

P R E S S   K I T

# A SHTETL IN THE CARIBBEAN

a film by SHERMAN DE JESUS

## **A Way of Arriving**

***A Striking and moving documentary road movie that takes viewers to Curaçao, the USA, Belarus, Ukraine and Israel.***

Gerry van der List, *Elsevier's Magazine*

***Best Feature Documentary,***

*Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival, New Delhi*



***A Shtetl in the Caribbean tells the compelling story of two childhood friends who grew up on Curaçao, in search for their family history in Eastern Europe.***

Mark and Tsale, children of Eastern European Jews who fled to Curaçao, travel back to the home countries of their ancestors. In a documentary road movie across Curaçao, the United States, Belarus, Ukraine and Israel, we witness their discoveries, courage and despair while they are reminded of the sacrifices their parents had to make to provide their families with a better future.

This unknown story is revealed in a journey from the desolate wastelands of Eastern Europe to the exotic Caribbean, a contrast metaphoric for the history of Mark and Tsale's ancestors.

A SHTETL IN THE CARIBBEAN originated from a strong emotion that we are all part of the same family, no matter how different we are. The film is also an homage to Curaçao, a small island with a big heart, and a place that has been a safe haven for strangers. Only in such a place can a human being truly build a home.

## **SCREENINGS**

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<b>JCC Manhattan, New York</b> (Q&A with the director)	16 February 2016
<b>Saratov Sufferings Film Festival, Russia</b>	2 November 2015
<b>Ischia Film Festival, Italy</b>	2 July 2015
<b>Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival, India</b>	30 April 2015
<b>Curaçao International Film Festival Rotterdam</b> (Introduction and Q&A with the director)	25, 26 March 2015
<b>Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam</b>	1 February 2015
<b>Filmhuis The Hague</b>	16 January 2015
<b>Filmtheater 't Hoogt Utrecht</b> (Q&A with the director)	9 November 2014
<b>Filmzaal Liberaal Joodse Gemeente Amsterdam</b> (Introduction and Q&A with the director)	30 October 2014
<b>Filmtheater Hilversum</b> (Q&A with the director)	28 October 2014
<b>EYE Film Museum Amsterdam</b> (world première)	26 October 2014

## **A Shtetl in the Caribbean – A Way of Arriving**

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**writer and director:** Sherman De Jesus **director of photography:** Bernd Wouthuysen  
**sound recordist:** Menno Euwe **editor:** Sander Kuipers **original score:** Randal Corsen  
**sound design and mix:** Mark Glynn **assistant production:** Mathijs Jorritsma, Tim van Velzen  
**commissioning editor:** Alfred Edelstein **producers:** Cécile van Eijk, Sherman De Jesus  
**production:** Memphis Film & Television

A co-production by Memphis Film & Television and Joodse Omroep supported by CoBO, The Netherlands Film Production Incentive of the Netherlands Film Fund, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied, Stichting Fonds Enamiel, Stichting Maror-Gelden Nederland, Avila Hotel, Nieuw Volendam N.V. & Crowdfunding.

documentary | 2014 | theatrical version 99' | TV version 2x 44' | DCP | Blu-Ray | color | English, Dutch, Papiamentu, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Hebrew & Yiddish | subtitled in English & Dutch

### **Contact**

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## **Press, festivals and others about A Shtetl in the Caribbean - A Way of Arriving**

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**Best Feature Documentary**, Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival, New Delhi

*In every aspect, a moving quest of an impressionist beauty.* – Aart G. Broek

*A most sensitive document that moves to tears, a truly original story that needed to be told.* – Claudia Landsberger, EYE Film Museum Amsterdam

*A Shtetl in the Caribbean is a truly beautiful, fascinating and impressive film. It gives an image of an unknown group of Curaçao, but also incisively captures a part of the darkest of world history without becoming too heavy. What an achievement!* – Michiel van Kempen, professor of Dutch-Caribbean language.

### **A Shtetl in the Caribbean – A Way of Arriving**

A Shtetl in the Caribbean tells the untold story of two childhood friends Mark Wiznitzer and Tsale Kirzner, descendants of Eastern European Jews who fled to Curaçao before and after the Holocaust, on a quest from the exotic Caribbean Island to the desolate landscapes of Eastern Europe.

Both of their parents fled Europe and after many trials and tribulations ended up in Curaçao, a small Dutch island that was wholly unknown to them and where a new life awaited. They arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs, yet felt safe and welcome. “Finally, we could sleep with the windows open again. People on the street greeted us like they would anyone else. We felt normal again.”

#### **EASTERN EUROPE**

Mark and Tsale venture back to the birthplaces of their ancestors in Ukraine and Belarus. Their search inevitably confronts them with the dark history of pogroms, anti-Semitism and the Nazi invasion. This road movie documentary takes us from Curaçao through Ukraine, Belarus, Israel, the United States and back to Curaçao. The film shows Mark and Tsale’s discoveries, their courage, and their despair. The journey helps them to understand the sacrifices their parents made to give them normal childhoods.

Their lives have been shaped and formed by the darkest pages of European history: Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Both in Ukraine and in Belarus, their family histories seem to have been erased. All that Mark and Tsale find from the thriving Jewish community that once lived in both countries are burial sites, a dilapidated old synagogue and monuments - faint traces of a gruesome history.

Mark and Tsale start their journey in Vashkivtsi, a small and forgotten village in Ukraine. Here at the Jewish gravesite they find the tombstones of Mark Wiznitzer’s grandparents, Rachel and Leib. According to their family history, it was Rachel who shortly before the First World War, had a vision of a great hellfire that would consume everyone and everything. Reading his mother’s vision as a definite sign Salomon, Mark’s father together with his brothers fled Europe.

Tsale Kirzner’s story begins in two small weathered and tattered villages in Belarus: Davydgrodek and Mikasjevits. In 1941, German troops marched the Jewish population out of Mikasjevits to systematically execute them. Most of Tsale’s family were murdered, yet Tsale’s father, Socher Kirzner, managed to escape together with his wife Fania Shusterman and her brother Lovke.

The film documents Mark’s and Tsale’s quests to meet with witnesses of those days. Tsale travels to Israel to visit Dina Solomich, his mother’s dear childhood friend who also knew Tsale’s grandfather, Bezalel Shusterman, well. In Miami where Mark visits his naturalised American mother Eda Aminoff, born Ida Hirschberg.

#### **CURAÇAO**

Like many others arriving in Curaçao at the time, Mark and Tsale’s fathers came with nothing but a few possessions. Salomon Wiznitzer, arriving in Curaçao before the war, opens a store together with his brothers under the promising name La Confianza (The Confidence), which later established itself as a luxury department store. Salomon ends up marrying Ida Hirschberg, offspring of a German immigrant.

In Curacao Mark tracks down former La Confianza employee Rina Keli. As they reminisce, she tells the story of the Wiznitzer Bros. and the store where she worked all her life.

Another witness they meet is the 90 year old Dora Suchar Cheis, who still runs her fabrics store, Casa Keis. At the tender age of six, she had fled the pogroms of Romania to join her father in Curaçao.

Tsale's father, Socher Kirzner arrives in Curaçao after World War II, after spending two years in a Displaced Person's camp in southern Germany together with his wife Fania Shusterman. His first few years on the Caribbean island were spent on the brink of poverty. Starting out by working odd jobs he launches his own store, eventually expanding into real estate. Their arrival, together with other Ashkenazi Jews, formed the beginning of a Shtetl in Curaçao: A tightly-knit Yiddish community akin to those commonly formed in Eastern Europe.

Yet even paradise has its darker days. On 30 May 1969, workers at Shell's oil refinery organise a strike that would eventually spin out of control, setting Willemstad, the capital, aflame. La Confianza remained intact, employees remained loyal and customers returned. Socher and Fania Kirzner's store, David's, also was spared.

### THE FILM

The grim, muddy streets and weathered houses of the villages in Ukraine and Belarus form a stark contrast with the sunny and laid back Curaçao, with its vibrant street markets and colourful houses. As Mark and Tsale share what they think must have happened in those remote Eastern European villages, they often find it difficult to grasp exactly from what they escaped.

The two men realise they have been very fortunate. Although they have been spared the horrors of those times, it is evident that their family's history has shaped who they are today.

### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

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*I grew up in Scharloo, where the elite of Curaçao used to reside, mainly Sephardic Jews and white Protestants. I was friends with Tsale Kirzner and Mark Wiznitzer, Ashkenazi Jews everybody would call the Polako children (i.e. Jews of Polish descent). Tsale lived in a small house in a Kura (courtyard) behind the Ashkenazi synagogue. Mark lived a bit further up Scharloo Road. The Ashkenazi synagogue was mostly closed during the week, yet its doors and windows were open when the Ashkenazi community celebrated Shabbat.*

*Tsale, Mark and I attended Hendrikschool in the part of Willemstad called Punda, where many Polakos owned a store. That is where I first heard the foreign sounds of Yiddish, and even the local dialect Papiamentu spoken with a Yiddish accent. That's how the Caribbean Shtetl became a part of my own story. That moment planted the seed that has ultimately led to the making of this movie.*

*A Shtetl in the Caribbean stems from the idea that we are all part of the same family, no matter how different we may seem to be. Migration is not something of the past. Today, there are thousands of refugees fleeing their war-torn countries. The film reminds us that there have always been refugees seeking shelter from the agony of war. Besides this, the film is a tribute to Curaçao, the small island with a warm heart where Mark and Tsale's family found a safe haven.*

## **DIRECTOR SHERMAN DE JESUS**

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Award-winning director Sherman De Jesus worked as a film critic and festival director and started in the seventies making many hours documentaries for television and theatrical release. He directed numerous documentaries in coproduction with Public Broadcasters including *Gods Own Parish*, *Long Live the Brown Monster* and *The Indian Bore a Negro. Everything Must Change – Piet Zwart* (FIFA Montréal), *All is Light – Jan Henderikse*, *Jan Schoonhoven – Official 18977* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) and *The Zero Revolution – Henk Peeters*. Sherman De Jesus is one of the founders and first director of the Dutch Film Festival; he also launched the first Dutch Film Market and, in 1985 and is initiator of the Cinema Militans Lecture. He was a member of the Golden Calf jury, a member of the steering group of the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam and was a board member and Treasurer of the Dutch Cultural Broadcasting Fund.

## **BIOGRAPHY MARK WIZNITZER**

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*Named after his two deceased grandfathers per Jewish tradition, Mark Leon Wiznitzer was born in the US and brought to Curaçao as a baby. There he was called “Buchi,” a popular island nickname that legend dates back to the strongest African slave broken by the loss of his beloved wife, and is still often given to a native first son. In Willemstad, Mark attended the Dutch-language Hendrikschool before he moved to New York City at the age of eleven with his mother. But he returned to spend all his school vacations on Curacao, where he worked with his father in La Confianza, the family-owned department store.*

*After studying political science at the State University of NY in Buffalo, Mark went on to complete a Masters in Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He worked in Curaçao for Wiznitzer Brothers, the family’s retail and wholesale business, for a year before he was selected to join the US Department of State as a career diplomat in 1976, at which time he left Curaçao for good. During his various assignments in Washington DC, Latin America and Europe, he earned awards for his performance in political and politico-military affairs, and strategic trade.*

*After retiring in 1999, Mark completed an Executive MBA in Vienna. He was a volunteer for Barak Obama’s campaigns for the Democratic nomination and election as President. As a result of his first visit in 2010 to Yashkivtsi, Ukraine, the birthplace of the four Wiznitzer brothers, he organized his family’s restoration of the neglected Jewish cemetery there. He currently lives with his wife, Paula Goddard, in Virginia, where he recently became a volunteer advocate for senior residents of Arlington County.*

## **BIOGRAPHY TSALE KIRZNER**

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*Tsale Kirzner was born on Curaçao as the oldest child of Socher Kirzner and Fania Shusterman, refugees who built a home on the Caribbean island in 1948. He was named after his grandfather from his mothers side, Bezalel, who was killed by a firing squad in Mikasjevits in Belarus, as a warning to the Jewish people living in the town.*

*Tsale went to the Hendrikschool and the Radulphus College on Curaçao, after which he moved to the US to study economics at The George Washington University, graduating cum laude, and Sinology at Harvard University. Since 1974 Tsale lives in The Netherlands and is a Trustee of the Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam.*

*Tsale is married to professor Lorraine Uhlener and is father to five children.*

In over twenty years Memphis Film & Television has produced a large number of films for television and theatres in cooperation with all the major broadcasting companies in the Netherlands and with different European partners.

Managing Director Cécile van Eijk and producer Sherman De Jesus have both been creative and financial professionals and film producers. Their rich and practical understanding of the creative industry enables them to deliver prize-winning films to a world audience. This has included the prize-winning films *Boy Ecury* (2003) with writer and director Arthur Japin and Frans Weisz and *Souls of Naples* (2005), with director Vincent Monnikendam which screened at more than thirty international film festivals. *Tulip Time* (2008), an international coproduction with RAI, Istituto Luce and *Izaline Calister – Lady Sings the Tambú* (2007) and the feature length documentary *Lost Down Memory Lane* (2010), directed by Klara Van Es, co-produced with Belgian Associate Directors.

Cécile van Eijk has worked in the screen industry for 24 years. She founded Memphis Film & Television in 1992 joining forces with producer and director Sherman De Jesus. Her work at the company has ranged across all areas of expertise.

#### In development

- ***Living Stones* (Bart Hölscher)**
- ***Batavia Blues* (Jean Hellwig)**
- ***The Photograph, the story of Juan & James* (Sherman De Jesus)**



#### Released

- ***The World According to Monsieur Khiar* (Sjors Swierstra)**, 2015, 52' – coproduction NTR.
- ***The Zero Revolution – Henk Peeters* (Sherman De Jesus)**, 2015, 55' - coproduction Omroep Gelderland, broadcaster: VPRO.
- ***The Last Title* (Bart Hölscher)**, 2015, 55' – coproduction LI.
- ***Carnotstraat 17* (Klara Van Es)**, 2015, 86' - coproduction Associate Directors, Canvas, HUMAN. Theatrical distribution Cinema Delicatessen.
- ***A Shtetl in the Caribbean* (Sherman De Jesus)**, 2014, 99' – coproduction Joodse Omroep. Festivals: Writers Unlimited Festival Den Haag, Curaçao International Film Festival Rotterdam, Best Feature Documentary Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival New Delhi, Ischia Film Festival, Italy.
- ***Forever Young* (Jelte Maarten Boll)**, 2014, 4 episodes of 50' – coproduction MAX.
- ***Whatever Will Be* (Esther Prade)**, 2013, 76' – coproduction RTV Rijnmond, theatrical release.
- ***Everything Must Change - Piet Zwart* (Sherman De Jesus)**, 2012, 75' & 52' – coproduction AVRO. Festivals: FIFA, Montreal 2014, DOKU.ARTS Berlin, NFF, Utrecht, BoschArt, Den Bosch.
- ***God's Own Parish* (Sherman De Jesus)**, 2011, 52' – theatrical release, coproduction RTV Utrecht.
- ***Lost Down Memory Lane* (Klara Van Es)**, 2010, 87' – coproduction Associate Directors (BE), Lichtpunt, Human (NL), YLE. Theatrical distribution Cinema Delicatessen.
- ***Jan Schoonhoven – Official 18977* (Sherman De Jesus)**, 2005, 52' - Coproduction VPRO. Festivalselection a.o. DOKU-ARTS Berlijn.
- ***Tulip Time – The Rise and Fall of the Trio Lescano, (Tonino Boniotti en Marco de Stefanis)***, 2007, 52' - coproduction Omroep MAX, RAI en Istituto Luce, Rome.
- ***Souls of Napels* (Vincent Monnikendam)**, 2005, 94' en 50' -coproduction IKON. Chrystal Film Award. Festivals: a.o. Tribeca Film Festival New York, Visions du Réel, Thessalonki Doc. Festival. Most innovative Documentary in the humanities van het Shanghai Television Festival / BEST LONG DOCUMENTARY – ex aequo during the International Documentary Film Festival “Contact”, Kiev.