

Actual Pictures Presents

Stuff

A film by
Lawrence Johnson

82 minutes, HDcam, digi-betacam, 4:3 Pillar boxed

When my dad died, I got his STUFF.

MEDIA KIT

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Stuff

SUMMARY

Short: Two men discover their fathers through the stuff they left behind.

Medium:

STUFF relates the personal odyssey of a Portland, Oregon filmmaker through a crisis of identity fueled by his father's death, and the process of sorting and distributing the garage-sized storage unit full of the stuff his father left behind. The film also follows the filmmaker's longtime friend, a carpenter, who in coming to terms with his own father's death, drives to a small farm town in Iowa to bury his father's ashes. Part road movie, part meditation, **STUFF** is an intimate and unflinching examination of the relationship of parents and their grown-up children. Through still photography, live-action footage, home movies and animation, **STUFF** explores psychic terrain that is highly relevant today as baby-boomers enter their sixties and are confronted with the deaths of their parents and their own mortality.

Long:

How does a grown man deal with his father's death? How does he resolve unresolved issues after his father is gone? **STUFF** is a feature length personal documentary about the death of the filmmaker's father and the garage-sized storage unit full of the stuff he left behind. The film also follows the story of a carpenter named Phil who, in coming to terms with the anger and guilt he feels toward his deceased father, travels to Iowa to bury his ashes in his father's hometown cemetery. These stories are told in parallel, along with the scenes of the filmmaker's father's death, and explorations of both father's lives, each descended from lines of ego-laden, narcissistic men. Phil and the filmmaker attempt to connect with their fathers through different ritualized acts. Phil undertakes a journey across the country -- a kind of pilgrimage to his father's hometown -- and enacts the ritual of returning his father's remains to the earth next to his mother's grave. This brings a sense of completion to his grief. The filmmaker connects with his father through his stuff, his home movies, pictures, books and tools. He moves the stuff into a storage unit, then moves it again. The stuff becomes a burden. His life after his dad's death seems to have "come to the edge of something." Memories and dreams are illustrated through ink-drawn animation. He gets no help from his mother, who, suffering from Alzheimers, is locked in a continual present. He tries to sell some of the stuff, and it starts to get mixed up with his own stuff as his life and marriage start to disintegrate. Soon, the film itself becomes a means to find the filmmaker's father and himself, as he integrates the ideas of the film into his consciousness. The act of making the film liberates the filmmaker to look at himself and his relationships with fresh eyes, even as he is forced to live in his van for months. **STUFF** explores psychic terrain that is extremely relevant today as baby-boomers enter their late fifties and sixties and are confronted with not only the deaths of their parents, but their own old age. For the audience, these thought-provoking stories will catalyze similar self-analysis.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT *STUFF*

There is a vogue of late involving filmmakers who use themselves as subjects. These films often don't make the necessary, transcendent leap to be about something beyond the artist. I'm happy to say that Larry Johnson's wonderful new film *Stuff* is so resolutely and unflinchingly about himself that he bravely uncovers hard and basic truths that apply to all of us. Johnson is that rare filmmaker who uses the self to reach the Self.

-Brian Lindstrom, filmmaker (**OLD TOWN DIARIES, FINDING NORMAL**)

Larry Johnson has made a very personal, touching and often funny film about his unresolved relationship with his dead father and the mysteries uncovered when he inherits box after box of his dad's meticulously organized "stuff." As we learn about Larry's father, we begin to see that the film is as much about the filmmaker and his own foibles as it is about dad. A very brave, passionate, and creatively executed memoir that wrings recurrent and universal questions about childhood, family life and the experience of "becoming a man" from the recollections, emotions and detritus of very specific lives.

-Jim Blashfield, filmmaker (**SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES**)

ABOUT THE FILM

When Lawrence Johnson's dad died, he left an unasked-for legacy: a storage unit's worth of junk. Getting rid of it wasn't easy for Johnson, a filmmaker with ambivalent feelings toward his father. The trove became both inspiration and albatross for Johnson, who set out on a six-year odyssey to understand the man who made him, a journey he chronicles in **STUFF**.

By turns intimate, unflinching, and surreal, **STUFF** follows Johnson as he delves deep into family history. Stark and magical animations recreate boyhood visions of fatherly power and perfection, and the devastating sense of betrayal when his father's imperfect reality is exposed.

As part of his own journey, Johnson accompanies his longtime friend Phil Wilson, a carpenter whose father has also recently died, on a trip to Wilson's father's hometown in Iowa. Phil wants to bury his father's ashes next to his dad's mother's grave. Both men attempt to reconcile and seek fulfillment of an unanswered need for intimacy with their fathers.

A lot of what's going on here is just opening boxes, exposing things that haven't had the opportunity to see the light of day, to be felt.

-- Phil Wilson, from **STUFF**

Returning to Portland, Johnson finds that filmmaking projects and grant opportunities have dried up in the bad economy, and at the same time his marriage continues to disintegrate. Yet he hangs on to his dad's possessions, paying to keep them in storage, even though he himself sells his whole library of books to pay the bills.

For every revelation the trove brings Johnson, there is a burden as well. Johnson's inability to part with the stuff expands into a crippling depression. When his wife throws him out, his dead father's stuff is mixed with his in the street. When Johnson goes homeless, the stuff sleeps with him in his minivan. It takes an encounter with a higher power to give Johnson the chance to break free.

"Without a father," says Johnson in his bare and eloquent narration, "Who am I to answer to, to measure myself against, to challenge, to overcome?"

To a TV and film environment where practically every father is a walking cliché—a petty tyrant, an absent cad, a fop tripping over himself to win a kid's affection—**STUFF** brings passion and reality. It reminds us of how potent the father and son relationship is.

"There's always a distance between father and son, but under the surface are tremendous expectations," says director Lawrence Johnson. "Fathers want to teach their boys how to be independent. Sons have a vision of fathers as invincible heroes. In the end the main way sons prove themselves is by pulling away."

"That's eternal, but men of my father's generation really lost out" Johnson says. "In colonial times men could be involved in every part of their kid's lives. But with industrialization and war

their roles got marginalized. Susan Faludi's book *Stiffed* shows how men became breadwinners and disciplinarians, but not much more. They weren't *supposed* to be involved emotionally.”

The trend left sons like Johnson and his friend Phil Wilson out in the cold. Writer Samuel Osherson puts it more strongly: “The psychological or physical absence of fathers from their families is one of the great underestimated tragedies of our time.”

Despite the heavy context, **STUFF** stays resolutely away from sociology, sticking solely to the experience of Johnson and Wilson: the roads they travel, the words they can't quite say, the memories that still live inside them—with Johnson's memories illuminated by sparkling animations aided by animator Zak Margolis. It's a deeply personal style reminiscent of the work of indie film hero Ross McElwee (**SHERMAN'S MARCH**).

“People can get statistics anywhere,” says Johnson. “I wanted to provide a completely enveloping experience. That's something I love about the medium of film.”

Though harrowing at times—Johnson travels through divorce and homelessness with his father's stuff dragging him down—the relief from the spectre of the Hollywood father is more than worth it. **STUFF** brings a new voice and visibility to a relationship so precious that most men can hardly speak of it. It's a film for anyone who wants to understand men.

And its triumphal moment comes, for once in film history, at the dump.

QUOTES FROM THE NARRATION

I imagine I am a boy again, climbing into my father's lap. His arms are tanned and hard. With my little hand I feel the stubble of his beard. I feel safe...

[My father] waited to die until his family was out eating dinner, perhaps because he didn't want us to witness his final salute to a superior - in this case, death... We never really knew him. Even in his death, he kept it all to himself

I pour through the stuff Dad left behind. I am afraid to remove anything from its container because the way he packed things may indicate some secret intent... some insight or glimmer of meaning. I can't seem to bring myself to get rid of any of it.

The principle of entropy is enacting on dad's belongings, displacing them from dad's boxes and putting them randomly into other boxes, table tops and shelves. I'm beginning to realize that I'm not entirely in control of the stuff.

Once, when I was six or seven I tried to run away from home...my dad picked me up squirming and held me in his arms. I hated him then. I hated his strength. I hated the heat of his body. I hated his scratchy face and his cooing laughter. I was powerless.

When I hit my fifties, I realized that although I had imagined I was blazing my own trail, really my story was being written by someone else... I felt I couldn't talk to my parents unless I had some achievement to report.

Perhaps the son only knows the father in the form of struggle to become himself. The son never knows his father. But he never knows himself until he steps into the silence and frees himself from his father. Then he knows his father through himself.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

I'm not sure when I decide to make the film, probably when I am pulling something out of a box, something on the surface really insignificant, like a bunch of rolled-up belts—because I could imagine him carefully rolling them up one at a time—somehow they speak to me about his experience. It's like opening a medicine bundle.

-- STUFF narration

Lawrence Johnson's father, Olin, died of liver cancer in 2004. A month later, going through a storage unit full of his father's stuff, he realized that there was so much of his dad's life in that storage unit—photos, films, trinkets and writings, papers and art—that his dad still seemed to be alive in it. He decided to make a film about discovering his father through the stuff he left behind.

Johnson had already captured images for the film at his father's deathbed. He shot a single roll of 35mm still film hours before and—through eyes full of tears—moments after his death. Within days of deciding to make the film he had jotted down some of the first words of the script. "I think I ought to be feeling something. But I don't know how to make feelings happen if they don't happen by themselves." The film became a kind of bait to coax those hidden feelings out into the open.

With a small grant of \$1000 worth of film from Kodak and the Oregon Media Production Association and a \$5000 grant from the Regional Arts and Cultural Council, Johnson started production. He went to visit his mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease and was being cared for by his brother in Colorado. Johnson shot scenes of his mother with a 16mm Bolex as old as he was.

In October, 2006, Johnson asked his friend Phil Wilson if he could accompany him on the journey to return Wilson's father's ashes to a small town cemetery in Iowa. To save money, Johnson shot in digital video. Cradling the Panasonic HVX200 camera in his lap much of the way, Johnson was able to capture Wilson's random thoughts, ruminations and memories. The evenings were spent separately, because Phil wanted private time to keep a journal.

Production included interviews with Wilson, and location shots at his father's old haunts, the mortuary and the cemetery. Johnson chose to remain in the perspective of an observer, not a participant, whose presence is only implied when Wilson speaks directly to him. Wilson became a kind of cipher for Johnson, helping the filmmaker form his own feelings through his experience of Wilson's.

Early in the process, Johnson had decided to use animation to illustrate his dreams and childhood memories. Johnson's first filmmaking experiments were animated. When he was 12 years old, he made an adaptation of James Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden" with paper cutouts and his dad's 8mm camera on a tripod. The process of drawing and animating these scenes for STUFF became a way to revive his childhood memories as well as illustrate them.

Enlisting the help of animator Zak Margolis, Johnson developed a style based on the expressionistic brushed ink drawings of his art school days. He drew each frame, scanned and cleaned up the drawings, then turned the files and timings over to Margolis, who created the layered scenes in a compositing program.

In November, 2007, Johnson flew back to Hemet, California, where his dad died, and filmed the trip to recreate the experience of visiting his father in his last days. As he shot the concrete and dry dirt landscape, the hallways of the assisted living facility, and the now-empty room of his father's last days, Johnson tried to capture the deep sense of alienation he felt when visiting his father.

Johnson's dad's photos and home movies also became an important part of the film. His dad obsessively documented his life and preserved everything. Johnson had access to the history of his dad's family in pictures and documents going back four generations. Years of home movies and videos became more important as the project progressed into the editing stage.

As the filmmaker's life started to unravel and he became homeless, he realized he must document this turning point as part of the film. He arranged sequences on a big pin board, writing the scenes on 3x5 cards. Soon, he was adding scenes to the board as he lived them, and the process of making the film became a way to work through the confusion.

It became evident that, if he was going to make a film about his understanding of his father's death, Johnson would have to reveal a lot more about himself through the words of his own narration. The scripting, written in between other jobs, took about a year and a half. "It was the hardest writing I've ever done, because it was about me," he says, "I got a lot of help from friends who urged me to scrub out the irony and cuteness which masked a resistance on my part to get to the heart of the matter. I needed to tell the story in a way that people could relate to."

Attempts to raise money for the film were going nowhere. Rejected by foundations and corporations and even associations like AARP, Johnson held a fund-raiser at the Hollywood Theater in Portland. The fiscal sponsor, Film Action Oregon, supports a number of independent film projects and offers free use of its theater. The screening raised \$2000. In November, 2008, Johnson received an Oregon Media Arts Fellowship, splitting the \$15,000 award three ways, with Portlanders Andy Blubaugh and Brian Lindstrom.

Johnson asked composer John Smith of Nu Shooz fame to create the music for **STUFF**. Smith had already produced soundtracks for some of Johnson's museum pieces, notably the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame and two exhibits for the Oregon Historical Society. The score for **STUFF** draws on a gamut of sources, from Beethoven, to vintage Italian horror, 30s jazz from Artie Shaw, and political thrillers like Polanski's **THE GHOST WRITER**.

Living in a borrowed motor home piled with his dad's stuff, Johnson continued editing. When he was unable to film the scenes on his own, he asked friends to shoot for him. Legendary Portland shooters Harry Dawson, Richard Blakeslee, Trevor Fife, Jan Baross and Gerald Lewis have photographed scenes for **STUFF**.

In December of 2009, almost 6 years after his father's death, Johnson held the first screening of the 90-minute film for a group of colleagues. The response was positive and constructive; notes from this viewing enabled him to tighten and strengthen the narrative.

In June of 2010, Johnson held an auction to gain funds and exposure for his nearly completed film. Later that year, the Northwest Film Center in Portland presented a preview screening of **STUFF** at the 37th Northwest Film and Video Festival.

STUFF was finished in February of 2011. Through online funding platform Kickstarter, Johnson was able to raise the last of his budget, money needed for mastering, promotion and film festival submissions.

Already, **STUFF** has been selected for the 2011 Florida Film Festival and the 2011 Talking Pictures Film Festival. This summer, **STUFF** will begin playing at the Living Room Theaters in Portland, Oregon and Boca Raton, Florida.

Lawrence Johnson has been on a difficult journey over the last seven years. The end result is **STUFF**, a poignant and fearless story that any son or daughter will be able to connect with.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Lawrence Johnson (producer/director) has produced and directed more than forty films in the past three decades. **STUFF** is his second feature length documentary and most intensely personal work. The subject and making of it consumed six years and a passage through homelessness and depression—both depicted with characteristic honesty in the film.

Johnson has developed a national reputation for historical and cultural documentary work for museums, producing films for the Smithsonian Institution, the Washington State History Museum, and the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. He won the Golden Muse Award from the American Association of Museums, and his work has played at numerous film festivals.

HAND GAME, Johnson's first feature documentary, uncovered the mythic and historic roots of Northwest Native gambling. It opened the 2000 American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco, and garnered praise from no less than indie film god Werner Herzog, who said it had some of the best footage of American Indians he had ever seen. It played on dozens of PBS stations nationwide. **HAND GAME**, said native historian George Price, “is one of those rare documentaries that uses native voices exclusively without filtering the information through non-Indian academic interpreters. This gives the viewers an experience much like going to the source.”

STUFF brings that direct, immersive approach to a much more personal subject: the relationship between father and son. Johnson won crucial support for the project from The Oregon Media Arts Fellowship, The Regional Arts and Culture Council, and the Oregon Media Production Association/Kodak Film Award.

Zak Margolis (compositing) is an animator and artist in Portland, Oregon. His haunting, magical work has appeared on PBS's “POV” and at the Sundance Festival (as part of Andy Blubaugh's **SCARDEYCAT**), and in curated shows like “A Natural Selection,” commissioned by the Northwest Film Forum. He has produced videos for musical artists Tara Jane O'Neil, Unwound, Old Time Relijun, and Goldcard. He studied film, video, and animation at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA, and computer animation at The Rochester Institute of Technology. Currently he is developing an expanded version of his “art-horror soap opera” **MOONBABIES**.

John R. Smith (composer) is a musician best known as the creative force behind the hit '80's band NuShooz. He got his start arranging for Latin and Jazz bands in his adopted hometown of Portland, Oregon. In his forty-year career, Smith has scored dozens of indie films and hundreds of commercials. His commercial clients include Nike, Adidas, Intel, CBS, and Hooked on Phonics. He is also a frequent contributor to the dance group BodyVox.

CREDITS

A film by
Lawrence Johnson

With special thanks to
Phil Wilson

Director of Photography
Lawrence Johnson
With
Harry Dawson
Gerald Lewis
Trevor Fife
Richard Blakeslee

Music composed by
John Smith
Alan Alexander

Music Recorded by
Gregg Williams
Alaqn Alexander

Music Played by
Lex Browning
John Smith
Gregg Williams
Alan Alexander

Script Consultants
Scott Weber
Enie Vaisburd
Howard Aaron
Jim Blashfield

Narration Recorded by
Clark Salisbury

Additional Photography
Brian Zeman
Jan Baross
Gil Paradise

Film Lab
Alpha Cine

Film Transfers
Bill Lord
Modern Digital

Equipment Rentals
Northwest Film Center

Music

“Moon Face”
Artie Shaw and his Orchestra
Courtesy Warner Chappel Music Inc.

“Mucho de Nada”
“Needle Nose” (1936)
Artie Shaw and his Orchestra

“Dardanella”
Prince’s Band (1919)

“Pretty Piece”
Damfinowho (1919)

“Langgam Suling Bambu”
Orkes Kroncong Mutiara
Courtesy Smithsonian Folkways

Archive Film
Oregon Historical Society
Prelinger Archive

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