

Review: 'Wretches & Jabberers'



MARCH 20, 2011 | 04:31PM PT

"Wretches & Jabberers'" ability to mix humor and emotion is the strong suit of this upbeat, music-saturated docu.

John Anderson (<http://variety.com/author/john-anderson/>)

“Try to ignore the man behind the curtain,” cracks one of the principals in “Wretches & Jabberers,” a global road movie about a pair of autistic men and their campaign to alter attitudes about their condition. No one expects a “Wizard of Oz” joke in an [autism](http://variety.com/t/autism/) (<http://variety.com/t/autism/>) documentary, nor certainly one made poignant: The men harbor keen intelligence behind their autistic “curtain.” But the ability to mix humor and emotion is the strong suit of this upbeat, music-saturated docu, which is likely to receive the kind of edu-circuit exposure at which it seems aimed.

Aiding that cause is a partnership among AMC Theaters, distributor Area 23a and the Autism Society that will assure limited national exposure to commemorate April’s Autism Awareness Month. As subjects Tracey

Thresher and Larry Bissonnette travel from the U.S. to Sri Lanka to Japan to Finland, making friends and changing minds, it's clear that the physical manifestations of their disorder — the symptoms that have often gotten the autistic dismissed as “wretches and jabberers” to begin with — are always going to make the first impression, and they know it. Still, they soldier on in the hope that ignorance about their intelligence will eventually go the way of other autism “experiences,” such as outright fear, ostracism and madhouses. Among those they meet is Naoki Higashida, a young autistic Japanese man who has authored 10 books but is not allowed to attend his local high school.

The revelations in this film directed by Gerardine Wurzburg (an Oscar winner for the 1992 docu short “Educating Peter”) aren't about treatment breakthroughs — as they were, for instance, in “A Mother's Courage,” in which autistic kids were reached in real time through therapeutic innovation. When we meet them, Thresher and Bissonnette have made already their strides, via the mini-keyboards that enable them to communicate the thoughts they have such trouble expressing verbally.

Both men harbor distinct personalities and acute insights into their condition, and offer reflections that occasionally come close to haiku. “Mankind expresses itself finely in variety,” says Thresher, in response to the question of why autism exists at all. A reporter in Sri Lanka, asking what autism is like, is told that what they suffer is “not abnormality of brain as much as abnormality of experience” — which is, quite frankly, something a lot of auds will have difficulty wrapping their heads around.

There's a quite a bit of humor in the pic, some of it casually hilarious: a bride, for instance, being photographed in the lobby of a Sri Lankan hotel as Thresher and Bissonnette amble by, causing her eyes to widen dramatically. Bissonnette, we learn to our amusement, has a “long history of low barefoot tolerance,” which is why he reacted, seemingly hysterically, when asked to remove his shoes to enter a Buddhist temple. He wasn't hysterical, though; the uncontrolled reactions of the men to various stimuli

are often misinterpreted or confusing. What “Wretches & Jabberers” makes crystal-clear is the quality of the men’s minds, and how badly they’ve been betrayed by their bodies.

Pic is nicely photographed by d.p. Gary Griffin, but the music by J. Ralph — abetted by the likes of Judy Collins, Scarlett Johansson, Norah Jones and [Stephen Stills \(http://variety.com/t/stephen-stills/\)](http://variety.com/t/stephen-stills/) — is overly triumphant and ultimately oppressive.

Wretches & Jabberers

Docu

Production

An Area23a release and presentation of a State of the Art production. Produced by Douglas Biklen, Gerardine Wurzburg. Directed by Gerardine Wurzburg.

Crew

Camera (color), Gary Griffin; editor, Barbara Ballow; music, J. Ralph; sound, Bob Silverthorne, Ron Fritts; line producer, Neetu Chopra; associate producers, Dan Curl, Denise Nakamizu. Reviewed on DVD, New York, March 18, 2011. (In Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival.) Running time: 94 MIN.

With

Tracy Thresher, Larry Bissonnette, Naoki Higashida, Pascal Cheng, Harvey Lavoy.

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