



Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday February 21st, 2025

Black Box Diaries (15)

Dir: **Itō Shiori**

With: **Itō Shiori**

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: *Black Box Diaries* follows director and journalist Itō Shiori's courageous investigation of her own sexual assault in an improbable attempt to prosecute her high-profile offender. Unfolding like a thriller and combining secret investigative recordings, vérité shooting and emotional first-person video, Shiori's quest becomes a landmark case in Japan, exposing the country's desperately outdated judicial and societal systems.

In 2015, Itō Shiori was raped by Yamaguchi Noriyuki, a prominent TV broadcaster with connections to Abe Shinzō, former Prime Minister of Japan. CCTV footage included in the first five minutes of *Black Box Diaries* clearly shows Noriyuki hauling her dead weight from a taxi and then half dragging her across the hotel foyer. It's impossible to watch this footage and believe that Itō was in any state to consent to sex. But Japan's then 110-year-old rape laws turned around not questions of consent, but evidence of physical violence. Police investigators told Itō that the crime was impossible to investigate or prosecute since it occurred within a "black box": a space devoid of witnesses and invisible to the public eye.

Directed by Itō herself, *Black Box Diaries* follows her attempts to make her rape visible - first through the press, then through the book from which the film draws its name - while gathering evidence for a civil trial. A deeply personal film, in which the journalist becomes her own subject, it consists mainly of covert voice recordings and intimate phone videos filmed by friends.

Occasionally, Itō films herself, her short addresses to camera uncannily like Instagram reels. For the most part a very composed presence, at times she tips into giddy girlishness- yelping along to "I Will Survive" - at others into mute despair.

The film invites reflection on rape laws, misogyny and institutional corruption, but most of all on what is at stake when victims of sexual violence seek redress through the media. Like Chanel Miller, who wrote a memoir about being sexually assaulted by the college swimmer Brock Turner, Itō wants the world to know her name. With depressing inevitability, death threats swarm on social media: she is forced to go into hiding. Even those galvanized by Itō's bravery seem either morbidly fascinated by her ordeal or dazzled by her celebrity. A political party tries to co-opt her as a spokeswoman. The investigating officer presenting as an ally drunkenly invites her on a date. A group of mostly well-meaning



grandmothers refer to Ito by the horrifying title of "the girl who was raped".

It's a stark reminder of the cost to individuals who risk their safety and reputation in the name of social progress. While the legal victories of figures such as Itō, Miller, and Gretchen Carlson (whose story was fictionalized in 2019's *Bombshell*) are worthy of celebration, "Congratulations" leaves a nasty taste in the mouth when spoken to a woman who will suffer her whole life with PTSD. As Itō puts it, the courtroom can offer closure but "winning doesn't mean what happened doesn't go away".

Credits

Director	Itō Shiori
Screenplay	Itō Shiori
Producers	Eric Nyari, Hanna Aqvilin, Itō Shiori
Camera	Hanna Aqvillin, Yuta Okamura, Itō Shiori, Keke Shiratama, Yuichiro Otsuk
Editing	Ema Ryan Yamazaki
Music	Mark Degli Antoni
	Japan 2023. 102m

Another View

Black Box Diaries is ostensibly an on-the-hoof, shot-by-phone film of the moment in a young woman's life when she decides to name her rapist – and all the moments which follow, in which she comes perilously close to losing that life completely. Itō Shiori, an aspiring journalist who brought #MeToo to Japan and paid the price, asks us to follow her journey in what feels like real time.

At the time of Itō's assault in 2015, the age of consent in Japan was 13 – yet non-consent was not grounds for rape. These archaic rules, which only changed last year, meant her assailant could insist he never broke the law. Over five long years, from the age of 27 to 33, Ito went public and pursued her attacker, the powerful journalist Yamaguchi Noriyuki; the closest reporter to Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo and the author of his biography. She only named him, and herself,

after his arrest at Narita Airport was suddenly, mysteriously, abandoned.

With its appealing and very-now mix of forensic journalism with the high-and-lows of instant iPhone reactions and emotions, *Black Box Diaries* is a natural festival film as well as being a pulverising illustration of truth and its consequences. Premiering in Sundance's World Cinema Documentary section, it is a sister film to that festival's *On The Record* (2020), which highlighted abuses in the hip-hop industry through the experience of former executive Drew Dixon, who also named her abuser (as Russell Simmons). That got as cautious a welcome as Itō Shiori did in Japan back in 2017, when she started her public pursuit, but Dixon survived Oprah Winfrey dropping her executive producer credit to see her documentary become a landmark film. *Black Box Diaries* will undoubtedly do the same.

Itō's experience is, at least, in the past. The case has closed and she has written her book, *Black Box*. Her film is the final statement and relates the story from start to finish. We see the very beginning, in shaky black-and-white streetcam footage of her being pulled out of a taxi, unable to stand, and pulled across a hotel lobby. A taxi driver testifies she was insensible, yet insistent she didn't want to go to Yamaguchi's hotel.

The word 'brave' is a much bandied-about term for women who go public like Ito – in Japan, she stood alone, and was pilloried as a result. *Black Box Diaries* shows the personal consequences of her need to fight for justice, making the extent of her bravery something that can only really be discussed in hindsight. She doesn't know, after all, when she switches the camera on herself, what will happen next. At one point, she writes letters saying that if she is found dead, it will not be through suicide but some unspecified dark deed by Government agencies. Later, she does attempt suicide, about as low as a hostile Japanese public can drag her, with the events of that night still raging through her mind.

Black Box Diaries is an unusual film and not just because it comes from Japan, perceived as a more 'traditional' society. There are elements which are unexpected. Ito doesn't bother to burnish her credentials, her various internships at prestigious journalistic outlets, her placements in America, or even her decidedly lower middle-class upbringing. She doesn't re-stage the night: she can't remember it, having woken up in the bedroom with Yamaguchi on top of her. She starts the camera on a single young woman taking on the world: the police have dropped her case and they are in the wrong. Her family doesn't want her to do this but there's a naivety, reflected in some brilliant editing of very raw footage by Ema Ryan Yamakazi, even a relief in going public. There: her secret is out. What can be worse?

The film is at its most fascinating in the details that Yamakazi sees in the edit. Itō's modern gumption versus her deference as a Japanese woman, extreme to outsiders. Her bravado, her lack of understanding, which comes so painfully, that there is no righting this wrong. Would she do it all again? It's not even a question for her to answer: her path was her path, and *Black Box Diaries* shows her doggedly following it.

Clip-able and extract-able and showable across all media formats, *Black Box Diaries* is one of the discoveries of this year's Sundance film festival: it seems to encapsulate a generation's dreams and disappointments, torments and

triumphs. Even if it takes place on the other side of the world, it's still a story we all know when we see it.

Fionnuala Hannigan: Screen International

Society note: Black Box Diaries has been nominated as Best Documentary for both this year's BAFATAs and Oscars.

**Our next screening: Friday March 7th 2025. 7.30pm
Crossing (Georgia 2024 106m cert 15)**

Crossing is the fourth feature of Swedish-Georgian director Levan Akin, whose *And Then We Danced* (2019), faced a harsh conservative backlash in Georgia because of its storyline of romance between two men in a traditional dance ensemble.

The focus here is on Lia, a retired history teacher who travels to Istanbul to search for Tekla, her estranged trans niece. She is accompanied by restless teen Achi, whose mother went to work in the Turkish capital and never returned. Their lives change after they meet Evrim, a trans rights lawyer.

This emotionally rich, deeply humane and politically resonant film gives timely visibility to an exodus of LGBTQ+ Georgians who feel there is no safe future for them in their home country.