

# The Star-Ledger

Wheels keep on turning: 'The Rink' documents Newark's last roller skating haven



Sarah Friedland and Ryan Joseph made a documentary about Newark's Branch Brook Park Skating Center, a holdout within a landscape of disappearing urban rinks. (*Amanda Brown/For The Star-Ledger*)

By Amy Kuperinsky/The Star-Ledger  
on May 30, 2013 at 5:58 AM

Down the hill, past a basketball court, a steep flight of stairs and ringed by cars is what appears to be a large fallout shelter. Blank and plain, it could be also be a warehouse. Or a gymnasium.

Get closer, though, and you can't help but feel the bass — the thumping heart of something undeniably alive.

It's Memorial Day at Branch Brook Park Skating Center in Newark. As block parties and barbecues wind down outside in the tepid air, the rink is flush with holiday skaters coasting to the drumbeats of house music. One woman in a hijab exits the main procession of wheels to conduct a dance reverie that goes against the grain, generating her own groovy orbit at rink's center. A young boy grips a wheeled balance support, faltering momentarily before pushing past two girls wearing disco-pink glowstick necklaces. As the "Cha Cha Slide" cues up on the speakers, a few skateless women get funky in the lobby.

This kind of scene — but mostly the people in it — star in a documentary called "The Rink" screening tomorrow at the **New Jersey Film Festival**. In telling the story of Newark skaters, the filmmakers paint Branch Brook's rink as an oasis.

The film begins with a stark phrase:

"Branch Brook is one of the last urban roller rinks in the tri-state area." However, more than just some last stand in the fading roller skate landscape, the rink can be an intensely personal outlet for those who call it home.

"For me, it's not about the space," says Ryan Joseph, the film's cinematographer and co-producer. As the documentarians see it, theirs is the story of **Newark**. Narratives about drug abuse, jail time and redemption are intercut with footage of skaters, mobile and liquid on Branch Brook's heavily traced surface.

"The rink is a place that's in constant motion," says Sarah Friedland, the film's director and co-producer. "It never stops."



Branch Brook Park's roller rink on Memorial Day evening.  
*Amanda Brown/The Star-Ledger*

Friedland, 33, is an adjunct professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Joseph, 36, is a production associate at Rutgers' Mason Gross School of Arts and adjunct professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College. They first teamed up while students at Hunter College's integrated media arts program, and have received a grant to take the film on a tour of U.S. roller rinks.

The pair originally intended to pursue a project about a women's roller derby team. Starting in 2008, Joseph, who grew up in Trinidad and lived in Newark before moving to **Jersey City**, photographed the Garden State Rollergirls, striking up a rapport with

skaters. Yet **derby** was only a fraction of the rink's lifeblood. Many who frequent the spot are gospel skaters, and adult skate-dancers.

So Joseph and Friedland decided to follow characters from two skating subsets. One, Michelle "Bone Saw" Taylor, 34, is a roller derby skater who spends her days working construction. Another, Gralen Stephon Vereen, 50 during the film, is a gospel skater who lives in **Kearny** and works at the Motor Vehicle Commission.

Both Taylor and Vereen have harried pasts. Taylor grew up in foster care, lived on the Jersey City streets and landed in prison more than once.

"Roller derby and roller skating is an alternate world for myself," she says. "It gives me a chance to be who I am. To escape the harshness of reality."



Garden State Rollergirls is one group that frequents Branch Brook Park in "The Rink."  
*Ryan Joseph/Sarah Friedland*

As a younger man, Vereen was ruled by the drug use that accompanied nights at **Zanzibar**, a club formerly located on Newark's Broad Street. It was a hub for house music in the '80s and '90s. "I was a crackhead," he says. Reclaiming his role as a father, Vereen uses Branch Brook as a "cleaner" route to expression — the music and dance without the vice.

"The Rink" frames Branch Brook as a symbol of revitalization for Newark, placing it in the context of city history, including the rise and fall of the First Ward projects, and the 1967 riots that propelled city unrest into national headlines.

Joseph says that while children may exclusively fill suburban rinks, Branch Brook routinely caters to older skaters. On Sundays and first Thursdays it's a veritable nightclub on wheels.

"The only thing that's missing is a bar," says Joseph. Such vibrancy is juxtaposed with the demise of rinks in New Jersey and New York. A late addition to skating culture, **Branch Brook Park Skating Center** opened its doors in 1996. In the documentary, its predecessors are listed as epitaphs. The Bronx's Skate Key: 1980-2006. Manhattan's Roxy: 1978-2007. Dreamland and Twin City, on the Elizabeth-Newark border.

Today, Branch Brook honors skate palaces of yore, their names inked brightly on a wall under the heading, "Gone But Not Forgotten." The film interviews displaced skaters who come to Newark but are angry, sad and frustrated that their home rinks have been shuttered.

"Probably 60 percent of our customers are from out of town," says Jaquaya Clark, 23, sales director at the Newark rink. "We also get people from Maryland, from Camden and things like that."



Branch Brook regularly hosts adult skate nights. *Ryan Joseph/Sarah Friedland*

The reason for Branch Brook's staying power is its location on public land, says Michael Feiger, who was born in Newark and grew up in West Orange. Appearing in "The Rink," he's a partner in United Skates of America, which has a contract with Essex County for Branch Brook. Feiger also owned Brooklyn's Empire Roller Skating Center, which closed in 2007.

"I was right in the middle of a community losing this valuable resource," he says.

A particular sequence in the film casts Branch Brook as a literal savior of urban skating. In it, the Newark artist Jerry Gant interprets skating as transformation. Take a person off the street, he says, strap on some wheels, and "It's like seeing a superhero ... materializing in front of you."

With that, the camera returns to the rink on adult skate night. A house track, Black Coffee's "Superman," plays like a siren song, the question "Can You Be My Superman?" forming a plaintive chorus. Couples loop through the dim space like they're driving a club highway, street lights swapped for disco balls.

As the music continues, the focus shifts to the street, flooded with daylight. People stand idle, or walk as if burdened, wearing strained expressions on their faces.

Back to the rink.

Inside, they're weightless. Flying.



THE ARCHITECTURAL LEAGUE'S  
**Urban Omnibus**  
THE CULTURE OF CITYMAKING

by Jonathan Tarleton  
May 31st, 2013

It gets bigger every year. The **2013 Brooklyn Film Festival** begins tonight and runs through June 9th. After receiving submissions from 119 countries, the festival will showcase over 100 feature-length and short films towards its mission to advance public interest in film, draw worldwide attention to the borough as a center for cinema, encourage local residents' access to film, and promote artists without censure. This year's theme is "Magnetic," which the organizers term "a study on all those invisible forces that bring people together or push them apart."

If you are eager to escape the summer heat and take in a narrative, documentary, or experimental piece, ticketing information and complete listings are available on the festival's website. Here at *Urban Omnibus*, we are similarly concerned with making visible the unseen systems and interactions of the city. See below for some festival selections *UO* readers might particularly enjoy.

**The Rink** (Director: Sarah Friedland)

6:30pm | Friday, June 7 | indieScreen

4:00pm | Sunday, June 9 | Windmill Studios

*The Rink* is a feature-length documentary that tells the story of one of the last remaining urban roller rinks in Newark, New Jersey. At first glance, the exterior resembles a fallout shelter; however, the streamers and lights of the interior tell a different story: a space cherished by skaters, and a city struggling to move beyond its past and forge a new narrative amidst contemporary social issues. The film retells moments of Newark's fascinating history, including urban renewal in the 1950s, resistance and the 1967 uprising, and contemporary downtown gentrification. *The Rink* is a tribute to the remaining affordable recreational spaces that are central to life in American cities — places where people can create community and enjoy life.



New Brunswick

## **Opening night of the 2013 New Jersey International Film Festival will feature the World Premiere screening of Sarah Friedland and Ryan Joseph's terrific documentary *The Rink***

Opening night of the 2013 New Jersey International Film Festival will feature the World Premiere screening of Sarah Friedland and Ryan Joseph's terrific documentary *The Rink*

Posted by Ag Nigrin , May 21, 2013 at 01:49 AM

**The opening night of the 2013 New Jersey International Film Festival will feature the World Premiere screening of Sarah Friedland and Ryan Joseph's terrific documentary *The Rink* which focuses on one of the last urban roller-rinks that is based in Newark, New Jersey.**

Here is an interview I did with Ryan Joseph:

**Nigrin:** Your documentary feature *The Rink* focuses the last urban roller rink in the Tri-State area. What were the motivations for making this film?

**Joseph:** Well, we wanted to make a roller derby movie, and after filming for several months we realized we had a different story. So we took a step back, and started to see the story unfold before our eyes- "The Rink". The Branch Brook Park roller skating rink was/is a central space that has a special meaning to those who uses it especially for Newark Residents and those who come form far to use the space. We started to see that the space had a symbolic meaning to those who used it. It was an escape from the stress for some, and refuge for others. But, one constant that was always present was/is the Newark's history. The golden days of Newark's club scene, the city's skate culture and the racial segregation and tension that fuel the 1967 riots. All these ghosts from the past were present in the space. But, the rink

is able to host these ghosts and transform the space and minds of those who visit the space. I think that was what attracted me to the story. What did this space mean to those who used it?

**Nigrin:** *The Rink*, set in Newark, New Jersey is a fascinating blend of sociological perspectives intermingled with a history of the city and roller skating. How did these elements come together for you?

**Joseph:** It was easy. I spent three years doing a photo-essay on the Garden State Roller Derby team. I already had established a great working relationship with many players on the team and in the roller derby league at that time. So I knew the players, and I was apart of the derby scene when derby was new to the Newark. And being at the rink for so long, you get to know people really well, therefore it was easy to meet people.

**Nigrin:** Your film also focuses on a number of roller rink regulars. Tell us a bit about these folks and how you decided to profile some of these individuals?

**Joseph:** Since I knew many of the players and developed a trusting relationship with many of them, and knew them personally, I had access to several people. We interviewed several players, and finally narrowed it down to Bone Saw. She was receptive to us, and wanted her story told. After having Bone Saw on board, we needed a second voice to carry the story of the Rink. Sarah had spent several weeks at the rink profiling other skaters at the rink and that is when she met Gralen. The Rink was his second home, like Bone Saw "The Rink" was his sacred space too. Sarah and I were surprised by how similar their personal stories were, and how important Newark, and the Branch Brook Park roller skating rink is to them.



## **Sarah Friedland Talks About her Vibrant New Documentary RINK at Brooklyn Film Festival**



New York filmmaker Sarah Friedland took a trip across the Hudson to make a documentary about the Branch Brook Park Roller Rink, located in Newark, New Jersey, one of the few remaining urban rinks of its kind. Now, one might think how interesting can a documentary about a roller rink be, but Sarah digs way deep, and after almost five years of hard work, she emerged with "RINK" a film that tells more than a story about a roller rink, but a space transformed and its symbolic representation to those who use it. In the documentary "RINK," two main characters emerge: Bonesaw, a tough talking, tattooed member of the Garden State Roller Derby Team; and Graylen, a deeply spiritual, Gospel Night skater. On the surface these two characters are different, both ideologically and in their social and racial backgrounds. However, the film reveals a shared past of violence and drug abuse from which the rink provides a much needed refuge.

We caught up with director Sarah Friedland at the [2013 Brooklyn Film Festival](#) where she is screening RINK, to learn more about the film, and find out how did a New Yorker end up making a documentary about a roller rink in Newark, New Jersey.

**VIMOOZ:** First, congratulations on RINK being an official selection in the 2013 Brooklyn Film Festival ... this is the NY premiere – are you ready for the NY audience?

**Sarah Friedland:** I am extremely excited to be part of BFF. My first feature, "Thing With No Name", premiered at BFF in 2009 and we had great festival experience then. The Rink is a film about Newark but New York City is my home, so I am thrilled to show it to the NYC audience.



**VIMOOZ:** How was the World Premiere screening at the NJ International Film Festival?

**Friedland:** The NJIFF screening went very well. We had a very receptive and large audience of folks from all over New Jersey. It was great to be a part of a New Jersey festival and share the film with Newarkers and folks from the rink.

**VIMOOZ:** Tell us about RINK – the story?

**Friedland:** The film is about Branch Brook Park Roller Rink in Newark New Jersey- one of the last remaining roller rinks in the tri-state area. We use the rink as a microcosm for the city of Newark and, in doing so, the film dips into many

facets of Newark's rich history, including: urban renewal, the rebellion of 1967, and the current gentrification of downtown Newark. We follow two main characters: Bonesaw, a tough talking, tattooed member of the Garden State Roller Derby Team; and Gralen, a deeply spiritual, Gospel Night skater. These two folks appear very different on the outside but have a shared past of violence and drug abuse from which the rink provides a refuge. In many ways, their stories parallel that of Newark, which is often labeled as violent and crime ridden, while all of its good parts are ignored. The film also sees the rink as an endangered space of urban recreation. There used to be hundreds of roller rinks in the tri-state area, now there is one. So Branch Brook is a very important place, not just for Newark, but for the entire skating community, which has recently lost many key rinks to real-estate speculation and gentrification.

**VIMOOZ:** Where are you from?

**Friedland:** I am from Hastings-on-Hudson New York, but I have lived in New York City for the last fifteen years. When I was little growing up in Hastings, we used to skate in the basement of the high school. It was something I looked forward to every week. Most people seem to have some connection to skating from there childhood, even if they don't skate anymore, and that is one of the great things about this film- we enter it from a point of nostalgia.

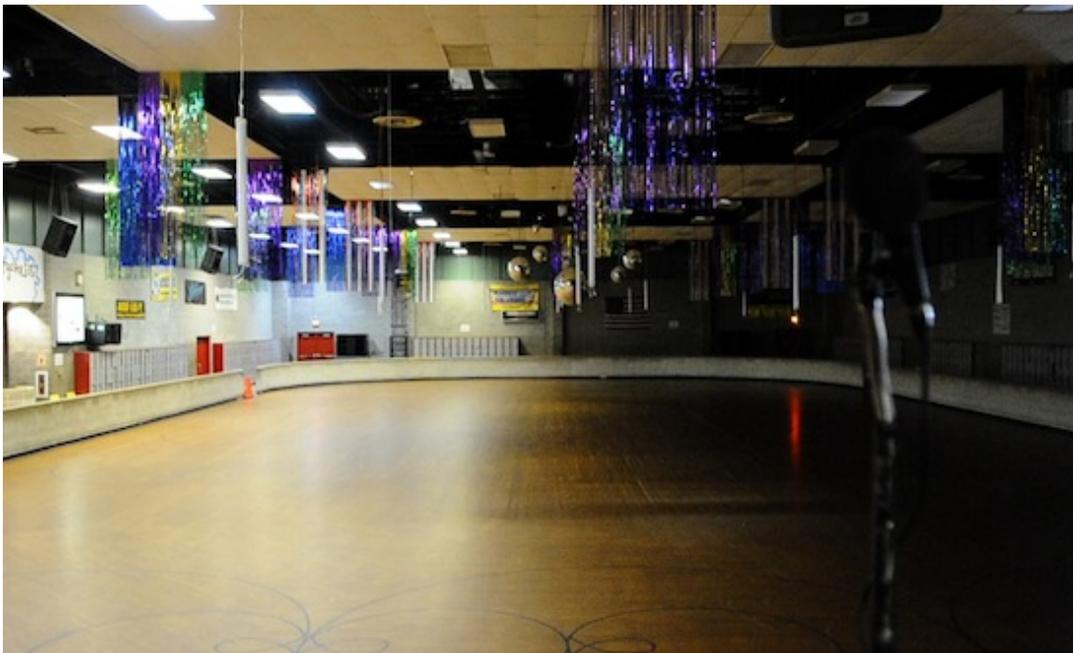


**VIMOOZ:** How did you find out about the rink in New jersey?

**Friedland:** My co-producer, Ryan Joseph, was living in Newark at the time and was the staff photographer for the Garden State Roller Derby team who practice at the rink. We originally thought that we would make a film about them, but when we spent time in the rink, it became clear that the space itself was so interesting and that the film should reflect Branch Brook as a whole.

**VIMOOZ:** How long did it take to shoot the documentary?

**Friedland:** We shot for about three and a half years and edited for a year and a half. It took us so long because we made a big effort to get to know the people we were following and make sure everyone was comfortable before starting to shoot. It's very important to both Ryan and I that we have a certain level of intimacy with the folks in the film before pulling out the camera. Ryan knew Bonesaw from working with the derby girls but I met Gralen after doing a series of pre-interviews with other Gospel Night skaters. So that was a new relationship. He and his family were really gracious with their time and let us into their lives openly. It was also a complicated film to put together because it was risky to weave Newark in as a character. We started editing and then realized we needed to shoot more to flesh out a few things, so it was a back and forth.



**VIMOOZ:** What's up next for RINK?

**Friedland:** We received a small grant from my union, I am an Assistant Adjunct Professor at John Jay College, to take the film on tour to roller rinks around the country. I am currently contacting rinks and planning where to take the film. We will actually be showing the film inside the roller rinks to create a more

visceral response between the viewer and the space. If anyone out there knows any rinks that might be interested, send them my way!

**VIMOOZ:** What's up next for you?

**Friedland:** This year I co-founded Perinspire, a production company with my long term film partner Esy Casey. We are finishing a film called Jeepney, which she directed and I am co-producing. The film is about the most popular form of transportation in the Philippines beautiful, blinged out buses called Jeepneys. These fascinating handmade and designed vehicles have their origins in US military jeeps that were left in the Philippines after World War II. The film speaks about Filipino history and culture through the Jeepney. It will come out sometime this fall. I have also been working as an editor on two feature docs: tentatively titled "Camp Kinderland" by Katie Halper, which is about a political, Jewish summer camp; and "Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger" by Sam Feder, which is about the amazing gender theorist and performance artist Kate Bornstein. Both of those films are slated to come out this year. After that, I will take a nap.



## **NJ Film Fest is on a roll**

**Newark-based documentary 'The Rink' is among international entries at Rutgers University series**

'The Rink,' premiering Friday, May 31 at Voorhees Hall in New Brunswick, is part of the New Jersey International Film Festival.

By Alex Biese  
3:06 PM, May 30, 2013

Sometimes, a building isn't just a building. Sometimes, a building can help tell the story of a whole city.

Such is the case with the Branch Brook Park Roller Rink, located on Seventh and Clifton Avenues in Newark, and the subject of the new documentary "The Rink."

The film will have its premiere on Friday, May 31 at Voorhees Hall in New Brunswick as part of the New Jersey International Film Festival.

"The film uses the rink as a microcosm for Newark and the history of Newark but also for American cities in general, and it kind of uses it as a device and also just through the place, the location, to talk about various points in Newark's history, including urban renewal and the rebellion of 1967 and contemporary downtown gentrification," said "The Rink" director Sarah Friedland.

"The space lends itself to talking about these things because it's home to so many different kinds of people who come from different cultures and communities within Newark and the surrounding neighborhoods, so you can jump off from the characters into talking about the city and talking about the country."

From the various subcultures that frequent Branch Brook, the film's two main characters emerge: a devout Gospel Night skater named Graylen and Bonesaw a hard-as-nails member of the Garden State Rollergirls roller derby team, which practices at the facility.

"When we talk about the gospel skaters, who are this community who use skating as a form of praise and worship, that leads us into this interesting thing that happens on one particular night, which is that the gospel skaters have their evening and then the roller derby girls come in," said Friedland.

"There's this transition in cultures because the gospel skaters are predominantly African-American and the roller derby girls are predominantly white and it's kind of a way of looking at American cities in general, which tend to be pretty segregated.

"And this is a phenomenon that happens all over the place, it's not unique to this roller rink, so it's a way of speaking about those things."