



WRETCHES & JABBERERS

A FILM BY GERARDINE WURZBURG
wretchesandjabberers.org

An eye-opening and most entertaining doc about a group of autistic people who challenge old misconceptions about the disability

By Kirt Honeycutt, **Hollywood Reporter**
March 31, 2011

Wretches & Jabberers: Film Review

The Bottom Line

An eye-opening and most entertaining doc about a group of autistic people who challenge old misconceptions about the disability

Director

Gerardine Wurzburg

Opens

April 1 New York, April 15 Los Angeles (Area 23a)

A documentary about autism that's nearly perfect in doing what an advocacy doc should do: show rather than tell, entertain rather than preach.

Gerardine Wurzburg's *Wretches & Jabberers* may be the best film you'll see on a subject you probably want to avoid — although you'd be wrong about that. Yes, it's a documentary about autism but it's also nearly perfect in doing what an advocacy doc should do: show rather than tell, entertain rather than preach. If this is your first exposure to the world of autism, it will be an eye opener.

Distributor Area 23a is partnering with the Autism Society to theatrically release the film in AMC Theatres in April to commemorate National Autism Awareness Month. However, the doc needs to find its way into people homes as well where it will continue to spread



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awareness about the misconceptions regarding this disability.

For seemingly forever, an autistic person was regarded as mentally retarded. Unable to speak and often acting out strange physical impulses, the autistic were denied basic education and often swept away into mental health facilities or adult disability centers. Then a few of the afflicted, such as the protagonists in this film, discovered they could communicate via typing. With vocal mechanisms attached to special laptops, they began articulating smart, grammatically correct, sometimes even poetic sentences that expressed complex thoughts and feelings.

The “beast” trapped within his autistic persona was suddenly free is how **Larry Bissonette**, 52, describes his introduction to typing.

Bissonette and **Tracy Thresher**, 42, are activists, men with autism determined to change global attitudes about the disability. And when you consider what determination it took to learn to type and communicate with an indifferent world, you cannot find more determined activists than these.

Wurzburg’s film follows these two on trips to Sri Lanka, Japan and Finland to attend conferences and meet fellow autistics who also can communicate via typing. One youth in Japan has even written books. Meanwhile Larry’s paintings hang in galleries around the world. Some mental retardation!

Taking the men out of their Vermont homes serves to make this a highly entertaining travelogue to foreign climes as well for the viewer. It’s funny too how many meetings wind up over various exotic meals, almost enough to qualify the film for a slot on the Food Network. It’s also fascinating to watch the translations from typing into other languages and then back again as Larry and Tracy communicate and learn with people like themselves but from different cultures.

A conversation with a Buddhist monk in Tokyo gives Larry a stronger sense of patience and purpose. A young Finnish woman explains her goal is to live a normal life. Together these autistic people appear before large audiences to challenge old views of autism,



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views that often are more regressive outside the U.S.

The editing is very good throughout in shortening the exchanges conducted through long hunt-and-peck typing and sometimes translations as well. The conversations flow well and a viewer is frequently startled at the soundness of the reasoning and the intensity of the feelings expressed.

No one holds back throwing difficult questions to these men and their new foreign friends. With the help of extremely patient assistants who accompany them, they answer with long, thoughtful replies that often contain a touch of poetry.

As Larry says, their new friends are “very like us in their penchant for language as a loud spear for bursting bubbles of backwards thinking about people who don’t get to speak normally.”

And that is precisely what *Wretches & Jabberers* does as well. The film is one very loud spear.

Opens: April 1 New York, April 15 Los Angeles (Area 23a) State of the Art Inc. Director: Gerardine Wurzburg Producers: Douglas Biklen, Gerardine Wurzburg Executive producer: John P. Hussman Director of photography: Gary Griffin Music: J. Ralph Editor: Barbara Bellow Unrated, 94 minutes