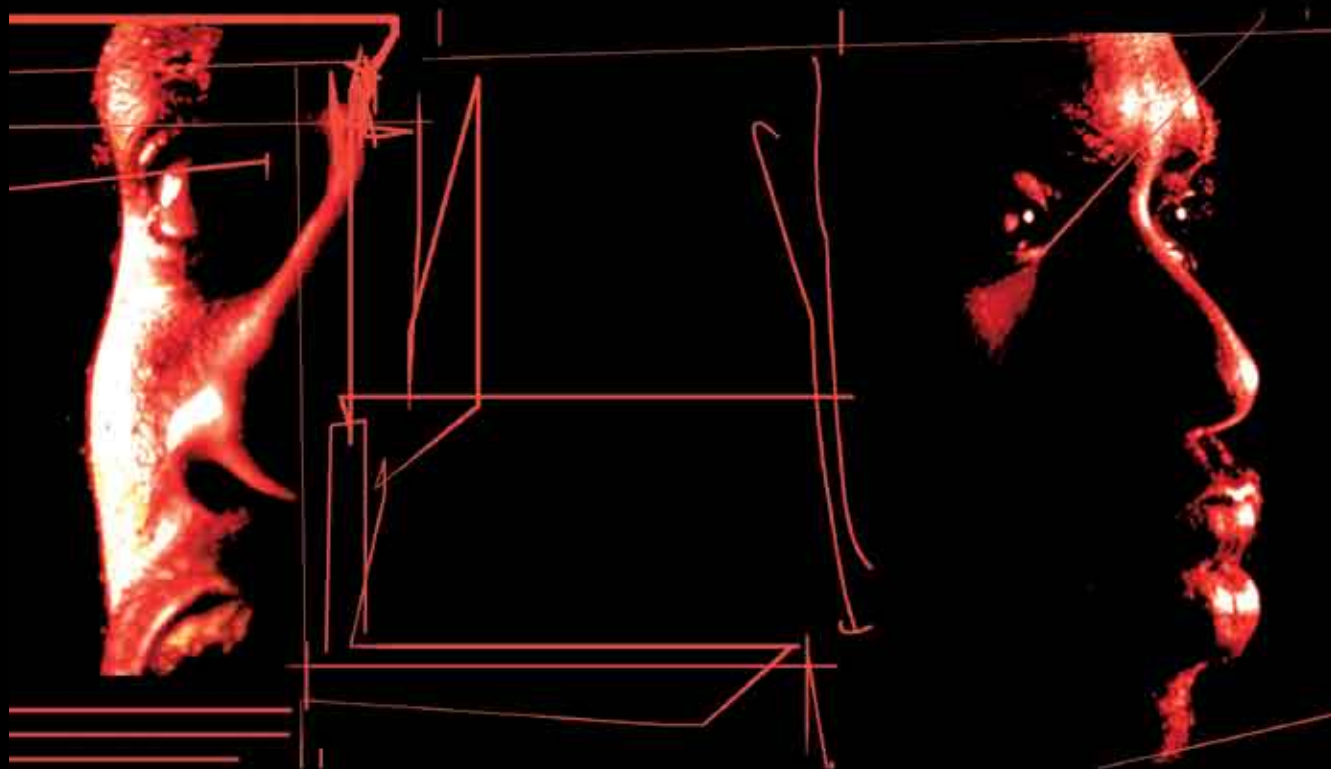


Rated 3½ out of 4 "powerful and well told... a must-see."

—*Canadian Review of Materials* Volume XII, Number 13



CHEATING DEATH

STUDY GUIDE

A CO-PRODUCTION OF BELLADONNA PRODUCTIONS AND THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD



AUDIENCE: EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS WHO CONNECT WITH:

- Youth at risk of dropping out of school and/or becoming part of the gangs-and-guns culture.
- Youth learning about choices and consequences.
- Individuals dealing with trauma, loss or suffering.
- Youth dealing with identity issues.

RELEVANT SUBJECTS: Civics, Social Studies, Religion, History, English, Urban Studies, Ethics, Politics, Social Justice, Media Arts

THEMES: Choices, Respect, High-risk activities, Gun violence, Racism, Consequences, Identifying personal strengths, Community

CURRICULUM LINKS**Grades 7 & 8**

Writing

Oral and Visual Communication

Grades 9–12

Social Sciences and the Humanities
(e.g. Individual and Family Living, Grade 9 or 10)

Writing

Media Studies (e.g. Analyzing Media & How Media Works)

Self and Others (e.g. Relationships, Personal and Social Responsibilities, Communication and Conflict Resolution, Decision Making and Problem Solving, Social Challenges)

SYNOPSIS:

At 13, Gyasi Ferdinand was an innocent kid from Trinidad living with his mom in suburban Toronto.

By 17, everything had changed. Gyasi, or J9 as he was called because of the 9mm gun in his waistband, was pulling in up to \$2000 a night selling crack cocaine in Regent Park, one of Toronto's roughest neighbourhoods.

At 25, he lost it all. Four bullets from a rival dealer's gun left Gyasi inches from death. The shooting led to a profound spiritual experience, and a personal struggle that Gyasi had never anticipated.

For Gyasi to live, J9 had to die.

Cheating Death takes us inside the mind of a man still struggling with the temptations of the street while at the same time trying to serve God. This documentary is a journey into the world of drugs, gangs and guns – a world much talked about and feared but rarely understood.

FOR EDUCATORS

This Guide is Gyasi's story. This 25-minute documentary looks at the series of choices he made, from selling drugs on street corners, to picking up a gun, to getting into the street dispute that almost cost him his life, to finally changing his lifestyle. Gyasi's story touches everyone because he shares his soul, his vulnerability, his fragility. His personal experience and frank storytelling provide a unique opportunity to open up discussion with youth. *Cheating Death* is an ideal educational tool that promotes healthy choices and smart decision making.

This Guide is designed for use immediately before and after viewing the documentary. It seeks to widen perspectives and foster critical thinking.

Pre-Screening Discussion Ideas:

Before showing the film, ask if anyone knows someone close to them who almost died. What happened to the person afterwards? Was there a significant change in their life?

If no one has direct experience, ask students to imagine themselves surviving a close call with death. Would they continue to live as if nothing happened or would they change some aspects of their lives?

Post-Screening Discussion Ideas:

What is Gyasi's message? To whom is it addressed? How important is it that he delivers that message in his own words?

What are some of the barriers that stop someone from doing the right thing?

A lack of education limits your opportunities for success. What are some of the other messages of the documentary?

Classroom Activities:MODULE A / **MAKING CHOICES**

- Think of an older person you look up to. Ask if you can interview them about their life: values they hold, aspirations they live with, the key decisions they made, key events that shaped what happened to them. What dreams/aspirations did they have in grade school (or at the age of the student interviewer)? How did things work out and why? What lessons did the person learn that they would like to share?
- For Discussion or Essay
As a teenager, Gyasi liked to hang out with his friends at an outdoor basketball court where there was drug activity. Eventually people assumed he was a drug dealer too. Why do you think people made this assumption? Why do you think Gyasi decided to start dealing? What other choices could he have made?
- Why did Gyasi feel that he had to go after the guy who confronted him for dealing drugs on his territory? In the film, Gyasi says, "Some people weren't meant to be killers ... but you got to do what you got to do." What unwritten codes of behaviour are evident from his story? What other choices could Gyasi have made at this point?
- After surviving being shot at close range, Gyasi spent a long time in hospital. His mother and his church proved to be his biggest support during recovery. It was then that Gyasi made an important life decision – to serve God as a minister in his church. "For Gyasi to live, J9 has to die."
- Who or what in your life is your source of support, and how does this support help you to make the right decisions?

MODULE B / **ROLE-PLAY**

- You are out one night with people you have known since Grade 1. You see a stranger across the street. Your friend says, “I want that hat.” What do you do?
- Your best friend has a new boyfriend. He seems really nice and does everything for her. She is really happy. Then you hear a rumour that he is a drug dealer.
- You learn that a close friend has joined a gang that you’ve heard is often violent. What is your reaction? (Role-play this with students who represent you, the close friend and other gang members.)

COMMUNITY: For Discussion or Essay

- 1) If you were asked to introduce your neighbourhood to outsiders, what words would you use to describe it?
 - How do you think outsiders see your neighbourhood?
 - Someone has just moved into the neighbourhood. How do they begin to make friends?
 - What sights would you include on your tour?
 - What parts of your neighbourhood are you most proud?
 - What do you wish you could change?

- 2) Many people see themselves as bystanders – individuals who lack the power and influence to make a difference. Others disagree. They are convinced that there are no limits to what people can accomplish if they join together with others who share their vision.
 - What do you think?
 - To what extent can people stop the violence and regain control of their community?
 - Gyasi suggests that outsiders know very little about his community. Is he right?
 - How much do you and your friends know about neighbourhoods other than your own?
 - How do you get information about the people who live in other neighbourhoods?
 - What part do the media play in shaping your impressions of people you've never met?

Related films:

9 Months, 6 Blocks (2005, Canada) – segment features teen who struggles to stay in school and out of gang activity in Parkdale, a neighbourhood in Toronto.

Bowling for Columbine (2002, USA) – teens and gun culture; Directed by Michael Moore.

Turning Away (1998, Canada) – street kids and drug use; making new decisions.

Youth Violence: What's Out There (1995, Canada) – offers positive alternatives to violence.

These films available from the NFB at <www.nfb.ca>.

Other:

Live by the Gun, Die by the Gun – (30 minutes, PBS)) Available from Castleworks Productions at <www.castleworks.com>. Discussion guide available at <www.pbs.org/inthemix/educators/livedie-gun.html>.

Credits:

Written and Directed by **Eric Geringas**

Produced by **Rosalie Bellefontaine**

Co-Producer for the NFB **Peter Starr**

Commissioning Editor, TV Ontario **Rudy Buttignol**

Executive Producer for the NFB **Silva Basmajian**

Director of Photography **John Minh Tran**

Editor **Prem Sooriyakumar**

Motion Graphics **Alan Shisko**

Original Music **Solitair**

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Study guide

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