

## ACT OF GOD

Director: Jennifer Baichwal

With: James O'Reilly, Paul Auster, Fred Frith 75 minutes Canada NR

An opening night presentation at the 2009 Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Act of God is the latest remarkable documentary by Jennifer Baichwal, who has achieved enormous success with her previous films, including 1998's Let It Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles and more recently, Manufactured Landscapes, which won numerous awards, including the 2007 Genie for best documentary. At the heart of both these previous films is an intense examination of the subject material – in the first, eccentric writer Paul Bowles, and in the second, the socially and aesthetically engaging photography of Edward Burtynsky – and Baichwal's new work is no exception. The filmmaker has now turned her scrupulous gaze to lightning, that mysterious phenomenon which has a scientific basis but lends itself so easily to meta-physical questions. She masterfully infuses a human touch to the story of lightning by exploring the topic through some fascinating, artistically inclined people affected by its power.

“I can't accept that it happened for a reason, nor can I really accept that there is no reason. The only way to carry on is to be humble, and a little bit in awe of these things you can't really understand,” says James O'Reilly, interviewed for the film. Baichwal also talks to Paul Auster, a writer whose brush with lightning as a teenager has profoundly affected him (his friend died in the accident). Fred Frith, a musician, allows himself to undergo testing: his brain is scanned both as he performs his typical improvisational work and as he performs from memory, and the testing shows a remarkable difference between the two – do we learn from this that accidents, or random occurrences, are in fact fruitful new beginnings?

Act of God examines these big questions, which ultimately revolve around our deep-seated desire to understand the world as either a machination of fate or product of chance. Poetry meets science and true wonderment in Baichwal's latest cinematic achievement.