

FILM

The popular PBS radio show *This American Life* recently rebroadcast one of its most riveting episodes about three young men who received long-term prison sentences for a murder they didn't commit.

Ending the show was a discussion of how law enforcement manipulates confessions. Host Ira Glass then ran a particularly poignant recorded examination of a 14-year-old boy who police convinced had killed his little sister—even though he hadn't.

The entire program called into question a system hell-bent on finding perpetrators fast and how the outside world inadequately perceives confessions and investigations.

New York director Andrew Jarecki has finally equaled on film the depth and breadth of this astonishing social phenomenon in *Capturing the Friedmans*, now playing at Regal Pioneer Place Stadium.

His subjects are the Arnold and Elaine Friedman family of Long Island, N.Y., whose 1987 Thanksgiving dinner was interrupted by police who arrested both Arnold and his 18-year-old son, Jesse, for child molestation.

So begins a story that challenges even the most patient viewer with a barrage of conflicting information, community assumptions and acute family dysfunction that provides, according to Jarecki, "no objective truth."

The filmmaker originally set out to do a documentary on party clowns; David, the oldest Friedman son, happens to be New York's most celebrated. But it was David's family Jarecki began to find irresistible.

He also found the Friedmans' home movies irresistible. Well before video cameras were the norm, the family "documented itself incessantly," right up through the arrests and trials. "While most families...document special happy

No objective truth

Capturing the Friedmans proves truth is stranger—and more elusive—than fiction

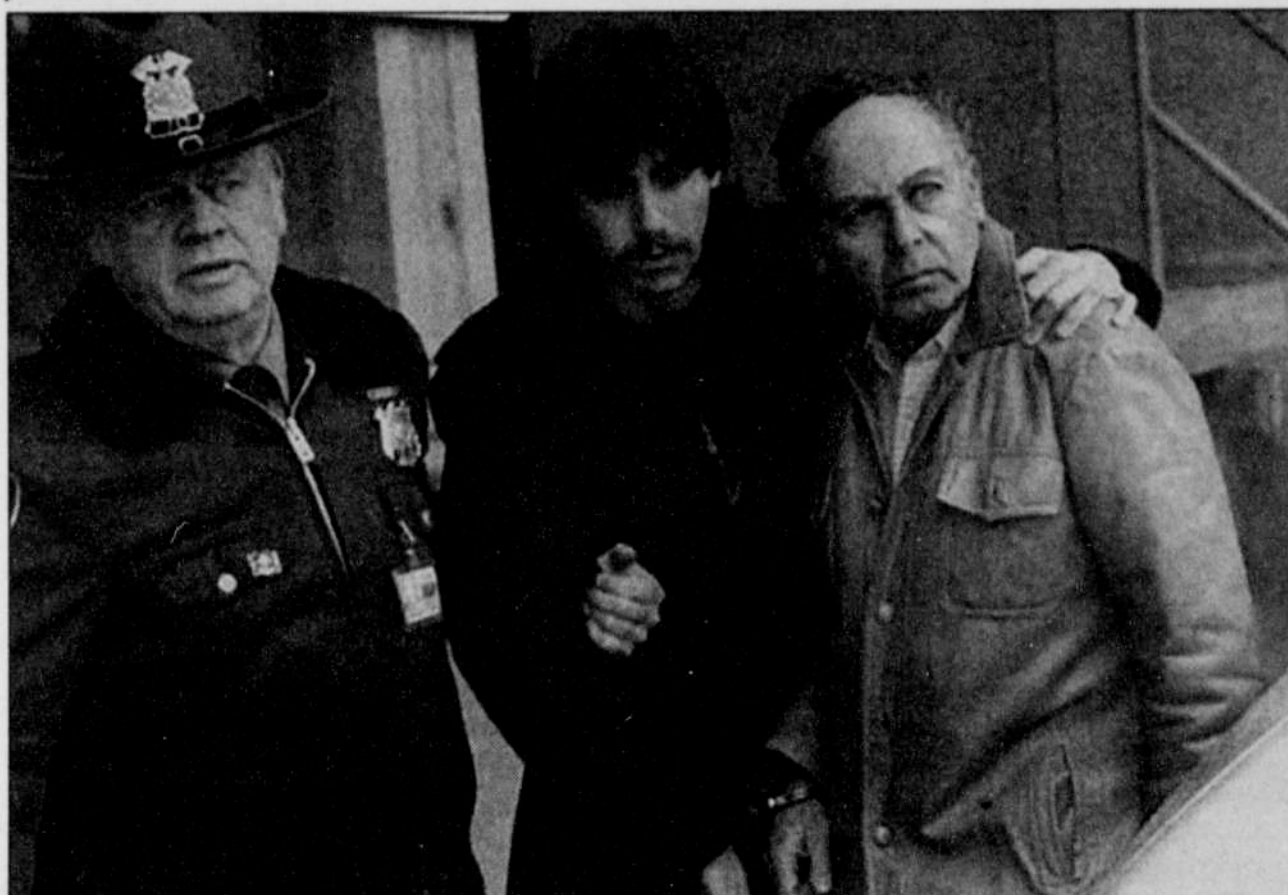
BY LISA BRADSHAW

celebrations like birthdays, this family never turned the camera off...starting with 8 mm films shot three generations ago," says Jarecki. This footage, mixed with the director's own, provides a view into the home through two alternatively fascinating windows.

Arnold Friedman received child pornography through the mail, a federal offense. The police also find that the respected high school teacher is giving computer and piano lessons to boys in his home, assisted by his youngest son. They begin questioning the students, using methods including hypnosis, largely believed to conjure up those dreaded "false memories."

Amid echoes of *This American Life*, a detective interviewed in *Capturing the Friedmans* chillingly states: "Children want to please very often. They want to give you the answers that you want."

It goes from bad to worse for the family, particularly young Jesse, who claims innocence but becomes confused about his own memories. Or does he? Between the lies the Friedmans are encouraged to (or believe they should) tell, their vastly differing takes on the same stories



Jesse and Arnold Friedman under arrest in 1987

and surfacing evidence of Arnold's prior offenses, the audience goes back and forth in believing who is guilty of what.

Queer viewers will take special note of some specifics of what was allegedly happening to children in the Friedman home under the noses of the rest of the family. Some of the claims are not physically possible, and the accusations themselves smack of not just hysteria but homophobia.

Just below the surface of *Capturing the Friedmans* lies a sense of what could be happening to a man whose homosexuality has undergone a lifetime of severe repression. Around the references of a non-existent sex life with his wife and a former student's description of Arnold as

"being kind of a nebbish" creeps in the notion that from suppression and confusion eventually erupts unhealthy, dangerous behaviors.

Obviously, this is dangerous territory. But this film introduces more questions than it answers—intelligently, carefully and without taboo. Queer sexuality is one of the many subtle whispers floating through this amazing study of an American family in extreme crisis.

"What I would like to see happen," says Jarecki, "is that people leave and say: 'You know, I've seen a lot of films this year where, at the end, I'm supposed to think something, and here, I'm not supposed to think something. I'm just supposed to think.' That's my hope." □

Family matters

Oregonian Howard Friedman on his family and the truth

Arnold Friedman's brother, Howard, agrees that *Capturing the Friedmans* is a "brilliant film." Still, the Portland-area resident wishes "it hadn't been made."

Howard, who lived with his partner, Jack, on the Oregon coast for several years before moving to Milwaukie last December, is featured in the new documentary exploring the strange Long Island case of Arnold and Jesse Friedman's arrests for child sexual abuse in 1987.

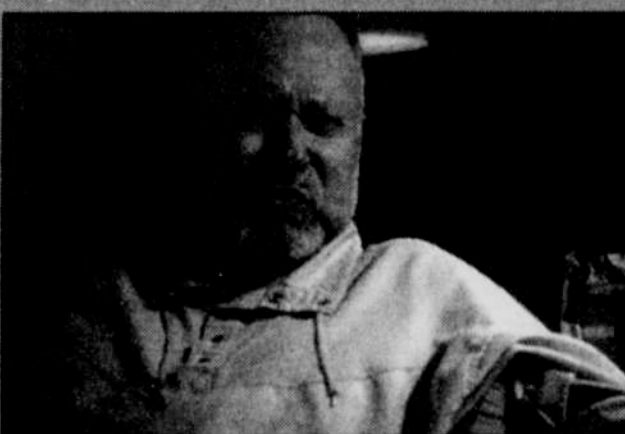
The articulate, soft-spoken man explains that, rather than bringing people who clearly had tenuous relationships to begin with closer together through exposing possible injustice, the film has "torn asunder" the family. "My oldest nephew, David, and my middle nephew,

Seth...have nothing to do with their mother. They will not see her, they will not call her."

Seth refused to be interviewed for the film and is angry at the rest of the family for participating. "But we all realized," says Howard, "that this director was going to make the film regardless...we could be interviewed and have some say in the film or just tell him to go jump in the lake, and he'd still make it."

Howard opted for the former, noting that he wanted "some positive things" about his brother to be known and said in the movie.

One of those was Howard firmly denying any memory that his older brother abused him as a child, contrary to Arnold's own claim. Now Howard is "remembering more," he



Milwaukie resident Howard Friedman in *Capturing the Friedmans*

admits. "This thing is knocking on the door, and the door's opening."

Talking with Howard doesn't necessarily clear up questions the movie ultimately raises about guilt, innocence or truth. He notes instances

where he isn't sure Jesse is telling even him the truth and thinks "the truth lies somewhere in between what the children said and what my brother and Jesse did...I don't know for sure."

Howard identifies as gay, but he does not consider his brother to have struggled with that identity. "Most pedophiles are not [gay]," he states. "I don't believe he was gay."

It's jarring to have your family's "dirty linen up on the line," Howard notes. "That picture they use in the ad...I took that picture; it was my nephew's bar mitzvah. I took that picture!" The entire difficult public process, though, has been made bearable by his partner's support.

"I could not have made it through all of this without Jack. I could not have... If you're lucky enough to share your life with someone...tell him you love him, hug him, go out and buy him some Krispy Kremes. That's what I have to say."

—LB

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