

SHOWEST 2004

BOXOFFICE®

THE BUSINESS MAGAZINE OF THE GLOBAL MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY

APRIL 2004, \$4.95

SUNDANCE

WORD WARS ★★★1/2

Starring Joe Edley, Matt Graham, Marlon Hill and "G.I." Joel Sherman. Directed by Eric Chalkin and Julian Petrillo. Produced by Eric Chaikin. A 7th Art release. Documentary. Not yet rated. Running time: 77 min.

Like "Spellbound" last year, "Word Wars" is poised to emerge as the word-smith exposé of 2004. The children who aspired to win the National Spelling Bee in the previous documentary could very well grow up into the adults who here spend nine months preparing for the U.S. National Scrabble tournament held in San Diego for a \$25,000 prize. In both films, these characters are objects of marvel, partly for their eccentric personalities, partly for their other-word-ly skill.

There's Joe Edley, the game's only three-time national champion, who practices a strict Tai Chi regimen in order to hone his biorhythms for peak performance. He has been called "Darth Vader" by his opponents due to his focus on "mind control." There's Matt Graham, a stand-up comic who inhales natural brain-enhancement pills to better his game. There's Marlon Hill, whose love-hate relationship with the English language, which he calls a "greedy language," fuels his political resolve to speak and write in Ebonics though he exhibits an uncanny knowledge of the standard English dictionary. And there's Joel Sherman, dubbed "G.I." for the gastrointestinal reflux disease that has him guzzling gallons of Maalox.

There's an attempt here to illustrate visually how these players' minds perhaps work differently from the average Joe's. Animated sequences of floating letters spell out all the possible anagrams from a series of letters. It's akin to playing Solitaire or Minesweeper or MahJong on the computer to the point where playing cards and tiles appear even when one's eyes are closed.

But, with subjects like these, directors Julian Petrillo and Eric Chalkin, himself a published expert in "recreational linguistics" (read: "word play") and an expert tournament player, need to do little more than point the camera and record the absurdities that unfold: Graham and Sherman get together to play for fun in a 50-game marathon. Edley shows up at Washington Square Park, a destination renowned for the level of amateur play. Regulars delight in recounting how the national champ—"under duress," he says, due to the outdoor venues noise and heat levels—was unable to recognize a "bingo," or a word play that uses all seven letters on the rack for 50 bonus points. A Baltimore elementary school teacher hears word that there's a nationally ranked player in her neighborhood and invites him to visit her classroom. The expert is Hill, a frequent pot smoker, who tells the children, yes, he does practice good sportsmanship, at which point the film cuts to a montage of his decidedly non-sportsmanlike behavior.

Like "Spellbound" before it, "Word Wars" proves to be a priceless slice of Americana.—*Annlee Ellingson*