There are parallels between making movie and magic—it's all a bit of illusion."

He said that growing up in New York he was also interested in film. "I always had access to the great art house theaters. In college I took film classes, but it was not my major. I graduated with a degree in psychology and counseling and worked in that field for four or five years. The 'Mayor of the West Side' was actually a client and I was able to film him and transition into becoming a filmmaker. In many ways, I feel the documentaries are an extension of the social work I was doing. I want to make films that are entertaining and engaging and at the same time have some meaning that touches and affects people."

He concedes that documentary filmmaking is a "tough business," but hopes that the Internet will open new markets for these filmmakers. "Documentaries are undervalued in this country," he said. "In other countries there is a lot more government support. Are they making money? Probably not, but they are supported. In America, the entertainment business is so much about numbers and that's why there are so many complaints about Hollywood doing so many remakes. It's an investment and they have to be prudent and cautious."

He says many people equate documentaries with the films shown in their old science classes. He said for some documentaries are considered "the 'D' word." "Documentaries really are considered to be kind of a dirty word," he agreed, "but now they offer such vibrant, exciting stories with everything a good narrative film can tell. With the proliferation of people watching online and having access to art-house movies, even people in small towns in the middle of country can be surprised by what they can see."

Ehrlich recently completed a successful Kickstarter campaign for his next feature, "Science Fiction Land." He collaborated on the editing of Ric Burns' epic PBS series and Emmy Award-winner, "New York," and also worked for acclaimed PBS independent documentary series POV and edited for CBS News. A graduate of Vassar, he teaches documentary filmmaking in high schools and universities.

Still, even though he now has his own production company, he makes commercials and films for corporations to support his documentary film habit. "Run for Your Life" premiered at Tribeca and it was picked up for distribution," he said. "There are a lot of films, and some break through, but the whole industry is trying to figure out the digital stuff."

He said "Magic Camp" has a distributor and will have a limited theatrical run. It is currently being shown at the Rerun Theater in New York City and will be premiered at The Moviehouse in Millerton July 5 through 11 at 4:20 and 6:30 p.m. Mr. Erlich will be in attendance throughout the opening weekend and promises to bring some surprise guests from the film.

Tickets are now available on line at www.themoviehouse.net or at the box-office. On July 9, it will be on iTunes and every digital platform.

"People have really enjoyed this film," he said. "People responded well at the film festivals and we hope people will begin to find it."

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