

Friday, November 21st 2014

## Stories We Tell (12a)

dir: Sarah Polley

featuring: Michael, John, Mark, Joanna & Susy Polley, Harry Gulkin

sponsor: Dr Roderick Ørner Ltd and Michelle Allen,  
Psychological Therapies and Consultancy Services

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Coverage of Sarah Polley's first documentary feature, *Stories We Tell* has focused on the director's discovery of her paternity, a subject of some gossip in the Canadian press since it concerns not only Polley but also leading Canadian film producer, Harry Gulkin. Yet, as Polley insists from behind the camera when her siblings challenge her about her investment in the documentary, it is not about her father(s) but about her mother.

At the centre of the film is a black and white audition reel of Diane Polley speak-singing 'Ain't Misbehavin' straight to camera. It's an adorable, irresistible performance – one that becomes more so the more we hear about her life and its resemblance to the song. Diane's trajectory matches many women in post-war North America, as women's lib was vaunted but society and legislation resisted. Married in the 1960s to a wealthy scion of Toronto society, she rebelled, falling for English actor Michael Polley, who was performing in the Canadian premiere of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. Toronto the Good, as it was known, was unprepared for such liberated behaviour: as a newspaper article shows, she lost custody of her son John and daughter Susan on moral grounds.

Michael suggests early on that Diane fell for his role in Pinter's play – an angry young rebel very different from the genial man he really was. They subsequently married, and acted together twice, the second time in *Filumena*, on which the 1964 Sophia Loren vehicle *Marriage: Italian Style* was based. A play about an independent woman that turns on a question of her children's paternity, it seems almost an overdetermined a resonance in the film as 'Ain't Misbehavin' and the title of Gulkin's Oscar-nominated 1975 feature *Lies My Father Told Me*. Further, Polley's previous films, *Away From Her* (2006) and *Take This Waltz* (2011), were preoccupied with questions of marital fidelity and the vagaries of memory, as if pre-telling this story.

Here, we see Sarah acting in *Mister Nobody*, whose protagonist narrates multiple incompatible life stories to a reporter. While on set, Polley was contacted by a reporter wanting to publish the story of her discovery before she had told Michael. The conversation this prompted led Michael to write his version of the story, which he reads as the voice-over narration to the film. The



viewer knows this because, *Stories We Tell*, uniquely, reveals its process as if we are thinking, sifting and selecting along with the film-maker. We see Michael and Sarah in the recording studio, focusing on moments when she directs him to “take back” a line that he's overplayed. Even the soundtrack – mostly populated by excerpts from *Play Me a Movie*, Abraham Lass's 1971 Smithsonian recording based on his repertoire as a neighbourhood movie pianist in the 1920s – uses knowing humour as it conjours a phantom paradigmatic film from our memories, all the while taking apart its conventional narrative of love and marriage.

The reflexivity is enhanced, but never exaggerated, by the family's involvement in theatre and film. John, Sarah's oldest sibling and Diane's assistant in her casting business, is the most camera-aware, offering a waspish, self-deprecating and transparent take on the kind of reflexivity that characterises the early films of Atom Egoyan, one of Polley's key influences. It has to be a knowing gesture that John has visible in the book stack behind him a Penguin Classics copy of *Anna Karenina*. Like 'Ain't Misbehavin' Tolstoy's novel offers a reflection of Diane's life, highlighting the distortions that patriarchy produces in women's stories as they are lived and then inherited.

Joanna's comment, when asked what changed for the family after the revelation of Sarah's paternity, that all three sisters got divorced, is a subtle marker of social as well as personal change. Never overt, Polley's documentary embraces both the political and cinematic heritage of feminism, particularly the seminal film *Daughter Rite* which screened internationally in 1978, the year Polley was conceived. Polley, of course, couldn't have seen it at the time but Michelle Citron's unique and influential combination of optically printed home movies, *vérité* footage revealed to be staged and poetic voice-over is deeply woven into the DNA of *Stories We Tell*.

Where Citron's 'daughter rite' was one of an adult daughter's separation from the mother, Polley's is one of reunion. The use of reconstructed footage shot on a Super 8 camera closes the film with startling 'off-camera' shots of the adult Sarah directing her mother, played by Rebecca Jenkins. Canny in their uncanniness, the two women's intimate conversation held in privacy under the dark folk song of the sound track, these impossibly moving and movingly impossible shots are the telling heart of the story.

**Synopsis:** Toronto, the present. Canadian actor and film-maker Sarah Polley interviews family and friends about their memories of her mother Diane, who died of cancer when Sarah was 11. Sarah's father Michael and her older siblings – John, Mark, Susy and Joanna – recollect family life before Sarah's birth and after Diane's death. Diane's friends and colleagues, including leading Canadian film producer Harry Gulkin, talk about her professional life as an actor and casting director, and the tensions this caused in her marriage. Diverging portraits, depicted through real and reconstructed footage of family and theatrical life in the 1960s and 70s, highlight Diane's complexity and reveal the secret she kept: an affair while acting in Montreal in 1978, before Sarah was born. What starts as a family joke about Sarah's appearance in relation to Michael's is confirmed when a chance meeting with Harry reveals that he was Diane's lover, and may be Sarah's biological father. Sarah's decision to pursue DNA testing and a relationship with Harry creates changes in her family life, and particularly her relationship with Michael, whose letter, written after she tells him about Harry, constitutes the voice-over narration of the film.

### Credits

**Writer:** Sarah Polley  
**Michael's narration:** Michael Polley  
**DoP:** Iris Ng  
**Editor:** Michael Munn  
**Sound:** Sanjay Mehta  
**Costume:** Sarah Armstrong

Canada, 2012. 108 mins

# Lincoln Film Society

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Families create their own narratives. Stories are passed on from generation to generation, and in this way the past continues to live, but it can also be obscured or distorted. Joan Didion famously wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Family arguments often come down to who "owns" the narrative, or which version is decided upon as the "true" one. Sarah Polley's fascinating documentary, "Stories We Tell," is ostensibly about her mother, Diane Polley, who died in 1990. A powerful and thoughtful film, it is also not what it at first seems, which is part of the point Polley appears to be interested in making. Can the truth ever actually be known about anything?

In speaking about "Stories We Tell," it is important to avoid revealing the surprises hidden within the film, surprises of fact and surprises of Polley's structure, because the discovery of said surprises is where the film packs its greatest and most indelible punch. The surprises do not operate as cheap "Gotcha" moments, but instead draw back veils to show levels, shades, nuances. Diane Polley comes to us in fragments, and we are forced to re-adjust our interpretation of her throughout the film as new details are revealed. At one point, one of Polley's interview subjects balks at the idea of having *everyone* tell the same story. As far as he is concerned, only two people have the "right" to tell that story, and it is the two people involved. Otherwise, he says, "you can't ever touch bottom." Inadvertently, in his criticism, he expresses Polley's whole theme.

Polley calls her interview subjects "The Storytellers," and they include her older sisters, Susy and Joanna, and her older brothers, John and Mark, and other important figures in her mother's past. Polley has said she was not interested in being an "omniscient" presence, and we can hear Polley's questions and laughter from behind the camera. Her father, Michael Polley, is an actor as well (familiar to anyone who was a fan of the Canadian TV series *Slings and Arrows*, where, incidentally, Sarah Polley had a role in the third season). "Stories We Tell" begins with Sarah setting up her father in a recording booth, to do the narration for the film, which (we find out later) he wrote. So there is already a distancing element in place. It's a film about making a film, and, as Polley tells her father, she sees the interviews as a kind of "interrogation process."

She asks each storyteller to "tell the story from the beginning until now," and as they begin, hesitantly at first, Polley supplements the story with old photographs and home movies: beautiful footage of her mother, cavorting on the beach, laughing at parties or around the pool, and, fascinatingly, singing "Ain't Misbehavin'" in what looks like an old black-and-white audition tape. Diane Polley is described by one and all as a woman who wanted to live life to the fullest. One person says that her walk was so emphatic "she made the record skip," an eloquent image. One family friend admits in an interview that she always sensed that Diane "had secrets," which turns out to be true. She was an actress, but she gave that up to have her family. The marriage to Michael was happy at first, but discontent grew. Michael was a

solitary type of guy, and Diane loved crowds and excitement.

The storytellers talk about her life, her acting, her children and her marriage, and Polley doesn't privilege one version over another. She is not interested in protecting her version (whatever it may be), or protecting her mother. She is more interested in how her family members interact with their own memories, and where they might intersect or diverge. Polley's touch here is gentle and yet insistent. At times, her siblings ask her, speaking to her behind the camera, "Well, what do *you* remember about that time?"

Sarah Polley got her start young in Canadian television, but she showed a rebellious streak early, dropping out of acting altogether as a teenager to focus on politics. Her role in Atom Egoyan's "The Sweet Hereafter" (1997) was hailed by American critics, who treated her as a newcomer (although she had been working for years in Canada by that point). Polley resisted the call of stardom, doing what interested her, and making short films through the Canadian Film Centre's prestigious director's program. Her first feature, "Away From Her," was a heartbreaking tour de force, showing Polley's breathtaking confidence as a first-time director. The film was nominated for two Academy Awards (Julie Christie as Best Actress, and Polley for her adaptation of Alice Munro's short story). Polley's second feature was 2011's "Take This Waltz" starring Michelle Williams and Luke Kirby (Kirby, like Polley, was treated as a newcomer by American critics, but he had been riveting in the first season of *Slings and Arrows* as the American movie star playing "Hamlet" in Canada).

In both of these films, and now in "Stories We Tell," Polley experiments with the expected narrative structures, pushing us to consider not just the meaning of stories but how the way we tell the story can change its impact. The interviews in "Stories We Tell" are amazingly intimate. This is a family talking to each other. Everyone still misses Diane. The loss they have suffered is incalculable. The questions Polley asks are not always easy. The answers aren't simple either.

Diane Polley was, in some respects, a trapped woman. It's a common story with a common narrative thread, familiar to us all: she wanted more out of life than just being a mother and a wife, but she was hemmed in by traditional responsibilities. But life is not that simple, and when you learn more about Diane, when you learn some of those "secrets," and one in particular, the clichéd narrative thread falls apart. Diane Polley seemed to be an extroverted fun-loving person, and she was, and yet obviously the well was deep (so deep you "can't reach bottom"). Life is messy and Diane Polley's narrative is messy. Stories told again and again have a way of neatening things up. Stories have a way of ironing out the wrinkles. Polley lets the wrinkles remain. By the end of "Stories We Tell," I am left with the feeling that there's still so much I don't know about Diane Polley. And what a fitting eulogy that is.

Sheila O'Malley, May 2013

**Our next film: Friday November 28<sup>th</sup>, 7.30pm**

**The Great Beauty (15)**

The extraordinary talent of Toni Servillo (Il Divo, Gomorrah, The Consequences of Love) is put to excellent use in Paolo Sorrentino's Oscar winning (Best Foreign Language, 2014) film about the joys and pitfalls of living the high-life as a celebrity in Rome.

Servillo plays Jep Gambardella, a journalist and writer. Since the legendary success of his one and only novel, he has been a permanent fixture in the city's literary and social circles, but when his sixty-fifth birthday coincides with a shock from the past, Jep finds himself unexpectedly taking stock of his life, turning his cutting wit on himself and his contemporaries, and looking past the extravagant nightclubs, parties, and cafés to find Rome in all its glory: a timeless landscape of absurd, exquisite beauty.