



STORIES WE TELL is the April, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

Canada 2012 109 minutes color and black-and-white live action feature documentary? Roadside Attractions / The National Film Board of Canada
Producers: Anita Lee and Sonia Hosko

17 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible ****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points

- 2 Direction: Sarah Polley*
- 2 Editing: Michael Munn
- 1 Cinematography: Iris Ng
- 1 Lighting: Hugh McJanet and Kendall McColl
- 2 Written by: Sarah Polley except Michael Polley's narration written by Michael Polley
- 2 Music: Fats Waller, Frederic Chopin Arranger: Jonathan Goldsmith
- 1 Production Designer: Lea Carlson
- 2 Sound: Dave Rose* (Supervising Sound Editor, Sound Recording and Sound Effects) and Sound Recordist Sanjay Mehta*
- 2 Interviewees: Sarah Polley, Michael Polley, Geoffrey Bowes, Harry Gulkin, Cathy Gulkin, Robert MacMillan, Joanna Polley, Mark Polley, John Buchan, Susy Buchan, Marie Murphy, Anne Tait, Deirdre Bowen, Victoria Mitchell, Mort Ransen, Pixie Bigelow, Claire Walker
- 2 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Rebecca Jenkins (Diane Polley, Sarah's mother), Lani Billard (Suzi Buchan), Sarah Polley (Sarah Polley), Peter Evans (Michael Polley), Jeanie Calleja (Victoria Marshall), Alex Hatz (Harry Gulkin), Allie MacDonald (Joanna Polley), Seamus Morrison (Mark Polley), Christine Horne (Anne Tait), Justin Goodhand (John Buchan), Andrew Church (Geoff Bower), Dave Kiner (Wayne Robson), Wayne Curnew (Garbage Collector), Kristen Corvers (Deirdre Bowen), Jef Mallory (Tom Butler), Tracy Ferencz (Aunt Sheila), Eric Hansen (j) (Mark Polley at age 11), Kaylin Griffin (j) (Joanna Polley at age 8), Mairtin O'Carrigan (1967 Director), Thomas Hauff (Actor / Caretaker)

Complex, insightful, enigmatic, *STORIES WE TELL* purports to communicate a story leading to revelation of the identity of filmmaker Sarah Polley's biological father. First, it must be assumed this information was carefully guarded for years, not only from Sarah, but also from the father who raised her. Considering the leaky vessel character of those privy to such news, this seems most unlikely. Supposedly, early death by cancer of one of the principals, Sarah's mother Diane, loosened previously tied tongues.

What kind of family would make a running joke of a child's parentage? And what kind of person would allow natural children to remain in the guardianship of an abusive stepparent? These are questions the film raises and elects not to answer. But viewers will draw their own conclusions.

According to confusing tales recounted during family interviews, Diane Polley's first marriage resulted in two children and an impasse between the spouses. It appears infidelity was a prominent issue in application for divorce and subsequent custody arrangements. John and Suzy, two children of Diane by her initial husband, were ordered to remain with their father, a most unusual determination for the time. Diane rebounded to marry acting partner Michael Polley, by whom she conceived two additional children, Mark and Joanna. As time passes, Diane tires of suspension from acting. She asks her spouse for permission to take a role in an upcoming play. He grants that wish, then seems to have second thoughts during the play's run. Did absence make the heart grow fonder? Or did Michael suspect a potential replay of their own prior romance? The film doesn't tip its hand.

At any rate, Michael and Diane become more actively enamored of each other, temporarily at least. A few months later, Diane receives word she is pregnant. Apparently, paternity of the fetus is doubtful and her relatively advanced age for maternity impels consideration of abortion. It seems her brother, rather than Michael, intervenes. This professional doctor counsels carrying the child to term, despising foreshortening of life. Diane acts on his advice and produces a fifth child and third daughter, Sarah.

The infant's red hair acts as a flag, with Polleys wondering where such a color could come from. This leads to a rumor that one of the cast members of the fateful play mentioned above is actually Sarah's dad, gossip that could hardly be comforting to Michael. Since the Polley family saw fit later to make light of this tittletattle, it apparently had by that time reached the ears of Michael. Who himself seems to have made use of it to tease Sarah. Tease? Or torment by planting a doubt in her mind about who her father actually was? Such behavior is more than slightly eccentric. Some might even consider it to be psychological child abuse.

Once the notion of being an adoptee of sorts entered Sarah's mind, it would be likely to cause readjustments in her relationship to putative siblings, as well as to Michael. Distancing would likely occur, even if subconsciously. This might be more compelling a reason for leaving home than political activism. Michael hardly seems like a closet conservative.

While pursuing the tantalizing suggestion her true parent is an actor named Geoff Bowes, Sarah discovers another unknown in her prehistory, producer Harry Gilkin. Apparently he, too, was besotted with party animal Diane and vigorously courted her during the run of an otherwise unremarkable play.

Sarah, now eighteen years old, arranges to meet with Harry, hoping to obtain corroboration of the family rumor. Instead, Harry asserts his own claim to being her father. Is he feeding the hungry, taking advantage of obvious uncertainty in his interviewer? Or is there merit and underlying evidence for his claim?

The remainder of this film deals with investigation of Harry's declaration and its consequences. Viewers can watch it and make up their own minds.

Obviously, the theme of *STORIES WE TELL* is family secrets, how they are cocooned, and nasty results from delayed revelations of personal truths. The question of personal identity, as opposed to social masking, is also examined.

Told in the form of a melodramatic mystery, devoid of hysterics but rather self-consciously primitive in deployment of home movies, blurry video footage, and staged interviews, *STORIES WE TELL* mixes fact and fiction, documentary and artifice to propose the impossibility of ever completely coming clean about past behaviors and situations. Since professional actors are used to provide narratives, there's a wall of art standing between verisimilitude and reality. Every storyteller slants details to fit preconceived notions of privacy, ethical behavior, and advancement of personal agenda. Some interviewees may elect to outright prevaricate. Others might dissemble to protect themselves, a deceased party, or family honor. Since no individual can plumb all motives of another, any testimony is fraught with potential errors, misjudgments and undetected biases.

Is the opening of old wounds worth the pain and trouble trailing in its wake? How important is personal closure? What are its consequences on other concerned parties, both short-term and lasting?

From a technical standpoint, Sarah's film asks probing questions of universal concern. It's well-written, both by the film director herself and by Michael Polley. The personalities displayed are immersing. Wintry Canadian settings look curiously exotic to a Southerner (in this case, anyone residing in the United States). Both cinematography and lighting are adequate. Though the latter is certainly not clarifying. Wide-ranging sound recording is effective throughout, with sound effects such as pantings of winded seniors and furniture squeakings faithfully captured.

Because of its focus on adultery, and the presence of a handful of expletives, *STORIES WE TELL* is suited only to adult viewers. For them, it is most strongly recommended.

Special features of the dvd release are subtitles, a 2 ½ minute theatrical trailer, previews of three other films: *THE COVE*, *PROJECT NIM*, and *ESCAPE FIRE*, and scene selections.

STORIES WE TELL was an official selection of the Sundance, Venice, Toronto and Telluride Film Festivals. Watch it and find out why.