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An Autism Documentary Aims to Go Beyond 'Rain Man'

ByGarin Pirnia



Douglas Biklen

Image from "Wretches and Jabberers: And Stories from the Road."

Thirty years ago, doctors constantly misdiagnosed autistic children, which resulted in autistics like Vermont natives Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonette being institutionalized and shunned from society. A couple of years ago, the friends embarked on an international mission to educate the world on autism and to prove just because they can't communicate fully it doesn't mean they aren't intelligent.

In "Wretches and Jabberers: And Stories from the Road," Academy Award-winning documentarian Gerardine Wurzburg follows the "dynamic duo" to Sri Lanka, Japan and Finland where the guys attend conferences and meet other adults and teenagers who are affected yet not hampered by their disability. The film is an ingenious documentary about real autistics, not actors portraying a "Rain Man"-esque character (it also has [an excellent soundtrack](#)). AMC Theatres teamed up with the Autism Society to host special screenings of the film in 40 markets throughout April (National Autism Awareness Month) with more screenings scheduled at universities, film festivals and conferences in May and June.

Speakeasy caught up with the Washington D.C.-based Wurzburg to talk about the film.

The Wall Street Journal: Tell me how you got involved in the project.

There's a number of films on disabilities over the years and I grew up with someone with autism, so it's

a world I know. I was at a conference where Larry and Tracy were presenting in front of 300 people. They were doing their riffing by typing and it was very funny. And they said we really want to go bigger and we want to be like a rock band and we're going to have t-shirts and hats and have a tour, The World Intelligence Magnified Tour, but we're not going to burn our communication devices at the end like Jimi Hendrix. To tell a good story you have to have strong characters. Larry and Tracy just have tremendous vitality and they have a real vision and they have a real message they want to get out.

How were Larry and Tracy to travel with?

It's like anyone that's traveling on a trip that's 36 hours long. You have to do a little bit of planning. We planned things. I got them Bose head sets in terms of dealing with the sound and things like that. I talked with them a lot about what would make the trip easier. Window seats were important. We did reasonable planning that anyone would try and do if they were traveling in such an insane way as we were.

How did Larry and Tracy meet?

They both live in Vermont but they don't live near each other. They both met communicating through typing at some conferences. And they get along really well. As Tracy said, he really developed a great appreciation for Larry's sense of humor and his kind of political wit. And also for Larry, he knew Tracy and he knew Tracy's advocacy work, but he didn't really realize what Tracy's living situation was like. When I had them visit me at my studio to look at the rough cut, Tracy said, "I have my easy existence" but I had no idea he had this life without a permanent home.

How did they respond to the cameras constantly being on them?

They love it. But I think it really has more to do with all the relationships that we have. They trusted me. They knew that I was making a film with them and that it was going to be their voice. I think the real turning point in the process — and the moment I realized we had a pretty remarkable film — was when we were in Sri Lanka and they were at the temple. Tracy was on a real spiritual quest. He said I really want to go to Buddhist temples, I really want to meet a monk. When we went to Sri Lanka, we couldn't find a monk to meet with him, but we did go to that beautiful Buddhist temple. But Larry then had to be barefoot and Larry's very, very sensitive to touch in that way, so it was very difficult for him. We had to leave early and the whole thing got hijacked. Afterwards they said, "Gerry, we want you to film us talking about what just happened." And that temple debrief, which is what I call it, really set a tone for the whole film because it was their wanting to bring you inside and hear how they experience the world.

Why do you think not much was known about autism 30 years ago?

I think there are several things. Number one, the diagnosis of autism wasn't as prevalent. Like Larry was diagnosed with childhood schizophrenia or they were diagnosed as being mentally retarded. Therefore, they fit into this other category, this other label. It's only now that the label of autism is used more often and they've also broadened what that definition is.

What was the biggest challenge you faced in making the film?

The challenges really were to be sure that I was telling their story accurately. They really were more

logistics: traveling such distances and being in Sri Lanka when the civil war was still going on. We were in Japan when the H1N1 epidemic was happening, so we had a lot of these variables that would suddenly pop up and we had to make some adaptations. But really, people ask me about the challenges and I feel as though every time you make a film it's always a journey. There's always things that come up. That's part of making a documentary. You just got to adapt.

What's next for you?

I've got a couple of projects I'm working on but right now my efforts are really focused on Larry and Tracy and touring with the film with them and also supporting because they're getting a lot of requests now to give keynote addresses at events and trying to provide the kind of logistics and support to make that happen. It's a very unusual film. It just doesn't end with the film coming out. It just has a bigger life because they have a very big message to take to the world.

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