

# Live and In Person at the Tivoli Theatre!

## WRITING WITH FIRE

**Monday, December 13, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Jessica Kiang | Variety | Not Rated | 93 Mins.

In some months' time, cub reporter Shyamkali will solo pilot a story that brings an accused rapist to justice. But right now she is sitting in the shade of a tree with her boss Meera, who has spiked a story of hers because she didn't like "the angle." When Meera explains her reasons, Shyamkali is thoughtful. "Ah," she says, "that's what 'an angle' means." The steep learning curve she will nimbly ascend is one of three tales of personal and professional persistence that directors Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh tell in their accessible, engaging debut doc "Writing With Fire," through which they'll also tell the story of the Khabar Lahariya newspaper, and of India, in a time of seismic change. Thomas and Ghosh have found their angle, and it's a powerful one.

But perhaps an angle on women as remarkable as these is not difficult to find. Meera, Suneeta and Shyamkali are three Dalit women, the lowest class in India's caste system, previously termed — and often still treated as — "untouchable." As Dalit they face discrimination and diminishment from the rest of society; as Dalit women they also chafe under the repressive traditions of their own menfolk. That they have kept an all-female newspaper going for 14 years is already an achievement, and when we join them, they are embarking on a new phase: Khabar Lahariya's pivot to digital — not an easy ask when some among them have never used a cellphone.



Of the three, Meera has seniority. A wife at 14 and a mother a short while later, she is formidably accomplished: Before turning to journalism she earned a Masters in political science and a teaching degree, while raising kids and keeping house. That last ought be more important than her job, according to her husband, leading her best friend Kavita to point out acerbically that Meera's job is what keeps house. By contrast, Shyamkali never had any formal

education and feels its lack enormously, while Suneeta's comparatively complete schooling also comes with its own dilemmas. Her father, with whom Suneeta has an endearingly irreverent relationship ("This is our usual friendly banter," he says, after a bit of back-and-forth, "now she won't talk to me for a while") cannot afford the dowries demanded by those husbands who would allow their wives to work. But her remaining unmarried is not an option either. It is a source of shame for her family.

Through private-life upheavals, the women doggedly pursue stories from around the region, and the viewcount on their fledgling YouTube channel gradually ticks upward. Suneeta's series on illegal, frequently lethal mining in her home village ("It used to be beautiful," she says sadly, "now there's always dust in our food") gains national attention. But while the women fearlessly tackle many dangerous, bigger stories as India's political landscape becomes more fraught, it's their grassroots local reporting that yields the most measurable results. A marginalized community gets medicine; a vital road is finally repaired; a remote village connects to the electrical grid; and parched farmland gains working irrigation — all largely due to coverage by Khabar Lahariya.

Thomas and Ghosh, who also shoot (along with co-DP Khara Thapliyal) and edit, don't make any huge formal leaps here. And a basic foreknowledge of India's recent socio-political shifts is recommended to place some of the outlet's heroics in context. But the directors have so much to work with, it's impressive they produce as coherent a document as this. With composer Tadjar Juniad's musical stings smoothing the transitions from one story to the next, they cover a lot. And just when it seems there's no time for levity they'll slip in an unexpectedly joyous moment, like a journalism-workshop tour of Kashmir where the women have a snowball fight. Or a beaming Suneeta, Khabar Lahariya's first international representative, in a selfie video taken on a bright Sri Lankan beach.

Back in India, Suneeta investigates the murder of a young woman. On her way back from the grisly scene, she's shaken. "Sometimes I feel it's a sin to be born a woman. A burden to her parents, then a slave to her husband," she says. "Did you see all the blood?" It's one of the only times the filmmakers' presence is directly acknowledged and it reminds us that some of the riskier exchanges might have been possible only because an outside camera crew was there. "Don't make the reporter the story" is one of the first rules of journalism. But some stories, like "Writing With Fire," are worth breaking the rules for, and worth doing what we can to protect.

### TIVOLI THEATRE

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# M A S S

Monday, January 10, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Richard Lawson | Vanity Fair | Rated PG-13 | 111 Mins.

Were the new film *Mass* an off-Broadway play, something as searing and finely performed as it is would likely have become a mini sensation. Or, at least, it would have caught the eye of many culture vultures in search of bracingly intimate, and pertinent, theater. But it's not a play: It's a film vying for national attention amid the clamor of James Bond and other large scale amusements.

Which, ultimately, may be a good thing, if it can find an audience. In film form, *Mass* can potentially reach a wider swath of people than a play probably ever would, especially in parts of this country where it is perhaps most grimly relatable. The film, from writer-director Fran Kranz, concerns a school shooting, one of those all too common horrors that arrives entirely without warning. Or does it? That is, in some ways, the investigation of the film, which is about two sets of parents trying to sift through what happened, years after it did. *Mass* exists in the long tail of grief and in the persistent haunt of questions unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable.

It's not a prurient wallow. Kranz's writing, and the generous performances of his actors, tend toward grace and compassion; the film directly, urgently grapples with what may be salvable while gently giving space to what isn't. The tricky conceit of the film is that one pair of parents—Linda (Ann Dowd) and Richard (Reed Birney)—raised the boy who did the shooting. They are, after much official mediation, meeting with the parents, Gail (Martha Plimpton) and Jay (Jason Isaacs), of one of those killed. Their tentative interaction maneuvers between confrontation and shared lament, staged as one long, almost real-time conversation as this shattered quartet tries to reach an ineffable understanding.

Minus some bordering scenes, the bulk of the film takes place in the church rec room where the parents have agreed to meet. The film is fixed in that one drab place, rooted there even as Kranz's camera subtly, nimbly moves around the actors. That cramped interiority could easily create something starchy and inert, a pretentious muddle that can't survive under such a close gaze. But Kranz, an actor making his writing and directing debut, keeps the conversation compelling. It sounds strange to say of a film about such impossible sorrow, but *Mass* is thoroughly entertaining. Or maybe engrossing is a better word. Its incisive dialogue and nuanced performances demand our attention, inviting us into a rolling weather system of guilt and sadness. The experience proves oddly nourishing, clarifying.

As the parents of the boy, Hayden, who killed 9 classmates and one teacher before turning his gun on himself, Dowd and Birney embody different but complementary ideas of how such a thing might be processed. Richard has his prickly defenses about the care and attention Hayden received before it all went wrong, while Linda is more willing to explore the gray areas of Hayden's character. But Richard also readily admits that he "failed," while Linda won't really let herself identify, or at least express, any concrete mistakes. They are a jumble of contradictions and agonized-over histories, just as most people are. Birney and Dowd sensitively illustrate the tension between confusion and certitude, their willingness and their weariness in responding to questions they've asked themselves a thousand times.

There are moments in *Mass* when one might wonder how "realistic" it is that these characters speak in such eloquent paragraphs. But the reality is probably that parents like these would have gone over these matters night after night, year after year. This meeting is meant to give formalized shape to what they've learned or come to understand in all that intervening time. Their deliberate, careful phrasing has been long in development. Even in one heartrending moment when Gail is asked to tell an impromptu story about her son, Evan, you can see her rifling through the file of well-worn anecdotes and picking a poignant, simple favorite. These people are all too well-versed in their grief.

In that scene, if you can call any specific point in the film a scene, Plimpton does extraordinary things, as she does throughout. She and Isaacs, showing facets of his ability I've not seen before, have a natural rapport, playing a couple that has stuck together through the ruin and now, with bone-deep exhaustion, are ready to make some kind of peace with what happened. Has that been achieved by the end? In some ways, yes. The kin of the killer and of the killed form a tentative, maybe fleeting bond in their mutual loss. But Kranz is also wise enough to suggest that some psychological wounds are irreparable, while others could come creeping out of dormancy at any point in these characters' future.

*Mass* does offer some solace, though. And there is the exhilaration of its precise execution, its sober competency, its eschewing of sermon and sanctimony. Kranz briefly touches on issues like gun control before turning back inward, letting the political hover at the edges but never too easily coloring the specific motivations of these four distinct people. He employs a crucial restraint, which allows his sterling actors to elucidate huge emotion without also having to prove some didactic point. Thoughtful and harrowing, *Mass* is a difficult wonder. I'd still like to see it on stage someday. For now, I'll urge you all to go see the movie.

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# THE RESCUE

**Monday, January 24, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Tomris Laffly | Variety | Rated PG | 107 Mins.

*Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin lucidly document the extraordinary 2018 story of a young Thai soccer team's rescue from a flooded cave.*

Taken together, boundless courage, physical stamina and emotional resilience form the magnetic core of co-directors E. Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin's nonfiction oeuvre. The duo behind Oscar-winning nail-biter "Free Solo" naturally gravitate toward real-life you-have-to-see-it-to-believe-it tales, extracting from them a great deal more than beautifully photographed and entertaining accounts of perseverance and survival. Far greater than mere extreme sports docs, their movies raise philosophical queries about life and the universe, bringing an existential edge to the challenges they capture.

Still, no risk that Chin and Vasarhelyi have depicted thus far has been more significant or more unreservedly worth taking than the one they chart in "The Rescue," a stunning documentary of bone-deep moral resonance and cinematic mastery that deserves to be experienced on the big screen. The extraordinary story they tell this time takes us to the summer of 2018, when the Wild Boar soccer team — a dozen young boys and their coach — got trapped in Tham Luang, an extensive and labyrinthine cave in Northern Thailand, drawing international concern and compassion their way during the two long

On the tragic day itself, the kids were on a leisurely yet poorly timed outing after a practice session, unaware of the approaching monsoon that would eventually block their exit, pushing them deeper into the dark ends of a rapidly flooding cave. Joined by thousands of concerned citizens and multifarious experts, an epic and terrifying battle of constantly changing unknowns had to be won to save them.

Through "The Rescue," Chin and Vasarhelyi generously assemble the pieces of the puzzle that adds up to this unbelievable operation. The result is a rousing film that celebrates humanity at its most selfless and ethically motivated, one that is guided by sharp directorial instincts and dextrous editing by Bob Eisenhardt.

Worth noting: Neither the seasoned mountain climber Chin nor the experienced open-water diver Vasarhelyi were present during this mission. Hence, the co-directors lacked their own original footage of the key moments of the operation, embarking on a different kind of storytelling challenge from "Meru" and "Free Solo." In other words, "The Rescue" relied on others' footage, plus generous talking-head interviews (filmed mostly virtually due to pandemic restrictions) for physical and dramatic context.

What's truly astonishing here is the kind of crystal clarity the duo achieves in muddy waters, considering the massive amount of secondhand, jigsaw-like and never-before-seen footage and perspectives they were drawing from. With studious patience and focus — and some help from a number of powerful reenactments and lucidly designed computer graphics — the two construct the terrorizing happenings developing in tunnels and claustrophobic underground chambers with utmost, well-researched precision, giving the viewer a complete and thrilling understanding of the geography with all the immense stakes buried within its vast scale.

In that regard, it's truly commendable how balanced "The Rescue" feels from a narrative standpoint: We get to follow and hear from Thai Navy SEALs, U.S. Special Forces, British cave divers, Australian medical experts and a Thai nurse named "Amp" Banggoen (with a crucial role as a translator), fully grasping the gravity of the situation handled by a crowded group of colorful personalities. The cave divers John Volanthen, Rick Stanton and Dr. Richard "Harry" Harris leave the most memorable impressions alongside Amp. It's through these figures that we get to understand what motivates a fearless cave diver — no, they're not crazy — and Chin and Vasarhelyi, both experienced in either taking part in or filming extreme sports, have fun with this inquiry.



One of them defines his dangerous, potentially fatal hobby as "two parts ego, one part curiosity and one part a need to prove yourself." It quickly becomes clear that a past of nerdy unpopularity in their youth is shared by all these heroes, a detail "The Rescue" briefly touches upon, enough to get the viewer hooked on these former underdogs. Ever-interested in human relationships (as they proved with the unique love story at the center of "Free Solo"), the co-directors can't help but spotlight some romance in "The Rescue," braiding in a courtship between two of the characters.

Naturally, the rescue itself is the main attraction, mostly occurring through an awe-inspiring final act. As the world watches and millions of gallons of water are drained from the caves to keep the kids from drowning, the divers ultimately decide to risk sedating and transporting the kids unconscious through the long tunnel, too precarious and panic-inducing even for an experienced cave diver to handle. At one point, a rescuer loses his rope — the most important asset of a cave diver that connects him to safety. At another, the drugs wear off, and proves insufficient.

It's truly breathtaking stuff, watching a massive group of diverse professionals set all notions of fear and self-interest aside and unite around a common goal. In today's increasingly individualistic world divided by superficial differences, witnessing this profound miracle feels like receiving an overdue supply of oxygen.

*Please join us for our thought provoking post screening discussions!*



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# WRITING WITH FIRE

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maybe ever!"

*Washington Post*

Monday, December 13 at 7:30 pm

"Knocks the wind right out of you and lingers in  
your mind for days."

*New York Post*

Monday, January 10 at 7:30 pm



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# THE RESCUE

" Extraordinary... A rousing film that  
celebrates humanity at its most selfless."

*Variety*

Monday, January 24 at 7:30 pm