

Arcadia Pictures presents



**"Every revolution is an adventure..."**

— Angel Wagenstein

a film by  
Andrea Simon  
US/Bulgaria • 85 minutes • 2017

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# ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON

## Synopsis

*“Angel Wagenstein’s life and work are a secret history of the twentieth century.”*

Elizabeth Frank

This provocative documentary portrait of the Bulgarian Sephardic film artist, novelist, anti-Nazi saboteur and lifelong revolutionary Angel Wagenstein introduces Western viewers to a brilliant and charismatic storyteller, for whom art became a form of resistance against a series of oppressive and corrupt regimes. At 94, Wagenstein remains a passionate witness to history, and an active participant in the political debate on Europe’s rocky post-communist future.

Wagenstein’s fascinating personal story includes command of a daredevil Jewish partisan brigade, early dreams of a socialist utopia, furious disappointment when those dreams began to crumble, and a central role in the democratic reforms that ended communist rule in Bulgaria. But his most striking quality as a documentary subject is his willingness to *think critically* about whatever historical situation he is placed in, rather than succumb to the temptations of ideological purity.

ART IS A WEAPON explores many of Wagenstein’s beautiful and deeply ironic films, focusing in particular on STERNE (“STARS”), his autobiographical masterpiece, which beat *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *The 400 Blows* to take the Special Jury prize at Cannes in 1959. STARS details an initially indifferent German soldier’s reluctant awakening to how he is personally implicated in the horror of what is happening to Europe’s Jews. It also brings to life a neglected chapter of Jewish resistance that challenges toxic myths of Jewish passivity during the Shoah.

The documentary considers other features – the witty utopian space epic EOLOMEA, the darkly allegorical GOYA (Wagenstein’s autobiographically inflected portrait of an artist torn between compromise and resistance), and the heroic Marxist Westerns HEROES OF SEPTEMBER and ALARM. Through these films, and the complicated history of their production and repression, we glimpse something of the idealism with which Europeans after World War II launched the socialist experiment, and their rage and disappointment as the system descended into chaos. Rare material from Russian, German and Bulgarian archives is included as well, while our own original footage captures the beauty and strangeness of the Bulgarian landscape, with its Greek ruins, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman villages and gargantuan, crumbling Soviet-era monuments.

**ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON** opens up a fresh perspective on the past hundred years, taking us down unfamiliar historical and ideological paths, and inviting us to revisit the revolutions of 1989 with a critical eye. Wagenstein's life and films raise fundamental questions—more timely now than ever—on when, how and why to resist the totalitarian impulse ... and where the paths of resistance may lead.

## **Short Synopsis**

**“94 Years, 52 films, 3 revolutions...”**

As a teenager in wartime Bulgaria, Wagenstein commanded a daredevil Jewish partisan brigade, surviving capture and torture by fascist police. When post-war dreams of a socialist utopia turned to dust, his films became a kind of covert resistance against the brutality of the Stalinist era. This is one of the great untold stories of world cinema: at 94, Wagenstein is still a man of massive charm and ferocious intelligence, a passionate witness to history and influential voice in the debate on Europe's rocky post-communist future. Intimate conversations, excerpts from his films, and rare archive materials inform this visually striking and provocative documentary on a remarkable artist.

Trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/217574243>

**“A GEM OF A FILM!”**

**Thomas Elsaesser**

**CREDITS:**

**Directed and Produced by Andrea Simon**

**Executive Producer: Felice Firestone**

**Director of Photography: Daniel Epstein**

**Editors: Adrienne Haspel, Elka Nikolova, Mary Ann Toman**

**RT: 85:30**

**Shot on location in Bulgaria, Germany, Macedonia, Russia, and the USA**

**In Bulgarian, English, German, Russian and Lad with English subtitles**

**FESTIVAL SCREENINGS:**

**[New York Jewish Film Festival](#) | January 2017**

**Review in Arts Blog “[Apollo’s Girl](#)”**

**SEEFest Los Angeles | April 2017**

**[Audience Award](#) - Documentary**

**Article in “[People’s World](#)”**

**Washington Jewish Film Festival | May 2017**

**Screening at the [AFI Silver Theatre](#)**

**Screening at the [National Gallery of Art](#)**

**Review in cinephile blog “[Unseen Films](#)”**

**Review in arts and culture guide “[DCist](#)”**

**[Jewish Film Festival Berlin-Brandenburg](#) | July 3, 2017**

**Review in German newspaper [Berliner Zeitung](#)**

**[Woods Hole Film Festival](#) | August 3, 2017**

**UPCOMING FESTIVAL SCREENINGS:**

**[International Film Festival KineNova Skopje](#) | October 6–11, 2017**

**[Dallas Video Fest 30](#) | Closing Night October 8, 2017**

**[CineLibri Sofia](#) | October 17, 2017**

**[with additional screenings/discussions through US Embassy October 19-21, Sofia and Plovdiv]**

**[London Jewish Book Week](#) | March 4-11, 2018**

**\* Special screening in conjunction with release of first English translation of Wagenstein’s autobiographical novel, *Далеч от Толедо* (Far from Toledo), winner of “*Prix Alberto Benveniste*.”**



## Selected Press Quotes

“His considerable output in cinema—over 50 feature films written—ought to have won him greater recognition outside the former Warsaw Pact countries; but the vagaries of film distribution, beset by commercial exigencies and political tensions, have left him all but unknown outside Eastern Europe. Seeing Simon’s graceful, handsome and intelligent film, and being delighted by Wagenstein’s earthy, candid wit, one hopes that the situation can be ameliorated.”

<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/a-feminist-lens-on-hummus-and-more/>

“The USSR had Sergei Eisenstein, while Bulgaria had Angel Wagenstein. ... The life and work of the 94-year-old screenwriter and novelist are wonderfully depicted in Andrea Simon’s top-notch documentary. ... I’m delighted to report that *Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon* was “weaponized,” winning SEEFest’s Documentary Audience Award.”

<http://www.peoplesworld.org/article/new-bulgarian-documentary-angel-wagenstein-art-is-a-weapon/>

“ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON is one of my favorite films of 2017. ... Not to put too fine a point on it: ART IS A WEAPON is amazing. It is an ever enriching film that alters how you see the world and yourself. I can’t recommend this film enough. It is a great portrait of a great man and it will make you a better person.”

<https://unseenfilms.blogspot.com/2017/05/angel-wagenstein-art-is-weapon-2017.html>

“*Angel Wagenstein* is extremely well made. ... Wagenstein himself, now in his 90s, plays a large role in the narration of the film, recounting events in a uniquely poetic and philosophical manner. In this documentary, Bulgarian history reads as a kind of microcosm of the world at large, with lessons we should all take to heart.”

[http://dcist.com/2017/05/the\\_dcist\\_guide\\_to\\_the\\_2017\\_washing.php](http://dcist.com/2017/05/the_dcist_guide_to_the_2017_washing.php)

“This is a truly stunning work on every level, from an accomplished filmmaker with a subject made for her talents. Even in the Festival’s august company (Kentrige, Zweig, Gert), the 94-year-old Wagenstein dominates the screen. ... I shudder to think of how hard [Simon’s] choices must have been, and mourn the thousands of feet of footage that had to be left behind, even as I celebrate the brilliance of her decisions and the film she has made from them packed into only 84 succulent minutes.

<https://apollogirl.wordpress.com/2017/01/11/apollos-girl-85/>



## Stills



## Director's Statement

We live in the era of Trump, Le Pen, Orban, Duterte. For me, the question of the hour is this: What does it mean when a big, beautiful idea loses its credibility? How did that happen to Communism? Is that what's happening to Democracy right now?

I had no idea when we began shooting **ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON** six years ago how unsettlingly topical it would turn out to be. But these issues pop up at every screening! I think it's because this brilliant and subtle film artist and very charming man—I call him the Bulgarian love child of Isaac Babel and Yves Montand—has valuable information for us about what exactly it means to *resist*: bravely, carefully, cleverly, lethally ... effectively.

He's 94 years old and still "an uncomfortable thorn in the side of power," one scholar says. Also worthy of note: this year the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize (again) in honor of its role in the wartime rescue of Bulgaria's 48,000 Jews. We need to know more about why not just Wagenstein, but an entire society, managed to summon up this spirit of resistance.

This is a man who takes the long view: Bulgarian journalist Plamen Petkov said to me: "*He carries around in his head every moment of the last two thousand years.*" Wagenstein makes connections, remembers everything. And now, more than ever, knowledge is important. Nuance and complexity and detail are important. FACTS are important!

I've always been interested in stories that are a little bit odd. What does the history of the world look like, seen from an unfamiliar perspective...? In America and especially in my hometown, New York, we live in the belly of the beast, at the heart of the empire. But what about the stories, the histories, the knowledge that come from the *margins* of empire?

Bulgaria is actually central to what used to be called "Western" civilization ... so, OK: what about Bulgarian history? And what about the repressed or forgotten Muslim history of Europe? (For example: the Ottoman Empire's welcome of 125,000 Jewish refugees after the barbaric Spanish pogroms and forced conversions of 1391-92, and final expulsion of 1492 which ensured the survival of Jewish civilization -- and Wagenstein's ancestors -- and mine.) Rana Dasgupta comments that "*The history that you know about the world is not the only history.*"

Indeed.

It started with a film I made years ago, on another superbly talented and under-estimated Jewish artist, Salka Viertel. Whose great-niece is the literary scholar Elizabeth Frank. One April day I heard the name Wagenstein first from Elizabeth, and also from the film historian Thomas Elsaesser. I looked at STERNE, read one of the novels. And something just clicked so I flew out to Sofia for eight days,

staying up til all hours and hanging out with AW and other witty, chain-smoking, hard-drinking unrepentant true believers in the Socialist utopia. I fell in love with Wagenstein's enigmatic and beautiful films, his incredible humor and energy and salty demotic polyglot language, and through him with Bulgaria and Bulgarian history. I soon returned with Dan and Felice to shoot: no funding, no game plan. I didn't speak a word of Bulgarian: all I knew was that this was a film I'd been waiting to make all my life. Cinema! History! Socialism! And Jews, Jews, Jews! All my favorite flavors.

Examining the failures of 1989's democratic transition was not a popular activity at that time: Bulgaria is the only East Bloc nation that, in its first free elections, democratically returned a communist majority to power and when I found that out I had to ask, "Why?" But how do you interpret a past you never knew?

Wagenstein has a beautiful sentence in one of his novels: "Everyone has the right to his own memories, and his own amnesia..." Again, the magisterial opening scene of *STERNE* asks: "*Wie war es damals? Warum wenden wir uns wieder dieser Zeit zu?*" ("What was it like in those days? Why do we keep returning to them?")

The answer is, I think, the subject of all his films: we look at the past so we can do better. "*There's only one right train,*" as he said in his great Filmmakers' Congress speech. And it's leaving the station!

The thing about this story was that it tied everything together for me. This life, these films, raise fantastically interesting questions about the importance of art—particularly cinema—as a strategy for nurturing critical thought, and thereby projecting the possibility of resistance at the individual level, in a political system that subordinated individual to collective will.

2017 is an interesting moment: for the last few decades we've been moving into a larger world, where stories from the margin are finally acknowledged to be as important as those from the imperial center. It's a revolution as big as Galileo's, and the rage of those who are no longer at the center of things is limitless.

**"EVERY REVOLUTION IS AN ADVENTURE. ... REVOLUTIONS ARE BORN IN ORDER TO DIE."**

Galileo was burned at the stake. Wagenstein (*Kinneha-Rah*) is right here: a living, breathing, flirting, writing, citizen of this new world that is grappling with the limitations and disappointments of democracy. He's pushing its boundaries as he pushed the boundaries of Socialism—an Angel wrestling like Jacob with those powerful and painfully elusive angels of Hope and Progress and *Liberté* and *Fraternité* and *Mir i Druzhba* ... Let's hope he wins !



## Film Team



**ANDREA SIMON** (Director, Producer) is an award-winning documentary filmmaker whose work has explored the interaction between politics, culture, and religion in a variety of times and places. Praised as both visually striking and intellectually provocative, her films include many museum commissions (from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, the National Gallery of Art, and The Jewish Museum) as well as the wryly subversive ethnographic chronicle *Koriam's Law* (Grand Prize at Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival), PBS arts specials *Destination Mozart: A Night At The Opera With Peter Sellars* (Grand Prize, Montreal Festival of Films on Art), "An indispensable primer for those who need to understand the vast potential of opera on television ... as entertaining as it is informative" (*Hollywood Reporter*) and *Tales From The Shadow World* on Indonesian art and culture. *Talk to Me: Americans in Conversation*, her populist film-essay on American identity, was broadcast nationally on PBS as part of the DEMOCRACY PROJECT series, and has since been shown in hundreds of schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and community meetings: "More eloquence than in a decade's worth of Presidential speechifying ... The Whitmaniacal spirit has been brought to film by Andrea Simon. This America sings." (Todd Gitlin, *New York Observer*) "Covers the territory with grace and honesty. ... The momentum is all toward intellectual and emotional risks—thinking, not pontificating." (Margo Jefferson, *New York Times*) "Intriguing PBS documentary could serve as a wake-up call.... Stylishly illustrates the diversity in heritage and outlook that is the nation's very backbone." (*Variety*) As Senior Producer of Bloomberg TV's arts show MUSE, Andrea profiled 110 major artists including Laurie Anderson, Leonard Cohen, Umberto Eco, Philip Glass, Günter Grass, Philip Roth, and Kehinde Wiley.



**FELICE FIRESTONE** (Executive Producer) has spent her long and distinguished career producing, directing and managing documentary productions. She is the recipient of many industry awards including a Peabody Award, four Emmys, a DuPont Columbia Gold Baton, three Gracies, a Christopher Award, a Silver Gavel and others. Her work has appeared on PBS, NBC, CBS, HBO, TBS with ten years as executive producer for Bill Moyers at his production company. There she oversaw production of more than 200 hours of programming including fourteen documentary specials and five multi-part series, such as *America's First River: Moyers on the Hudson* and *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*, plus the weekly series *NOW with Bill Moyers*. Other work included *America in the Forties*, launching Consuelo Mack/WealthTrack, the PBS series *The Irish in America* and the start-up of a TV station in Slovenia. She was Consulting Supervising Producer for the multiple-award winning series *Women, War & Peace*. Recently she worked on *Twice Born* which examines the life-saving surgeries of unborn babies, and the documentary *Against All Odds: The Fight for the Black Middle Class*.



**DANIEL EPSTEIN (Director of Photography)** Since graduating from the fabled film department at Hampshire College Daniel has carved out a freelance career doing many forms of television production. His work has been featured on a diverse group of broadcast and cable channels over the years, shooting in many different genres. Sports, food, entertainment, theater and news are some of the areas that the productions he has worked on have covered. He especially enjoys working in the documentary form. Dan started working with Director/Producer Andrea Simon in 2006 on Bloomberg's *Muse* show and has continued ever since. Now a NY-based, middle-aged, relatively non-practicing Jew (who somehow looks like his father, grandfather and mother) his lifelong interest in the history of the 20th century has intersected with his professional career in a most stimulating way.



**ADRIENNE HASPEL (Editor)** is a narrative and documentary film and television editor. She has worked on shows for *Frontline*, *Need to Know* and *Wide Angle*, including the Emmy-nominated "Lord's Children." Her narrative work has been shown at many film festivals including Tribeca, Cannes, and Edinburgh. Her collaborations with video artists have appeared in museums and galleries in the U.S. and abroad. In 2011 she completed various installations and documentaries for the Moscow-based Russian Jewish Museum and Center for Tolerance, including one about the Holocaust on Soviet Soil. Currently she is working as an editor for *Fault Lines*, an Emmy, Peabody- and DuPont-award-winning documentary series on Al Jazeera English that focuses on U.S. and international current affair issues.



**ELKA NIKOLOVA (Co-Producer, Co-Editor)** studied psychology in Bulgaria, and was politically active in the Bulgarian democratic reforms of 1989. In 2001 she received a MA in Media Studies with focus on film from the New School, and soon after began working in the film industry as an art department coordinator on various productions. From 2003 to 2007 Elka worked as an assistant editor at *Dateline NBC* and the *Today Show*. While there she wrote and directed her documentary *Binka: To Tell a Story About Silence* (2006), about one of the first women directors in Eastern Europe, Binka Zhelyazkova. Her son Philip was born in 2006, and she took some time to raise him, while researching and developing a two-part documentary about the fate of the Bulgarian and Northern Greek Jews during the Shoah. *Part 1: The Road to America* focuses on the role of the public in the survival of the Bulgarian Jews. *Part 2: The Dressmaker* deals with this theme through the story of one Sephardic family from New York.



**LORA MYERS (Consulting Producer)** is a writer, film producer, and educational outreach coordinator who has worked in the USA, Italy, and Brazil on numerous award-winning documentaries, public television specials and feature film scripts. She has written feature articles for international magazines, children's books for *Time for Kids*, and dozens of documentary grant proposals. She developed high-school and college-level curriculum guides for *People Like Us*, a documentary on American social class produced by the Center for New American Media, and for *The Freedom Files*, an ACLU video series. A specialist in adult literacy, she created and administered New York City-based high-school equivalency programs for adults, and has co-authored two books aimed at showing parents how to strengthen their children's reading and writing abilities. For more than ten years, she was Curriculum Director and staff writer for an Emmy-winning public television show, *TV411*, and its companion website.



**SILVIA VACHKOVA (Coordinating Producer)**, a distinguished Bulgarian journalist who has worked all over Europe, was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1941. She studied Russian and German Philology at Sofia University. After graduating she worked as a Filmredakteur (News Producer) for INTERFILM, where the Redakteur in chief was Angel Wagenstein, and remains a close friend. In 1990 Silvia started her own company, FILMSERVICE, to provide location services to foreign productions in Bulgaria with a strong focus on political and social issues, as well as other productions, including many dealing with culture and tourism. For the past 35 years she has been a stringer, producer and a reporter for the German TV ARD, CNN, DW and numerous other foreign TV stations for Bulgaria.

**Stay Tuned**



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