

Filmmaker mom sees the boy inside

Compelling story of autistic son to premiere at Vancouver film festival

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CREDIT: Photo by Arlen Redekop, The Province

Marianne Kaplan's new 'activist film,' *The Boy Inside*, seeks to educate people about having an autistic child and the toll it takes on a family. Motioning toward her cellphone as we settle in for an interview at a Kitsilano cafe, Vancouver filmmaker Marianne Kaplan says, "I'm going to have to answer the phone if it rings."

Kaplan has gotten wind of a potential confrontation between her 14-year-old son, Adam, and another student, and she's available if the high school calls. This has not been an uncommon occurrence for Kaplan's autistic son, who also stars in her latest documentary, *The Boy Inside*, which premieres at the Vancouver International Film Festival on Sept. 30 (also screens Oct. 10; ticket information at www.viff.org).

"Our house is not a peaceful place. There's always the crisis of the day," Kaplan says.

The best filmmakers have always honoured honesty. Kaplan is no different, whether exploring resistance culture in South Africa in *Songololo* or dissecting the artificial ingredients that make dinnertime dangerous in *Deconstructing Supper*. And *The Boy Inside* is an exercise in brave self-revelation -- a compelling, poignant look at the impact an autistic child has on his family.

Now Kaplan finds herself urging Adam, whose Asperger syndrome prompts him to say what he thinks, to sometimes be a little less honest, noting the time he told a White Spot patron: "Wow. You're really fat."

There are some things to be said for saying what's on your mind, no?

"There are," Kaplan says, "but it makes it hard to live in the world. He could care less what anyone thinks of him. Part of what we learn as kids is how to be dishonest."

Besides, "the truth" isn't so simple, even for filmmakers or writers who fancy themselves uncompromising. "We know there's a fine line between being able to get along in the world and selling out," she says.

There is a scene in Kaplan's film where Adam, in Chicago for a conference on autism, stands outside of Wrigley Field, which is closed, aching for a glimpse inside the ancient home of the Cubs. "Baseball is my favourite thing," he says early on in *The Boy Inside*. It was one of my favourite things during my childhood, too, so this afternoon, in the family home he shares with his mom, set-decorator father, Peter, and big sister, Sarah, we talk about batting averages and home runs. Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle. Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg. Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson. When Robinson broke baseball's anti-black colour line, Adam says, it was the most important event in the game's history.

Maybe there's something about growing up anti-apartheid in South Africa that leaves you with an acute sense that it's wrong to punish someone for who they are. From the moment Kaplan learned of her son's disability, she has never wavered in her belief that he is entitled to a place in this world.

By her early teens, Kaplan, who grew up in Cape Town, knew she would leave. "I was living in a situation that was bad and unjust." After high school, the fledgling visual artist travelled in Europe and the U.S., then came to Vancouver to study at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

"I got frustrated with painting," she says. "I was interested in social issues and film made more sense."

Kaplan worked in the American service industry as a set dresser in films such as *Roxanne* and *Cousins* and TV's *MacGyver*. She took a breather from the film industry to direct *Songololo*, a moving exploration of the black culture that thrived under apartheid repression. It won acclaim everywhere from the San Francisco Film Festival (won a Golden Gate Award) to Canada's Genie Awards (nominated for best documentary).

It was also Kaplan's first film to screen at the Vancouver International Film Festival, which is renowned for its documentary program. Festival director Alan Franey is excited about Kaplan's latest.

"There's a huge interest in this particular subject right now. It's touched many people in my own life. Marianne's done a good job at a kind of all shades of grey. Some films that are personal are a bit of a whitewash. But I thought she was trying to be as honest as possible."

Shortly after *Songololo*'s release, Sarah was born in 1991, Adam in 1992. There was no hint of autism the first couple of years, then Adam withdrew. Kaplan recalls the first time the subject was broached, by a pediatrician friend. "He said, 'Have you ever considered he might be autistic?' When he said it, I actually wanted to hit him. I had that kind of physical response. I thought, 'How dare you?'"

When Kaplan calmed down, she eventually learned Adam had a form of autism called Asperger syndrome. People with the disability have problems maintaining friendships because they can't read responses to their behaviour.

"They're talking ad nauseum about baseball, and you're rolling your eyes and they don't get that," explains Kaplan. They are also, among other things, often socially naive with no capacity for small talk and have exaggerated emotional responses (for instance, tantrums when they don't get their way). On the other hand, they have unique abilities to focus on areas of interest and are fascinated with details.

Adam wasn't too impressed upon his initial look at an early edit of *The Boy Inside*. "It was terrible at first," he tells his mom. "But you edited it. It's good enough." Kaplan answers the young movie critic: "I'm not that interested in baseball. You're not that interested in documentaries."

But he's pleased to be in it ("definitely a thrill"), though "it's hard being filmed all the time, just pressure. You got to do everything just right."

He has some good-humoured trepidation about the film-festival premiere. "I'm afraid I might get so bored I might walk out on my own screening." But overall, Adam is pleased with his first foray into movie stardom: "The only way it could get any better is if there were free gift baskets and swag." I tell him about the freebies I encountered at the Sundance Film Festival.

"Is this going to Sundance, mom?"

When Adam was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, Kaplan approached the matter with the passion of an activist filmmaker. "I was in shock and denial about it for about 10 minutes." Then she started to search for answers. "I couldn't accept there was nothing we could do."

Adam started with applied behavioural analysis therapy, in which positive behaviour, such as sitting, is rewarded. "You teach them, six days a week, three hours a day. It's a painstaking process." In the mid-1990s, people were reconsidering autism. "People with autism used to end up at Riverview. They would be warehoused," Kaplan says, adding there were some who felt Adam should be left in his withdrawn state. "I couldn't have done that. I think that would have been an incredibly irresponsible thing to do."

Autistic author Temple Grandin notes that likely autistics include everyone from Mozart to Carl Sagan. "If you got rid of all of the genes that make autism and Asperger, we'd have a very boring

world," she says in the movie. "A little bit of abnormality is needed."

Adds Kaplan: "The halls of academia are filled with people with Asperger syndrome, particularly in the areas of math and the sciences. Adam can have a productive life. He talks. He communicates. He's in the world. He goes to school."

The problem is the disability is still often stigmatized by other students and even some teachers.

"He's very bright, but he can't tell if someone's being mean. At school, he's been teased, ridiculed. He had a kid put a box cutter to his neck.

"Kindergarten was horrible, and it's been ongoing variations of that. Some schools are more open to a team approach, involving outside experts and parents."

The Boy Inside follows Adam, who's now in Grade 9, through his Grade 7 year -- in school, at home and at the Chicago conference.

Adam says so far Grade 9 is "going really good. Last year was better than any year I've had. This year's going to be better. Elementary school was rough for me -- quite a lot of bad things happened. Some so bad I don't want to discuss."

As for those who bully classmates, Adam says: "They take their anger out on somebody. But it's a dumb-ass thing to do."

"I'm not treated like other kids. I have to be a certain way every time or I get punished. It's not fair. Imagine people classify you all the time. I'm a 'disabled kid.' It's really annoying.

Unfortunately, people are jerks. I can be dishonest, arrogant, sexist. I'm not happy about being sexist."

There is also a lot endearing about Adam (and something to be said for a 14-year-old who is self-conscious about his sexism), and I tell him that pretty much all high-school students, even the "cool" ones, have insecurities and fears and think they're weird a good portion of the time.

"I don't agree," he says. "A lot of people are cocky."

He's also considering a future beyond high school, involving sports broadcasting. "That, or own a collectors' shop," he says. And there is his mom. "I love her. She's always there for me, always supporting me, on my side. Even though she hates doing some things, she does them for me. She's my favourite person in the world. And [family friend] George Cromartie and my dad and my sister."

Melanie Walker, who has a bit part in *The Boy Inside*, has been Adam's provincially-funded behaviour consultant since early 2005. She spoke to Adam's class to explain his disability and encourage empathy.

"The kids were completely mystified by him and how he presents himself," she says.

The second time she met with his classmates, Adam asked to be present. "And he joined in. It was so profound. I was so moved by him that I told him 'You're the most courageous person I know.'

"Autism is so ceaseless in its demands of the entire family. It almost requires a family to give up all other aspects of their life. It's gruelling. Ultimately, between maturing and being raised with great values, Adam has the potential to become a successful young man. His life will continue to be fraught with challenges." The current interest in autism made *The Boy Inside* the easiest bit of film fundraising Kaplan has experienced, with supporters including CBC Newsworld and Telefilm.

At first glance, *The Boy Inside* might seem a transition from activist filmmaking to self-concerned filmmaking. But Kaplan says: "This was an activist film, too. I wanted to give Adam a voice and I thought there would be value in showing what a family goes through in this situation. I don't think people -- I don't think schools -- get that."

As for the phone call Kaplan was waiting for when we started this interview, it never came and the matter at hand failed to explode.

"He's definitely doing better. If we can get through the teenage years."

For more info on the film, visit www.theboyinside.com.

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