

Thunder in Guyana

A film by Suzanne Wasserman



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Thunder in Guyana

US • 2003 • 50 Minutes • Color/B&W

film synopsis

The tale of Janet Rosenberg is almost too fantastic to be believed. It's the love story of two idealistic young radicals, the Chicago-born Rosenberg and Cheddi Jagan, a native of Guyana on South America's northern coast, who fell in love, married and set off for the British colony to start a socialist revolution. Though Jagan and Rosenberg became the most important political figures in Guyana, they also faced arrest, repression and the active oppression and intervention of world figures such as Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy. At one point, the British press even dubbed Rosenberg the "Second Eva Peron."

After years of tireless work, free and fair elections were finally instituted in Guyana in the early 1990's, and Janet Rosenberg-Jagan was elected the first foreign-born, female president of the country in 1997. Combining biographical portrait with social and political history, THUNDER IN GUYANA illuminates an overlooked corner of recent history in a story packed with real drama.

"An amazing story, compellingly told."

-- Mike Wallace, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer



film credits

Director/Writer/Producer:
Suzanne Wasserman

Executive Producer:
Deborah Shaffer

Editor: Amanda Zinoman

Cinematographer: Debra Granik

Original Score: Steve Sandberg

Music: Basya Schechter



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Thunder in Guyana

director's statement

Inspiration for THUNDER IN GUYANA came from stories my mother told me about my cousin, Janet Rosenberg Jagan – an atypical Jewish-American girl who took flying lessons and was a world-class swimmer. Making this film was my chance to offer those stories to others, while expressing my passion for Janet's dedication to the people of Guyana.

As both a relative and historian, I interweave threads of my own family history to recount the life of an extraordinary woman and her adopted homeland. I hope to offer a unique perspective on both the complex history of Guyana and the passionate woman who would become the "mother of the nation."



festivals and prizes

CINE Golden Eagle Award

IFP/Film Society of Lincoln Center Independents Night

Myhelan Indie Film Festival – Best Documentary

Margaret Mead Film Festival, 2003

San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, West Coast Premiere

Boston Jewish Film Festival – Best Documentary Audience Award



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Thunder in Guyana

biographies

Suzanne Wasserman

Director, Writer, Producer

Suzanne Wasserman is a graduate of New York University with a Ph.D in American History. Currently she is Associate Director of the Gotham Center for New York City History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

THUNDER IN GUYANA is Wasserman's first film. She received grants from NYSCA, the Open Society Documentary Film Fund, the Director John Sayles, the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund, The Harburg Foundation and the Samuel Rubin Foundation to complete the film.



Wasserman has taught courses in Museum Studies, Women Studies, Urban Studies, American History and World History. She has also published widely on topics ranging from Lower East Side housing to the Jewish silent screen actress Theda Bara. As public historian she has worked on projects for the Jewish Museum, City Lore, the Tenement Museum, Henry Street Settlement, Clio, Inc. and Steeplechase Films.

Deborah Shaffer

Executive Producer

Deborah Shaffer has been producing documentary films for over twenty years and has received many awards for her work, including an Academy Award in 1986 for her short documentary *Witness to War*. Her recent credits include directing *Enemies of War*, PBS, and 2 programs on contemporary art. In 1995 she produced, directed, and wrote the award-winning *Secrets Underground* on women scientists for WGBH TV's series *Discovering Women*. Her other films include *The Wobblies* (1979) and *Fire from the Mountain* (1987).

Amanda Zinoman

Editor

Amanda is a staff editor on *NOW with Bill Moyers* at PBS. She has worked as a film editor for major television and cable stations and networks. She served as editor on *The Lost Children of Rockdale County* which received a 2000 Peabody Award, *Art/21 Consumption* (PBS, 2001), *Trauma*, *Life in the ER* (New York Times Television Network, The Learning Channel), *Carmen Miranda*, *Bananas is My Business* (1994) and *The Shvitz* (1992) among other films. She was nominated for an Emmy in 1998.



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Thunder in Guyana

biographies cont'd.

Debra Granik

Cinematographer

While attending New York University's graduate film program, Debra Granik received multiple awards for her work including the Nestor Almendros Award for Cinematography (1997 and 2000) and production awards from Martin Scorsese and Warner Brothers. She recently completed *Side by Side*, for which she received a Wasserman Award. Her current project is *Down to the Bone*, a feature script based on her award-winning short film *Snakefeed*.

Steve Sandberg

Original Score

Emmy-nominated composer Steve Sandberg currently scores *Dora the Explorer* for Nickelodeon/CBS. With Uli Geissendorfer, he recently wrote the music for *Climbing Miss Sophie*, which had its premiere at the 2002 Tribeca Film Festival. He has toured with David Byrne, Ruben Blades, and Bebel Gilberto.

Basya Schechter

Music

Basya Schechter formed the critically acclaimed band, Pharaoh's Daughter in 1995. The band has performed in Germany, England, Netherlands, Czech Republic, as well as the New York venues Symphony Space and the Yiddish Music Festival.



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The Nation.

OP/ED

In Radical Matrimony

BY BAZ DREISINGER

February 17, 2005

Suzanne Wasserman's documentary *Thunder in Guyana*, which airs on PBS's Independent Lens series at 10 pm on February 22, is the first in-depth look at Janet Jagan, former president of Guyana. Attribute that to the subject's obscurity: Guyana is roughly the size of Britain, but as an economically strapped country whose population grazes 800,000, it's a blip on America's radar.

Or attribute it to the subject's enormity: Jagan's life story is so much larger than life, it's almost too cinematic for cinema. That story delivers dramatic narrative tropes--rebellion, revolution, racial tension--in operatic proportions. It begins in 1943, when Janet Rosenberg, a pretty Jewish girl from Chicago, immigrates to the land of her new husband, Cheddi Jagan, the son of East Indian sugar workers in what was then the colony of British Guiana. It ends in 1997, when 77-year-old Janet Jagan takes the helm of what is now Guyana--to become the only American-born woman elected president of any country.

Guyana's story, like Jagan's, is familiar yet fantastic, at once a typical postcolonial ordeal of independence and creolization, and a grotesque hyperbole of these things, punctuated by crises--race riots, rigged elections, political paranoia--that make our 2000 election woes feel like, well, a blip on the radar.

Considering the grand scale of her subject, first-time filmmaker Wasserman--a cousin of Janet Jagan's and associate director of the CUNY Graduate Center's Gotham Center for New York City History--had her work cut out for her. Recounting the life of a politician is itself a challenge, because it means striking a compelling balance between two narratives that threaten to overwhelm each other: history and (in Jagan's case) her story, public and private. When these two halves of the saga are as sensational as they are here, achieving this balance is more than a challenge; it's an all-out battle between competing narratives. *Thunder in Guyana* navigates that battle, but just barely. Its goal is lofty, particularly for a fifty-minute documentary: to give us public and private--not just Janet Jagan but Janet Rosenberg.

Set during Guyana's 1997 election, *Thunder in Guyana* is a deftly edited fusion of newsreel footage, photos and interviews with Janet Jagan, her two children and her political allies. The film is narrated by Wasserman, who embarks on an odyssey to flesh out the cousin she knows via weathered photographs and family gossip. It lands her in Georgetown, Guyana, where Jagan pilots her campaign headquarters with grandmotherly repose. Wasserman voices the skepticism that her cousin clearly lacks: "I wondered if the Guyanese people would really elect a 77-year-old American-born Jewish woman for president." The film is thus framed as a question: How did Rosenberg become Jagan, and how did Guiana become Guyana?

It began, we learn, as a love story. Beautiful, athletic, fiercely intellectual Janet Rosenberg met dental student Cheddi Jagan during her college years in Chicago. Both were fervently committed to Marxist politics and, soon, to each other. To Janet's family, Cheddi was a triple blow--"a foreigner, a person who wasn't white, a person who wasn't Jewish," Jagan says--but by 1943, an undeterred Janet ("nothing much frightens me," she shrugs) had married Cheddi and was off to rural British Guiana, where she found her rightful place: not in the kitchen with the women but in political trade unions with the men. In 1950 Janet, Cheddi and London-educated lawyer Forbes Burnham launched the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which propounded ardent socialism in a newsletter titled *Thunder*.



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The PPP represented more than national unity. A country that naturally confounds categories--geographically, it is South American; culturally and politically, it is Caribbean--Guyana is known as "the land of six peoples" because it's a postcolonial pilau, born of Amerindian natives, European colonizers, African slaves and indentured servants from China, Portugal and East India, imported to work the plantations after Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1833. An alliance between the Indo-Guyanese Cheddi and the Afro-Guyanese Burnham was thus an alliance of Guyana's principal ethnic groups. Although Janet eluded any such category, in 1953 -- when Cheddi was elected the first Marxist leader in the Western Hemisphere--she became Guyana's Minister and Deputy Speaker of Parliament. In the American press, she was likened to Eva Peron and vilified as "the ablest Communist organizer in the Western Hemisphere," adept at spreading "propaganda among the hungry, ignorant natives."

As Cheddi's story takes center stage, then, Janet's is never just its footnote: A bright-red expatriate, she attracted all the attention her husband did. It was not the right kind of attention: 133 days after Cheddi assumed office, Winston Churchill sent troops into Georgetown to topple a so-called Communist regime. It was the end of a golden era, because it was followed by a racial rift that now defines Guyanese life: Burnham moved far to the right of Jagan, founding an opposition party--the People's National Congress (PNC)--that appealed directly to Afro-Guyanese voters, exploiting their fears of Indo-Guyanese domination. Gang-style political warfare erupted in most Caribbean countries, but thanks to its uniquely diverse population, Guyana (like the similarly populated Trinidad and Suriname) added race to the mix and bred a monster: *apanjaat*, or divisive racial politics. Afro-Guyanese endorsed the PNC; Indo-Guyanese stood with the PPP; exceptions to that rule were scarce.

The US government, for its part, regarded *apanjaat* as a way of weakening Cheddi Jagan, and worked covertly to encourage this shameless race-baiting. Re-elected in both 1957 and 1961, he confronted a hostile media in Britain and the United States, where his socialist convictions made cold war leaders shudder. "Where do you stand on this fundamental division in the world today, between Communism and Western democracy?" an O'Reilly-like anchor asks him on *Meet the Press*, in language eerily reminiscent of President Bush's evocation of a world starkly divided between the forces of "freedom" and those of "terror," between us and them.

While the PPP's mission statement--"to build a just socialist society, in which the industries of the country shall be socially and democratically owned"--was clear enough, Cheddi refused to take sides in the cold war: "I don't like this sort of either Communist or West, you know? I think this tendency toward black or white is a tendency which can lead to a lot of harm," he tells a reporter. America, however, turned a deaf ear to this reasoning, determined as it was to avoid another defeat in the Caribbean after the Bay of Pigs. So the CIA committed what Kennedy adviser and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. later admitted was "a great injustice" against Cheddi Jagan, funding strikes and race riots in Georgetown in an effort to destabilize his government. (Schlesinger's apology, delivered to Jagan at the *Nation* offices in 1990, was the subject of the magazine's June 4 lead editorial that year.) As the violence spread, scores of people died, Guyana's economy was crippled, a state of emergency was declared and, by tweaking Guyana's electoral system (Britain replaced popular with proportional representation), the West got its wish: In 1964 Burnham became Guyana's president. And in 1966, with the country still in a state of emergency, Guyana became independent.

Burnham is hardly seen in *Thunder in Guyana*--no PNC advocates are interviewed--but he is the film's villain. After taking office he turned sharply to the left and, much to America's dismay, out-Jaganned Jagan, nationalizing the bulk of Guyana's industries. As Guyana became the second-poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, the PNC retained its power by rigging elections until the 1992 presidential race, when the Carter Center arrived in Georgetown as monitors--and Cheddi Jagan ended Burnham's run.

Janet Jagan ran for office after her husband died of a heart attack, but the results were so disputed her victory was not declared until days after the election. The "eureka" moment of victory was thus never quite there for Wasserman's camera to capture; after winning Jagan heads home to rest. Still, her level-headed triumph is the crescendo of the film. Her presidency may have been short-lived--because of health problems, she stepped down after twenty months--but it was the climax of Janet Rosenberg's transformation into Janet Jagan.



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Such is the plot of *Thunder in Guyana*--and it is hardly impartial. In fact, there were gaffes on both sides of the political fence: Afro- and Indo-Guyanese parties relentlessly used their respective realms of influence--the public-service sector and the agricultural sector--to sabotage each other's agendas. And while Burnham was indeed a corrupt dictator, he is not Guyana's principal villain. That dubious honor goes to race itself: a synthetic system of biases that Guyanese and Western politicians consciously milked, engaging in what Cheddi Jagan, in his book *Forbidden Freedom*, called "the familiar imperialist game of divide and rule." Professor Ralph Premdas concludes his study of Guyana with a grim diagnosis: The country suffered--and still suffers--from "ethnically inspired collective insanity."

It is a surreal plot twist that at the crux of this racial "insanity" sits a woman who confounds race altogether. Who--what--was Janet Jagan? To the Western media she was a dangerous Jew misidentified by journalists as a relative of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. To Burnham she was a "stupid American" (he allegedly addressed her as such during sessions of Parliament). To many Indo-Guyanese she was simply white: "They used to call me a blue-eyed bouchie," Jagan recalls ("bouchie" is a brother's wife; "brother," here, is Cheddi). Rolling her eyes, Jagan shrugs. "I'm not even blue-eyed."

It's one of the few moments in the film where Jagan addresses her racial identity; another is prompted by an Associated Press reporter who directly inquires about it. Jagan replies, "I don't know if people see white when they look at me--except, you know, the diehard politicians. But maybe I am living in a dream world.... I don't feel anything like being a minority." She pauses and adds that perhaps her identification with the underdog was a product of growing up Jewish in America.

It's a plausible explanation, as well as a familiar one. Janet Jagan is one in a long line of Jews-- from 1920s-era musicians George Gershwin and Mezz Mezzrow to civil rights martyrs Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman and hip-hop Hebrews the Beastie Boys--who have, in various degrees and contexts, identified cross-racially. How such crossover figures negotiate the conflicting facets of their identities--how, for instance, a Jewish-American woman feels about being, as daughter-in-law Nadine Jagan puts it, "more Guyanese than most Guyanese"--is a profound issue that *Thunder in Guyana* could have probed.

It doesn't, perhaps because Wasserman's interviews with her cousin, more informational than emotional, emphasize the public over the private, history over her story. We learn little about Janet and Cheddi's relationship, and only slightly more about Janet's rift with her Jewish family: "Unfortunately," states Jagan, speaking flatly of her father's death, "my husband and my father never met." Jagan seems uninterested in reflecting on the emotional dimension of her cross-identification--which alone could indicate how deep this identification runs: Analyzing one's identification with the "other" (as Mezzrow did in his memoir *Really the Blues*) means standing apart from that group; taking this identification for granted, by contrast, suggests a sense of peace with one's cultural crossover and, perhaps, with the inherently vexed nature of race and identity.

The film's only reading of Janet Jagan's racial identity comes from Nadine Jagan, who suggests a rich tension at the heart of *Thunder in Guyana*. "She fell in love with [Cheddi], and they had a common goal." Jagan's daughter-in-law shrugs. "That's all they saw."

The cruel irony of Janet Jagan's story is that her personal narrative and her public one--her story and Guyana's story--are at odds. Janet may have fallen in love with Cheddi, and from then on seen cause over color. But her beloved Guyana could never do the same; it evolved into a nation that privileged color over cause. In Janet's triumphant personal saga, politics trumps race; in Guyana's tragic one, race trumps politics. And though the latter saga is the more disquieting one, it is also, in our race-fixed world, the more universal and familiar one--and thus the easiest one to recount. To plumb the depths of Jagan's personal story is an altogether different coup, one that *Thunder in Guyana* comes tantalizingly close to achieving.



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The New York Times

TV REVIEW | 'THUNDER IN GUYANA'

A Radical Journey From Chicago to Guyana

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

Published: February 22, 2005

Wondering if you've lived up to your potential? Consider Janet Jagan. Named Janet Rosenberg when she was born in Chicago in 1920, she grew up in the suburbs. At Wayne State University in Detroit, she turned radical; she met a gallant Guyanese student, Cheddi Jagan, in 1942. Her parents objected (her father threatened to shoot him), but she married him anyway. In 1943, the Jagans moved to what was then British Guiana, became involved in labor politics and formed a left-wing political party. Cheddi was elected chief minister in 1953. Then they had two children, were vilified as Communist, went to jail. Finally, after years in and out - mostly out - of power, Cheddi Jagan was elected president of free Guyana in 1992. When he died of a heart attack in 1997, Janet saw her calling: She ran for president of Guyana that year and was elected.

The filmmaker Suzanne Wasserman, an admiring relative (she's a daughter of Ms. Jagan's first cousin), tells this story in "Thunder in Guyana," a presentation of Independent Lens that appears tonight on PBS. A simple affair, the documentary uses voice-over, casual conversation, interviews and archival images to portray Ms. Jagan as fearless, forthright, principled, heroic. Though newspapers in the 1950's hinted that she was kin to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (she wasn't) and - alternatively - called her "the second Eva Perón," she is portrayed as a fair-minded progressive.

Ms. Wasserman is understandably most interested in how Ms. Jagan came to abandon her tribe, their tribe - suburban Midwestern Jews - to fight for another people altogether. Did she do it for love of Cheddi Jagan? One relative says so. Or was she driven by idealism, willfulness, defiance?

Now in her 80's and somewhat removed from her original motives, Ms. Jagan surmises that as a Jewish woman she might have developed sympathy for the downtrodden. But Ms. Jagan doesn't give the explanation too much weight. Nor does she spend much time complaining about her parents, despite their rejection of her husband. She remembers her mother's mah-jongg games with affection, and regrets having missed her father's funeral. She also wrote many conscientious letters home.

Certainly some of Ms. Jagan's willingness to take up the cause of the Guyanese must be explained in the universalist language of Communism. She appeared to believe, at least at first, that liberating Guyanese workers from slave wages was part of a larger world-historical trend, and she and her husband were openly Communist during much of their careers.

Though Ms. Wasserman shows clips of Cheddi Jagan facing a malevolent are-you-or-aren't-you interrogation on "Meet the Press," she does not ask Ms. Jagan to explain her ideology in the present day, and that's a shame. What did she make of the fall of the Soviet Union? What does she think of the example of Cuba? When, if ever, did she stop reading Marx, who had so excited her as an undergraduate? Does she think it's a joke now? Or dangerous? Does she think some of the old ideas can be saved?

Communism - as theory, as explanation, as promise - motivated so many Americans in the 20th century, and yet today the memory of it enrages the right and embarrasses the left. The rage and the embarrassment do a grave disservice to history. Marxist ideology did not define history the way believers thought it would, but its influence on people who changed their lives, and the lives of others in its name, is incalculable. There's nothing like it now, and we cannot comprehend the lives of people like Janet Jagan without it.



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The Villager

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West and East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Noho, Tribeca, Little Italy, Chinatown and Lower East Side

Since 1933

THUNDER IN GUYANA.

Directed by Suzanne Wasserman. 51 minutes. Tomorrow, 6:30 p.m., at the Walter Reade Theater in Lincoln Center, 165 W. 65th St., plaza level, (212) 496-3809.

BY JERRY TALLMER

It was—and is—a big red photo album, one that played an enormous role in the thoughts of a 7-year-old girl growing up, like her cousin before her, in Chicago.

The girl was Suzanne Wasserman. The older cousin she idolized from a distance was Janet Rosenberg Jagan, a flashing beauty who in 1943 had left home and country behind her to marry Northwestern University dental student Cheddi Jagan and go down to spend the rest of her life with him in the tiny colony that Cheddi had come from, the British Guiana which ten years later would elect him prime minister and her, his wife, deputy speaker of Parliament.

The same Janet Rosenberg Jagan who in 1997, following the death of the man she'd been married to for 54 years, was herself voted in as president of the nation that had long since attained independence and changed its name to Guyana—the first American-born woman (white Jewish woman, in a seething Hindu-Muslim-Christian black-brown potpourri) to be elected president of any country anywhere.

"Janet went to Guyana when she was 23 and my mother was 13," says Suzanne Wasserman, whose clean, compact, informative 50-minute documentary film "Thunder In Guyana" gets screened tomorrow [Thurs, June 12] at 6:30 p.m. in the "Independents Night" series at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater.

Janet Rosenberg's family was just as appalled as Cheddi Jagan's East Indian parents at the elopement of this daughter, this son. "Janet's father, my great-uncle Charlie," says Ms. Wasserman, "threatened to shoot Cheddi on sight. My great-grandmother had a stroke." To them, he was black.

The film shows Janet Jagan now, in her thoughtful, level-headed 80s, still speaking in the flat broad tones of Chicago as she's interviewed by her cousin Suzanne, and—through stills and archival footage—the Janet Rosenberg in her teens and 20s who swam, rode horses, took flying lessons, had plenty of boyfriends, didn't give a damn, and whose stunning face and figure might remind a moviegoer of, oh, Paulette Goddard... just as Janet and Cheddi Jagan's grown daughter

Nadira might remind a playgoer of, oh, Marissa Tomei.

"As soon as Janet got to Guyana, the newspapers there started writing about her—this white woman who was dentist, Cheddi Jagan's wife, and office assistant. Back in Chicago," says filmmaker Wasserman, "my mother started saving all the Guyana clippings. She kept everything in this red album—letters, telegrams, photographs, newspaper articles—and all of it fired my imagination."

"I would look through that album and see headlines like 'CHICAGO GIRL STORM CENTER OF GUYANA,' or 'CHICAGO GIRL SECOND EVA PERON.' I was fascinated. I knew I wanted to do something about it someday. Not that it would be a film, but something. And I think it's also why I became a historian."

Suzanne Wasserman, who has a BA in History from the University of Wisconsin, an MA and a Ph.D in history from NYU, is now

in her third year as assistant director of the Gotham Center for New York City History, which is at the CUNY Graduate Center, within walking distance of her and her lawyer husband's (and their 15-year-old son's) apartment in Stuyvesant Town.

This is the first movie she's ever made.

"Cheddi died of a heart attack in March 1997. When I found out in July 1997 that Janet was going to run for president, I called her up and said I'd like to come down to Guyana and write something. None of her family had ever been down there, and she was reluctant for me to come. Didn't want the responsibility of worrying about the safety of a 40-year-old American cousin."

"Meantime I'd sent a query to the New York Times Magazine, and they said yes, they'd pay my fare and then see if they'd like to run the story. So I had a little money and I had a press pass, and at the very last instant I thought: What if there's a film here?"

"Someone had hooked me up with Debra Granik, an NYU graduate student in film. She was enthusiastic, and had her own equipment. I paid her airfare and we shared a hotel room; also with us in that room was my sister Nadine, 10 years younger than me, to help out on the project."

"In Guyana there is a long history of racial conflict and violence during elections. At the last minute, I got scared and wasn't going to go. Nadine said: 'If you don't go, I'm going anyway.' She shamed me into going."

Nadine Wasserman obviously has a lot in common with Janet Rosenberg Jagan.

"I was lucky," says Ms. Wasserman, "because I was with somebody [Debra Granik] who had already made a film. She knew what she was doing, how to shoot from a variety of angles, how not to interrupt the

person you're interviewing. She kept kicking me under the table and telling me to shut up."

"I didn't expect to even talk to Janet [who was midst-campaign]. The day after we arrived Janet called up and told me where she'd be. For the next 10 days we followed her around everywhere. She's a remarkable woman. At rallies she would sit there eight hours. I couldn't do it. She has the joie de vivre, the energy that make people very productive and a relationship of 54 years, which most people can't say today."

"She's always been a lightning rod. People still insult her, even today. The old untruth that she [born Janet Rosenberg] was related to Ethel and Julius Rosenberg still gets repeated to this day, even in the Washington Post. Yes, really. When I interviewed her, Janet declared: 'If I was related to the Rosenbergs, I would say it. I wouldn't be ashamed.'"

The New York Times Magazine never did print Suzanne Wasserman's story, but it did pay a kill fee. Back in the States, she ran down wonderful (and costly) archival footage.

"Thunder in Guyana" then had the benefit of "a real professional editor, Amanda Zinoman." The total budget came to \$125,000, around a fifth of that in time (two years) and money put in by its director.

The film premiered last month at Proctor's, a huge old 1926 movie palace in Schenectady, New York, where there's a considerable Guyanese community. The "Independents Night" that screens it tomorrow at the Walter Reade under the joint aegis of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and IFP/New York, is, as it happens, appropriately named. There aren't an awful lot of nice Jewish girls out of Chicago who are more independent than Janet Rosenberg Jagan.



Janet Rosenberg



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ANGLE ON – Suzanne Wasserman by Adriana E. Davis

Filmmakers and historians have a lot in common. Both are storytellers and dedicated to preserving the world around us. Meet Suzanne Wasserman, a Public Historian who has just completed her first film, a fifty-minute documentary entitled "Thunder in Guyana" which tells the story of Janet Rosenberg Jagan who, at 77 years old, became the first, and only, female president of Guyana and Suzanne's cousin. "It's like giving birth. After six years I can't believe I'm done," Suzanne remarked. "It's funny how it becomes a part of you. On the day the film was completed I was in a cab, film in hand and the cab driver said 'Why so glum?' I realized that I was experiencing a kind of post-partum depression about sending my film off into the world."

Originally hailing from Chicago, Suzanne holds a PhD in American social history and is considered an expert on the New York's Lower East Side. She has lectured and published widely on varied topics including: the Depression, women's issues, Jewish nostalgia and 19th century saloons. Her writing has appeared in the *Encyclopedia of New York City*, *New York Family Magazine*, *Seaport Magazine* and the *Journal of American Culture*. Currently, she is the Associate Director of the Gotham Center for NYC History (www.gothamcenter.org) an organization started in March of 2000 by Pulitzer Prize winning historian and author Mike Wallace, who was featured in the Ric Burns' "New York" documentary for PBS. The Gotham Center and its web site are a unique, and free, resource for documentarians and scriptwriters interested in NYC history. "It's our mission to be accessible and answer

questions. We receive calls from people scouting locations or needing historical information and connect them with others so in that way we help promote filmmaking about and in New York."

Recently, Suzanne has added film consultant to her list of achievements when Imagine Entertainment hired her to help accurately portray 1930's, depression-era New York City in their new film, "Cinderella Man" starring Russell Crowe. She has been working directly with Oscar winners Ron Howard and the screenwriter Akiva Goldsman.

Suzanne began work on "Thunder in Guyana" in 1997, but was always inspired by her mother's tales about Janet's life before and after she immigrated to South America. "From the stories I heard I gained a deeper understanding of this atypical, Jewish-American girl who took flying lessons and was a world class swimmer. Making this film was my chance to offer those stories to others while expressing my passion for Janet's dedication to the people of Guyana."

Remarkably, Janet is the first American-born woman to have ever been elected President of any country. Her story begins in 1943, when she marries Dr. Cheddi Jagan, a politically active Guyana native she met while studying in Chicago. The couple returned to Cheddi's homeland and after witnessing the appalling social and economic conditions formed the People's Progressive Party (PPG). In 1953, Cheddi became the country's first democratically elected Prime Minister. "Through their efforts, they helped this tiny, racially-divided country, with numerous problems, go from British colonial rule to independence. Three things defined Janet: the PPG, humanitarianism and the fight for

independence. I always admired that kind of commitment and connected with her values."

Suzanne became determined that if anyone was going to tell Janet's story it was going to be her, but it didn't happen easily. She had never made a film before and she still had to get Janet's consent. "When I came back from my first trip to Guyana I had 25 hours of footage and didn't know what to do next." Suzanne quickly turned her attention to writing a treatment, raising money and cutting a demo reel. Her efforts paid off. She received grants from NYSCA, The Soros Fund, the Director John Sayles and others. In fact, out of the 200 letters and queries she wrote, she secured 10 grants. "I opted to go for lots of smaller grants instead of one big one. Of the total time it took to make this film, I spent about 65% of my time fundraising."

Not only is this a film about a woman, but also Suzanne believes it is a film that could only have been made by a woman. "Janet's story is the story of a woman in a man's world." Suzanne continued, "History had already miscast her as 'the little woman behind the man'. Some sort of Lady Macbeth or Hillary Clinton, but in my film you see Janet as a strong, independent woman, misunderstood by most Guyanese." Women's issues have played a big role in Suzanne's career. She has worked for NYU's Program in Women's History and has been a visiting scholar to the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University.

Though Suzanne made the film for herself to satisfy her love of storytelling, she is also happy her 14-year old son watched her go

through the process. "Freud said, 'Love and work are the two most important things to have in your life.' I have strived for that balance in every challenge I've set for myself as a mother, a wife, an advocate, an historian, and now a filmmaker."

With her film completed, Suzanne wants to give back to the people who helped her make "Thunder in Guyana" a reality. She calls the independent film community "a special place filled with giving and caring people" and plans to use her CineWomen NY membership to help others get their films completed. "CWNV is an organization that encourages community and networking between women. That helps us all take risks with our work."

When asked her advice for other first time filmmakers, Suzanne stressed, "Get involved! As women, we bring more guardianship to the subjects we cover and that is an asset in storytelling. Talk to your neighbors, walk the streets, observe, be curious and take lots of notes." She further challenged, "Go and interview someone about their life. Everyone has a story to tell. Film it and see what you find out!"

"Everyone has a story to tell. So go film it and see what you find out!"



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Film profiles American woman who was president of Guyana

By BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

Her mother could always tell a good story, and now Suzanne Wasserman is following in her footsteps, albeit in a much different medium.

Wasserman, a Chicago native and New York City resident, has written about history and taught the subject for more than 15 years. More recently, however, she has taken on the role of filmmaker, and at 8 p.m. Saturday at Proctor's Theatre, Wasserman will be in Schenectady for the world premiere screening of her first documentary film, "Thunder in Guyana."

The film tells the story of Janet Rosenberg Jagan, the only American woman to become president of a foreign country. Jagan is a first cousin of Wasserman's mother, and long before she was elected president of Guyana in 1997, Jagan was a popular topic of conversation at family gatherings. Wasserman often heard her mother talk about the relative who married the young dental student from British Guyana in 1947 and gave up her U.S. citizenship.

"My mother was 10 years younger than her cousin, but she always followed Janet's life, and when I was a little girl she would tell me all about her," said Wasserman recently from her office at the Gotham Center for New York City History. "My mother became the unofficial family historian, and she would fascinate me with Janet's story."

Wasserman was a young teenager when she met Jagan, who is 83 and still residing in Guyana. Jagan's husband, Cheddi Jagan, was elected president of the country in 1992. When he died in 1997, Janet reluctantly accepted her party's nomination and ran to succeed her husband, and won. She served two years of a five-year term before ill health forced her to resign.

"I had met this woman, who I thought of as an elderly aunt, a number of times, and I always knew of her remarkable story," said Wasserman, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison before getting her doctorate in American History at New York University.

Inspired to start

"By the time I was in graduate school I had always thought that eventually I would do something with her story. When her husband passed away and she decided to run for president I said, 'this is the moment. If I'm ever going to do anything with this story, now is the time to jump in.'"

Wasserman's original intent was to write a magazine article on her cousin.

"I really wasn't thinking about doing a film at all," said Wasserman. "I had approached The New York Times about doing an article for their magazine, and they thought it was a great idea. They paid for my trip, and I went down there to the campaign armed with a New York Times press pass."

Before she left, however, she got bigger ideas.

"I didn't know anything about doing a documentary film, but I knew my mother still had a lot of old photographs and news clippings about Janet, and I thought, naively, that I could do it."

She enlisted the help of Debra Granik, a student in New York University's graduate film program, and the two women took off for South America. Their subject, however, wasn't convinced the story was such a great idea.

"Janet told me that she was 77, that the campaign was going to be very taxing for her, and she didn't know if she would have any time to spend with me," said Wasserman.

"So we went down there with no expectations, but we stayed for two weeks and we got some amazing material. She never stopped moving, but we were always two steps behind her the entire time."

Personal trials

The film gives viewers a brief history of Guyana and closely documents the 1997 election, but it is mostly the story of Jagan and her trials and tribulations.

"Janet finally reconciled with her father before he died, but he never went and visited her in Guyana," said Wasserman. "He had threatened to shoot Cheddi on sight. He was very upset that his Jewish daughter was dating this native of India who was a man of color and a Marxist."

There was also a time during the 1950s and 1960s when the U.S. government did not allow Jagan back into her native country. Jagan, however, never harbored any resentment toward the United States, according to Wasserman.

"It's remarkable, but she never did," said Wasserman, "and

ever since 1992 Guyana has had very good relations with the U.S. government. Janet always looked forward."

Wasserman's trip to Guyana in 1997 was only her introduction to filmmaking. Since then, she has undergone an education working to create the documentary, as well as fund it.

"It's been a remarkable journey and an unbelievable experience," said Wasserman. "I'm like, 'I want to make this film,' but I didn't know what to do. I feel like I could do it now, and maybe even shoot footage myself, but I'm always going to need a professional editor."

That's one thing I learned, and I also found out that the independent film community can be very generous."

One of those in the film community who offered funding to help Wasserman's project was director John Sayles, a Schenectady native who has directed such films as "Matewan," "Eight Men Out" and most recently, "Sunshine State."

Coming home

Sayles learned of the recent influx of Guyanese people into Schenectady during a phone conversation with his brother Doug, a Ballston Lake resident.

"I bring him up to speed on what's going on in Schenectady, and when I told him about the Guyanese he said, 'that's kind of interesting,'" said Doug Sayles. "He told me that he had been working with a first-time documentary filmmaker doing a film about Guyana. What a small world."

The two brothers thought Schenectady would be the perfect place for the film to open, and Doug Sayles, a golf course developer who was also working with Proctor's Theatre and its expansion, easily sold the idea to Proctor's CEO Philip Morris.

"Doug called me and said, 'I have an idea,' and I said, 'great,'" said Morris. "Then I talked to the mayor, and he thought having the film open here would be great. It's a very interesting story, and it's a great way to meet some of our new neighbors."

One enthusiastic viewer will be Schenectady Mayor Al Jurczynski, who recently returned from a visit to Guyana, where he met Jagan.

"I spoke to her and had my picture taken with her, and she and everybody else down there is very aware that the documentary is going to have its world premiere in Schenectady," said Jurczynski, who has been encouraging Guyanese migration to Schenectady for two years now.

"Our connection with Guyana is still relatively new, but I think it's great that we're going to have the film here for its opening. I'm very interested to see it."

Wasserman will open Saturday's festivities at Proctor's with an introductory talk at 7 p.m. The 50-minute film will begin at 8 p.m., with a question-and-answer segment to follow. There is no admission fee.



Janet Rosenberg Jagan is pictured above as a young woman in an undated photo and at right addressing the United Nations on Sept. 22, 1996, as president of Guyana.

Wasserman said she enjoys talking to people about the film, but for her the best part was making it.

"That was the most satisfying experience," she said. "Whatever happens now is icing on the cake. I'd love to see it picked up by a film festival or have it run on cable TV or PBS. But making it was the real challenge, and that's what I can feel good about."

One critic, the one Wasserman was most concerned about, has given the film a thumbs up.

"Janet's been in the news for 60 years and there's always been a distorted view of her in the press," said Wasserman. "She's not bitter about it, but I wanted to help clear up all the mythology. I was very nervous waiting to hear what she thought of the film, and then I got a letter from her. She liked it. She thought I did a remarkable job. I was so relieved."

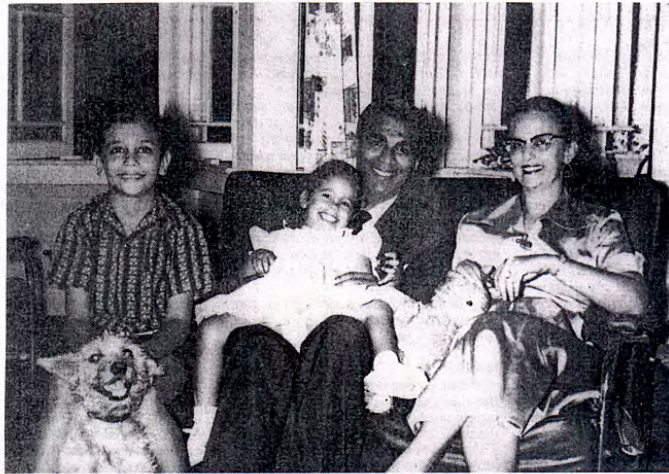


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FORWARD

OCTOBER 24, 2003



COURTESY OF WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

ALL IN THE FAMILY: American-born Janet Jagan and her husband Cheddi Jagan, pictured with their children, fought for a democratic and independent Guyana for over half a century.

GUYANA'S POLITICAL PIONEERS

Suzanne Wasserman grew up hearing stories about her cousin, a beautiful woman who left her home and her country to marry a man against her parents' wishes. The older cousin was Janet Rosenberg. She married the man who would later become the first democratically elected president of Guyana, a position she would inhabit after her husband's death.

Wasserman, a Chicago-born American social historian, tells the story of her adventurous cousin in "Thunder in Guyana," a documentary that is being shown at various film festivals around the country.

Rosenberg fell in love with Cheddi Jagan, the son of East Indian immigrants in the colony of British Guiana while she was a nursing student in Chicago. Jagan and Rosenberg married in 1943 despite the objections of her Jewish and his Hindu parents, and they planned to go to British Guiana to fight for the colony's independence. In 1950, they founded the People's Progressive Party, the colony's first modern political party. Jagan was elected chief minister in 1953, and his wife was elected the colony's first female deputy speaker of parliament. She became known in newspaper headlines as the "Second Eva Peron."

They governed for 133 days, until Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, deposed them. Cheddi Jagan was elected prime minister in 1961 but lost power in 1964 due to an alliance of foes backed by the CIA. Finally, in 1992, in the first free and fair elections in almost three decades, he was sworn in as president of Guyana. In the winter of 1997, he passed away and his wife was elected president, the first foreign-born person and first woman to serve this role.

The film recounts her life and her adopted homeland through archival photographs and film footage, as well as interviews with her friends and family.

— LISA SOPHER

NEW JERSEY & NEW YORK

National Council of Jewish Women's Women's Film Festival, Caldwell College, 9 Ryerson Ave., Caldwell, N.J.; Oct. 25, 7:30 p.m.; patron \$40, benefactor \$125, director \$175, film critics circle \$500 per couple. (973-740-0588 or www.ncjwessex.org); Reel Jews Film Festival, Makor, 35 W. 67th St., New York; Oct. 26, 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.; \$9 each screening. (212-415-5500 or www.92y.org). See www.guyanafilm.org for additional screenings.



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