

RAISING RENEE

a film by
Academy Award nominees
Jeanne Jordan & Steven Ascher

81 minutes

www.raising-renee.com

A West City Films production
In association with
HBO Documentary Films
and Knowledge: Network



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SHORT DESCRIPTION

Painter Beverly McIver was enjoying a skyrocketing career when a promise she had made to her mother—that she would take care of her older sister Renee, who is mentally disabled—came due. Filmed over the course of six years by Oscar nominees Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan, RAISING RENEE is marked by drama, humor and unexpected twists. The film explores themes of race, class and disability and provides a complex view of a unique group of women, the tenacity of family bonds and the transformative power of art.

SYNOPSIS

RAISING RENEE begins in 2003 as Beverly McIver is savoring opening night of her first solo art show in New York. A talented painter and winner of major awards, her career was skyrocketing. She flew in her mother Ethel, a maid from Greensboro, North Carolina and her sister Renee, 43, who is intellectually disabled and functions at about the level of a third grader. Years before, Beverly had casually promised her mother that she would take Renee when Ethel died, an event that seemed infinitely far off and unlikely to impinge on her life as a single black woman, painting and teaching where her work took her.

But in 2004, Ethel died suddenly and Beverly's promise was put to the test. RAISING RENEE is the story of a family's remarkable response to being broken apart and rearranged after nearly 50 years. The film explores deep themes of family, race, class and disability through the interplay of painting, cinema and everyday life. Produced and directed by Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher, RAISING RENEE is the third part in a trilogy about resilient families that includes their acclaimed feature documentaries SO MUCH SO FAST and the Oscar-nominated, Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner TROUBLESOME CREEK: A MIDWESTERN.

Beverly McIver grew up in the 1960's and 70's in a housing project in Greensboro, North Carolina. Ethel singlehandedly raised her and her two sisters, working as a maid for white families. Segregation in Greensboro was notorious – it was the site of the earliest student sit-ins of the civil rights movement. A 1979 rally against the Ku Klux Klan in front of the McIvers' house resulted in five people shot dead by the Klan.

Beverly's talent brought her out of this world and into the world of art and a tenured professorship. It's stunning to see the dream of upward mobility played out in one generation, and to look at its costs and implications. Beverly's work has been politically controversial, examining racial and sexual stereotypes and executed in a style that critic Irving Sandler calls a merger of "personal confession and social commentary, photography and painting, and realism and expressionism."

The narrative arc of RAISING RENEE takes us from the time when Ethel and Renee shared a home in Greensboro, through Ethel's illness and death, then to the pivotal moment in 2004 when Beverly brought Renee to live with her in Phoenix, Arizona. Viewers experience the consequences of Beverly's promise to "raise" her sister, a forty-three-year-old woman/child, and the way it transforms her life at a time when she had hoped to focus on her burgeoning career and on finding a life partner.

Renee, who had lived with her mother from birth, undergoes an even greater transformation. At times she seems childlike; at others times she is remarkably competent and articulate. She, too, is an artist, creating a large output of potholders and crafts. In the fall of 2009, after living with Beverly for five years, an opportunity arose for her to live independently – something that was unthinkable when their mother was alive. How she responds to this challenge at age 50 is astonishing, and poses key questions about disability and ability.

In RAISING RENEE events unfold over six years with humor, drama and unexpected twists, investing the film with the scope of a nonfiction novel that's nearly impossible to put down. The film provides a deeply intimate view of a unique group of women, the tenacity of family bonds and the power of art to transform experience into something beyond words.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

RAISING RENEE began with an offhand promise. In 2003, Jeannie was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, working on our film, SO MUCH SO FAST. In the next studio was Beverly Mclver, working on a set of paintings about her life. They developed a friendship and Beverly talked about the promise she'd casually made her mother Ethel that she'd take care of her older sister Renee, who is intellectually disabled, if anything happened to Ethel. She was just starting to grasp what that might mean and pleaded jokingly for advice on how to get out of it.

We were fascinated by Beverly, her talent as a painter, her instinctive storytelling—and the idea of her promise. Ethel, a maid in Greensboro, North Carolina who had cared for Renee for 43 years, was strong and healthy and no one had any idea of how the story would play out, but we started filming a few scenes while we worked on other projects.

Six years later, the result is RAISING RENEE, a feature documentary that captures the Mclver family's saga of reinventing itself. The film is the third in our trilogy about remarkable families which includes TROUBLESOME CREEK: A MIDWESTERN (about the Jordan family, threatened with the loss of their Iowa farm) and SO MUCH SO FAST (about the Heywood family, threatened with the loss of their son to Lou Gehrig's disease). All three films begin at a moment of crisis and take a longitudinal approach to uncover meanings that are only visible by filming over years, through an intimacy with our subjects forged by time.

We approached each of these films with an eye toward plot and the inherent drama of everyday life. At first glance the storyline may seem deceptively straightforward. But embedded in it is an exploration of family relations, race and class in America, and intellectual disability. Audiences sometimes approach these issues with clichéd assumptions —assumptions we seek to upend with the unexpected complexity of actual life. Beverly's gift to her sister can be seen as heroic, but the film is just as interested in the conflicted feelings that come with that gift, which gets closer to the true nature of heroism.

RAISING RENEE is in part about the relationship of art-making and lived experience. Beverly's work has focused on the swirling dynamics of love and tension with Renee and Ethel. Audiences see events as filmed by our camera and as interpreted in Beverly's art, giving them a privileged position to examine the interactions of painting, life and film. Beverly's canvases become another character in themselves.

The three films in this trilogy were long-term commitments because we're interested in time – time for our characters' lives to unfold, and time to elucidate layers of interconnections through story, structure, image and sound.

THE FILMMAKERS

STEVEN ASCHER AND JEANNE JORDAN have been making documentary and fiction films for over 20 years. Their feature documentaries include *TROUBLESOME CREEK: A MIDWESTERN*, which won the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award at Sundance, the Prix Italia, Peabody and IDA awards and was nominated for an Academy Award. Their film *SO MUCH SO FAST* premiered at Sundance, was released theatrically to critical acclaim and was broadcast worldwide, including a special presentation on PBS's Frontline. Other collaborations include Emmy-winning portraits of artists, including Chuck Close and Shimon Attie.

Jordan's work as a producer and editor include *EYES ON THE PRIZE*, dramas for *AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE* and she was two-time Emmy nominated series producer of PBS's *POSTCARDS FROM BUSTER*.

Ascher's directing credits include Emmy-nominated films for television and the drama, *DEL AND ALEX*. He is author of *The FILMMAKER'S HANDBOOK: A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE* (with Ed Pincus), a bestselling text, which the Independent calls "the bible."

Composer **SHELDON MIROWITZ** has scored hundreds of Film and TV projects. He's a three-time Emmy Award nominee for best music, most recently for the score to the A&E movie *THE NAZI OFFICER'S WIFE*. Steve and Jeannie have an ongoing collaboration with Sheldon including his brilliant scores for *TROUBLESOME CREEK* and *SO MUCH SO FAST*.

APPPEARING IN THE FILM

BEVERLY MCIVER is widely acknowledged as a significant presence in contemporary American art in general and has charted a new direction as an African American woman artist. Her work is in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art, the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C., the Baltimore Museum of Art, and many other institutions. She is currently the Suntrust Endowed Chair Professor of Art at North Carolina Central University. McIver's work has been reviewed in *Art News*, *Art in America* and *The New York Times*. She has received numerous grants and awards including the Anonymous Was A Woman Foundation grant, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a Radcliffe

Fellowship from Harvard University, a Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation award, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award and Creative Capital grant.

RENEE MCIVER, Beverly's oldest sister, creates a variety of crafts including pot holders and bird houses and participates in educational programs.

RONI BRYANT, Beverly's older sister, is an educator and Assistant Principal in the Greensboro school system.

HOBSON BRYANT, Roni's husband, is a physician's assistant in Greensboro area hospitals.

CREDITS

Produced, Directed and Written by: Jeanne Jordan & Steven Ascher

Cinematography and Sound: Steven Ascher

Editing: Jeanne Jordan

Music: Sheldon Mirowitz

For Home Box Office

Supervising Producer: Lisa Heller

Executive Producer: Sheila Nevins

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Produced with support from the LEF Foundation.

Unrated. 81 minutes.

Full credits and all photos available for download at www.raising-renee.com