

Itzhak (2017)

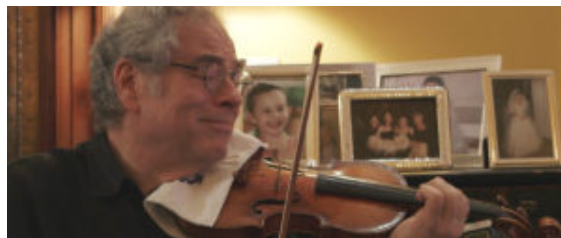
Documentary. Running time: 1 hour 22 min.

Our content ratings (0-5): Violence 1; Language 1 ; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.*

Psalms 98:4



At home in his NYC apartment with his Stradivarius. (c) Greenwich Entertainment

Lovers of great music will find much to enjoy in Alison Chernick's documentary about violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman. Thanks to her cameras, she takes us into his New York City apartment where we also meet Toby, his devoted wife of half a century, as well as follow him around the city and the world as he enchants thousands with his exquisite performances. One scene on a snow-piled New York sidewalk epitomizes the film maker's message. Setting in his scooter and accompanied by Toby and friends, he is able to navigate a blocking mound of snow when one of the party sees his snow shovel to widen the passage so Perlman can cross the street. The musician is a polio survivor who, with some help along the way, has more than a survivor, he is a victor.

Born in 1945 in Tel Aviv of Poles who had left Europe in the mid-Thirties, the boy was a child prodigy who came down with polio when he was four-years-old. Although he was able to study at Julliard, his career was hindered because of his disability. And then Ed Sullivan featured him on his hit TV program in 1958. Toby, who also is a trained violinist, suspects that the offer was made partially out of pity for "the poor crippled boy." Maybe, but it made him world-famous, and his career took off. He returned to the show in 1964, along with The Rolling Stones.

This latter reminds me that Perlman enjoys playing all kinds of music, the film opening, not with a piece by Mozart or Bruch, but with his rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." The setting is Citi Field in Queens where, sporting a Mets jersey, he has been invited to play The National Anthem. Later we see him absorbed in his performance with Billy Joel. He also has made a jazz recording and played his violin for film scores. The most notable of the latter is the haunting theme from Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*—Perlman notes that wherever in the world he performs, someone always asks him to play this. This sequence includes archival footage of Jewish prisoners playing their violins.

In many places, such as the sequence in which he entertains in his apartment his good friend Alan Alda, we see he is a lively story teller with a great sense of humor. During a visit to Tel Aviv he jokes that the film maker should look up street names on the "Jewish Google" because so many are named after famous Jews. "If you could Jew-gle," he quips, "that would be nice." During his visit in Tel Aviv to the cluttered shop of friend and famous violinmaker Amnon Weinstein, he says, while doing exercises on a newly-made instrument, "It plays Jewish automatically." I love especially the comment made by this master craftsman that his friend is "praying with the violin." Perlman himself comments, while playing a Bach piece, "The violin is a replica of the soul." The way he plays it, we can

certainly believe him.

In addition to the opening baseball park episode there are many concert hall scenes, during which Perlman plays sitting down. These are filled with beloved selections from the music of Bach, Brahms, Bruch, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Strauss, Tchaikovsky—and of course, Billy Joel and John Williams. He also teaches, obviously enjoying interacting with his talented students. Back at his home we also meet many family members (the couple have five grown children) who gather for a Shabbat dinner.

The film is a warm loving tribute to a man who continually brings music to a world badly in need of its beauty and joy. We see that even a great handicap such as polio can be overcome by pluck, strength of spirit, humor, and the loving help of family and friends.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of Visual Parables.