

A PLACE NAMED DESTINY

Study Guide

From the filmmaker

While working in television news, I was saddened by the fixation on negative images and stories about our society. Rarely were there stories about people who were living positive and empowered lives. The only images that I saw of young people and people of color were tragedies and crime stories.

I quit working in the news and produced the documentary “A Place Named Destiny” because I wanted to contribute a positive story about youth to the world. I spent 1 1/2 years shooting and editing this documentary, which follows an inner-city youth performance company from their auditions through the creation of their original performance arts piece. This documentary looks into the lives of these young people, some who come from “at-risk” backgrounds and others who have had a more stable middle-class family environment. The young people are very frank about the issues they have been dealing with in their lives, including absent fathers, violence, homophobia, and racism. This documentary shows how these negative influences do not have to equate to failure. “A Place Named Destiny” shows how self-expression can be a force to help transform the lives of young people into empowered and positive experiences.

This guide is designed to assist you in the discussion and investigation of the themes explored in the documentary. The activities and discussion points are clustered around three central themes that the young people explored in the film: identity, culture, and community. The guide has discussion points, writing exercises, and a few of the group activities that the young people in the film used to get to know each other as they were creating their performance piece.

Identity

In the film Alice struggles with anger and violence in her life. Alice learns to channel her anger and express herself in a positive way through dance.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you relate to Alice’s character? If so, how?
- What do you think causes violence?
- How do you think the cycle of violence be stopped?
- Alice talks about being provoked into violence

when people make fun of her. What are other ways to respond to a situation like this that aren't violent?

- Alice says that her best friend died and she doesn't want to get close to anyone else for fear of being hurt. Have you experienced loss? If so, how did that death impact your life?
- How do you like to express yourself?
- In the film, Alice goes from struggling in her life to becoming a dance teacher for young people. How you ever experienced a positive transformation in your life?

Writing Exercise: Have the student write, "I am...." And then have them continue writing in any form that they choose to describe who they are. For example, they could use as many adjectives as they can think of to describe themselves. In the film, Alice wrote her "I am" exercise like a poem and she ended up revealing a lot about herself. Ask them if they would read their "I am" writing aloud to the class.

Group Activity: Divide the group into pairs of two. Try to put together people who would not normally interact with each other. Have them sit cross-legged on the floor facing each other. Have each pair select who will first recite the questions for the activity and who will respond to the questions. Tell the question asking person that they will be asking their partner three different questions:

The first question is: "Who are you." The second question is: "Who do you pretend to be." The third question is: "Who do you want to be."

Start a 3-minute timer and ask the question asker in each two-some to start by asking their partner the first question, "Who are you." The responder will answer, then the question asker will ask, "Who are you." this will be repeated for 3-minutes. An example interchange would be:

Q: "Who are you?"

A: I am Thandiwe"

Q: "Who are you?"

A: "I am an African-American man."

Q: "Who are you?"

A: "I am a creative, free person."

The person asking the questions is asked not to respond to the other person, but to remain silent and listen to the others person's response. The person receiving the questions should try to answer as honestly as possible. After the 3-minutes is up for the first question, have them do the same for the second and third

questions. After the 9-minute period is finished, have them switch roles.

In conclusion have them discuss and/or write about what this experience was like for them. Did they feel surprised by their partner's responses? Did they feel surprised or uncomfortable with their own responses? Why?

Culture & Race

In the documentary Sam shares a story about a racist incident at his school where his white classmates turned off the lights and said that they could no longer see the African-American classmate. Evelyn talks about the stereotype that she experiences as a Latina, that many people think she should be pregnant with many kids by now.

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever experienced or witnessed racism? Explain.
- How did experiencing or witnessing racism make you feel?
- How do you think the victim of racism felt?
- What are some stereotypes that you have faced in your life?
- Why do you think stereotypes exist?
- What does your cultural identity mean to you?
- What kind of cultural events, rituals, or celebrations have inspired your spirit?
- What kind of cultural / creative activities bring you together with others?

Writing exercise 1: Write about your experiences with racism. Explain what you think causes racism and offer some solutions that you think can help stop racism.

Writing exercise 2: When people think of culture they sometimes think only of their race, but culture is much more than that. It is the clothes you wear, the food that you eat, the languages that you speak, the places that you hang out, the music that you listen to... etc. Write about what culture means to you, including descriptions of all of the different aspects of your culture.

Community

In the film, Chanel speaks about her fear of coming out as a lesbian at her high

school. During her freshmen year, she watched a classmate get beat up because she had come out as lesbian. Violence towards gay/lesbian/transgender students is very high. About 27% are violently assaulted by a classmate before they finish high school. Chanel and some of the other company members also speak about the pain of not knowing their Fathers.

Questions for discussion:

- Did you relate at all to Chanel's character?
How?
- Why do you think people can't accept gay/lesbian/transgender people?
- Do you experience homophobia in your life?
- What kind of effect do you think this lack of societal acceptance has on the lives of gay/lesbian/transgender youth?
- What do you think causes intolerance?
- Have you had to deal with a family member or friend who came out as gay/lesbian/transgender?
- Have you experienced or witnessed someone who has had to deal with an absent father or a divorce?
What has this been like for you?

Writing Exercise: In the film, Chanel writes a monologue about her Father. She wrote this in response to an exercise that the young people were given about community. Ask the young people to think about their community; their neighborhood, their family, their church, their school. Ask them to write down this question: What does community mean to you? Have them answer the question in detail. Remind them that Chanel wrote her monologue about her father in response to this question.

Group Exercise: Have the class divide into groups of 4-6, depending on the size of the class. Make sure that each person in the group gets their own piece of paper and have them write their name on the top of their sheet of paper. Have each group pick a scribe. Have each group member hand their piece of paper with their name on it to the scribe. Select someone to go first.

Each person will get 3-minutes to receive positive feedback from the other group members in the form of words or short phrases. The scribe will write these words and phrases down on the piece of paper that has that person's name on it.

For example: Chanel Baty goes first. The scribe has her blank piece of paper with Chanel's name on it. The group starts saying positive words and phrases about Chanel that the scribe writes down on Chanel's paper.

"Chanel is beautiful"

"Chanel is a talented teacher"

"Chanel has a big heart"

After the 3-minutes is up, have the group pick who will go next and repeat the procedure. Each group member will get a chance to receive this feedback including the scribe. (Someone else will volunteer to take the scribe's place for his/her turn) When all of the group members have had their 3-minute turn to receive positive feedback, then they will get handed back their piece of paper with their name and the list of words and phrases that the other group members used to describe them. Each group member will look over their own list and circle the word or phrase in which they LEAST expected to hear about themselves. Have them share that word or phrase with either their group or the class and have them explain why that word/phrase surprised them.

Other Post-Film Activities

Interpretation Writing Exercise: Thandiwe's Poem

In the film, Thandiwe writes a poem and performs it in front of an audience. Interpret what you think he means by this line in the poem: "I have been pondering the ways of humanity for awhile. I am addicted to what they feed me which after digestion easily eats away at my self-esteem."

Creative Writing Exercise: Your school decides to put on a stage production of dance, theatre, spoken word, singing, and any other type of expression.

- What would you like to bring to the performance?
- In what way would you want to contribute to the production?
- Would you work backstage or would you want to perform?
- What would you like the performance to be about?
- Describe your performance and your part.

Other Post-Film Discussion Points:

- What was your reaction to the youth in the film?
- What did you see in the way people at Destiny interacted with each other that is different and/or unique?
- What parts of the film were you most surprised or affected by? Why?
- Has your thinking about any issue changed after seeing the film?