

**GREENWICH**  
E N T E R T A I N M E N T

# Izhak

A Film By Alison Chernick



**TRT:** 83 Minutes **Country:** USA **Language:** English



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## Logline

From Schubert to Strauss, Bach to... Billy Joel, Itzhak Perlman's transcendent violin playing evokes the depth of the human experience. This enchanting documentary details the virtuoso's own struggles as a polio survivor and Jewish émigré, and reminds us why art is vital to life.

## Synopsis

From Schubert to Strauss, Bach to Brahms, Mozart to... Billy Joel, Itzhak Perlman's violin playing transcends mere performance to evoke the celebrations and struggles of real life; "praying with the violin," says renowned Tel Aviv violinmaker Amnon Weinstein. Alison Chernick's enchanting documentary looks beyond the sublime musician to see the polio survivor whose parents emigrated from Poland to Israel, and the young man who struggled to be taken seriously as a music student when schools saw only his disability. Itzhak himself is funny, irreverent and self-deprecating, and here his life story unspools in conversations with masterful musicians, family and friends, and most endearingly his devoted wife of 50 years.

As charming and entrancing as the famous violinist himself, ITZHAK is a portrait of musical virtuosity seamlessly enclosed in warmth, humor, and above all, love.

## **Filmmaker Alison Chernick - Director Statement**

Taking on a subject such as Itzhak Perlman is no easy task. The more celebrated the subject, the more pressure there is to deliver in a manner that justifies his legacy. Aside from this daunting factor, one thing was clear—I would have the most beautiful soundtrack in town.

I've done previous films on contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, Matthew Barney, Martin Margiela, Roy Lichtenstein and other complex characters. What I learned from those experiences was the importance of feeling free in my creative process. No one said it better than the late Albert Maysles, "To understand your vision early on is like asking an infant what they want to be when they grow up." In other words, you need to first experience your subject, digest it—and allow for the magic to happen. Find the beauty in between the lines. Each film's style and structure will be unique to its subject. With Itzhak, there were plenty of those magic moments, my job was to help them along, set the stage and allow for that space to blossom. Capture it and then effectively translate it onto the screen.

For me, what became transparent after seeing my footage, over and over again, were themes of Jewish identity, Jewish history, humor, love, love for life, love between Itzhak and Toby and of course a shared love for music. These themes all emerged as unique storylines that would resonate independently.

An important creative decision for me was to avoid interviews with contemporaries lauding on about how terrific he is. Despite how endearing a subject he is, the goal of the project was not to make a love letter film with copious amounts of treacle. I wanted the viewer to experience what makes Itzhak special rather than be told so. I knew with his gregarious personality this was achievable and that this would ultimately provide the audience with the intimacy that is most rewarding in documentaries—something with more emotion and depth than anything a series of "talking heads" could deliver. And through this intimate unraveling we can see for ourselves the components and character that combine to create his ability to perform at such an exceptional level. The sound Itzhak generates comes from his heart and flows through his hands and in this film we come to realize how extraordinary this process really is.

Finally... the edit room. The best-kept secret of documentary filmmaking is that this is where it all comes together. My editor and I worked tirelessly and collaboratively to find our story. We broke typical structure standards and searched for the poetry that felt necessary to deliver this story. After hours, days and months of obsessing through the creative process, I hope that I delivered a portrait that accurately reflects the beauty, significance and wonder of this unique man.

## **Q&A With Director Alison Chernick**

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#### **Why Itzhak Perlman? What about him drew you to in?**

I wanted to tell the untold story of Itzhak Perlman, the story of the ‘mensch’ behind the great musical talent. There is so much more to this man than his musical virtuosity that you gather from his performances. I look for subjects that are dynamic with complex personalities. I knew that Itzhak could carry the film's narrative in the style of filmmaking I prefer called *cinema verite* -- without inserting “talking heads” to give commentary where the viewer can unravel the subject on their own.

#### **You have profiled contemporary artists in your previous films. What made this a unique experience, and why make it a feature-length film?**

The process for me of documenting a character or an artist is the same no matter what their craft is. My previous films on artists Jeff Koons, Matthew Barney, Roy Lichtenstein were all similar in process. As the director, my single goal is to get as intimate of a portrait as I can, to allow the audience to discover the artist alongside me. It's always the most satisfying to see who this person is outside of their work, to see what informs their process. In Itzhak's case, his tremendous spirit, soul and humanity is infused into his music to create that beautiful sound. His music starts in his heart and flows through his hands.

#### **What role does music play in the film?**

Having Perlman's music as my soundtrack is a filmmaker's dream. Itzhak is in fact so much more than his music, so it became this very beautiful vehicle to help weave his story together.

#### **How long did you shoot for? Was it difficult to gain access to the people and places that you wanted to include in the film?**

We shot for a year on and off —and edited for a year. It just happened to be his 70th year so there was a lot to film awards, etc. It was truly perfect timing. Regarding access— he's very loved, so people were very supportive. And he was very generous with his time. Once we gained his trust, it all became much easier.

**You had access to Itzhak's personal life. How did you choose which moments to use for the film?**

It was a very organic process. The moments became obvious, the film took on a personality and dictated what was called for. When we would watch a rough cut my editor Helen Yum and I had the same instinct if something was missing or if something was unnecessary.

**How much archival footage did you have to review while putting together the film? How did you decide what to use in the final version?**

We wanted the film to be present day but there were some archival clips that were too precious to leave out plus it gave a context— so there's about ten percent of archival footage in the film. And again, these choices felt obvious to us.

**Itzhak's wife, Toby Perlman, has a prominent voice in the film. Why did you choose to incorporate so much of her?**

"Behind every great man there's a great woman." Or in front of every great man I like to say. Toby has a great sense about her and Itzhak really feeds off of that. They are a perfect duo. There would be no film without Toby. At one point we considered the title *Itzhak and Toby* but ultimately felt it put too much pressure on her character in the story.

**Itzhak is very aware of his identity as a Jewish man in a rapidly changing New York City. Did you intend to capture this narrative from the beginning or was this something you uncovered while shooting?**

I didn't have many intentions at the beginning. I try to avoid this sort of fixed agenda so as to allow the film to move freely and let it become what it may. Albert Maysles once said, "asking someone what their film will be before they shoot it is like asking an infant what they will be when they grow up." It takes the magic out. It stifles you creatively. The only way your story develops is through the constant observation of the lens and analysis of the footage. The Jewish angle for me, amongst other storylines, became prominent - after getting to know my subject and my footage intimately all these decisions became organic.

**What do you hope people take away from this film?**

It seems to inspire people — the Perlman's are role models for today's world. They are morally and creatively driven. Im grateful to be able to put this positive story into the world at a time when the world most needs it.

## About Itzhak Perlman

One of the only household names in classical music today, Itzhak Perlman, undeniably the reigning virtuoso of the violin, enjoys superstar status rarely afforded a classical musician. Beloved for his charm and humanity as well as his talent, he is treasured by audiences throughout the world who respond not only to his remarkable artistry but also to his irrepressible joy of music-making and communicating with audiences.

Having performed with every major orchestra and at venerable concert halls around the globe, Perlman was granted a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Nation's highest civilian honor, by President Obama in 2015, a Kennedy Center Honor in 2003, a National Medal of Arts by President Clinton in 2000, and a Medal of Liberty by President Reagan in 1986. In 2009, Perlman was honored to take part in the Inauguration of President Barack Obama, premiering a piece written for the occasion by John Williams alongside cellist Yo-Yo Ma, clarinetist Anthony McGill and pianist Gabriela Montero, for an audience of nearly 40 million television viewers in the United States and millions more throughout the world. In 2007, he performed at a State Dinner for Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, hosted by President George W. Bush and Mrs. Bush at the White House.

A major presence in the performing arts on television, Perlman has received four Emmy Awards, including one for the PBS documentary *Fiddling for the Future*, a film about the Perlman Music Program and his work as a teacher and conductor there. Founded in 1993, the Perlman Music Program offers unparalleled musical training to young string players through intensive summer programs and mentoring.

Perlman has entertained and enlightened millions of television viewers of all ages on popular shows including *The Late Show* with David Letterman, *Sesame Street*, *The Frugal Gourmet*, *The Tonight Show* and multiple Grammy Awards telecasts. During the 78th Annual Academy Awards in 2006, Perlman performed a live medley from the five film scores nominated in the category of Best Original Score for a worldwide audience in the hundreds of millions.

Having garnered 16 Grammy Awards over the years with his best-selling recordings, Perlman was honored in 2008 with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for excellence in the recording arts.

Born in Israel in 1945, Perlman completed his initial training at the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv. He came to New York and soon was propelled into the international arena with an appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1958. Following his studies at the Juilliard School, Perlman won the prestigious Leventritt Competition in 1964, which led to a burgeoning worldwide career.

Numerous publications and institutions have paid tribute to Itzhak Perlman for the unique place he occupies in the artistic and humanitarian fabric of our times. Harvard, Yale, Brandeis, Roosevelt, Yeshiva and Hebrew universities are among the institutions which have awarded him honorary degrees. He was awarded an honorary doctorate and a centennial medal on the occasion of Juilliard's 100th commencement ceremony in May 2005.

## **About Alison Chernick**

In award winning documentaries profiling major contemporary artists, Chernick has succeeded in capturing the thoughts and processes of this century's most prolific visual artists. Creating a bridge between contemporary art and film, Chernick initially conceived a series profiling artists for television, and launched an artist expose series for Rainbow-Media with her first feature film entitled THE JEFF KOONS SHOW. THE JEFF KOONS SHOW went on to have international theatrical distribution and is available on iTunes. She completed her second feature length documentary on contemporary artist Matthew Barney entitled MATTHEW BARNEY: NO RESTRAINT which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival and was acquired for theatrical distribution by IFC and The Weinstein Company. Her short film THE ARTIST IS ABSENT on artist/designer Martin Margiela premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2015. Her most recent feature, ITZHAK, was awarded opening night film at the Hamptons International Film Festival in 2017 and will have a theatrical run before airing on American Masters Pictures/PBS in Spring of 2018. Chernick is known for creating compelling portraits using cinema verite style.

Amongst other commissions, the Tate modern commissioned her to do a film on Roy Lichtenstein to accompany his retrospective in 2012. Her art documentaries have been screened at various museums around the world, including the five Guggenheims, The Smithsonian, SFMOMA, and The Walker. She is the recipient of a NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR HUMANITIES award in 2017 for ITZHAK, the 2017 recipient of the NYWIFT (New York Women in Film and Television), along with a Loreen Arbus grant and a Woman of Her Word grant. Other awards include a Patricia Highsmith-Plangman residency award, a Promax award for HBO and a Best Screenwriter award for a short film.

Chernick's past writing credits include the Sundance Channel, Showtime, Sci-Fi, MTV, VH1, The History Channel, and National Geographic. Chernick started Voyeur Films, a film production company in 2005. She was signed for global representation in commercial directing in 2011. She does short films on topics of art, fashion, music, gastronomy and healthcare. She is currently working on a narrative film.