

PRODIGAL SONS

a film by Kimberly Reed

86 minutes, Color/B&W, Stereo & Dolby E
Exhibition Format: HDCAM or DigiBeta
Production Format: HD
English, USA, 2008



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Winner— FIPRESCI International Critics' Prize for Best Film, Thessaloniki doc film festival

Winner— Special Jury Prize for Bravery in Storytelling, Nashville film festival

Winner— Special Jury Prize for Fearless Filmmaking, Florida film festival

Winner— Best Documentary Jury Prize, NewFest, New York's LGBT film festival

Winner— Best Documentary Jury Prize, Copenhagen LGBT film festival

Winner— Best Documentary Jury Prize, Tampa int'l LGBT film festival

Winner— Audience award, Dublin GAZE Int'l film festival

Winner— Honorable Mention, Viennale international film festival

Winner— Volunteer Award, Frameline - San Francisco Int'l LGBT film festival

Winner— "Best of Fest" top-ten audience award - Palm Springs Int'l film fest

— **short synopsis** —

Prodigal Sons follows three siblings — a transgender woman, a gay man, and their adopted brother who discovers he's the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth — back to their Montana hometown, where a powerful story of an entire family's transformation unfolds.

— **synopsis** —

Marc has had a rough life. Adopted as an infant, he was held back in preschool (putting him in the same grade as his younger brother), failed to graduate high school, and suffered a head injury at twenty-one. His entire worldview was that he was cheated by life. Then he discovered he is the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth.

Unlike Marc, his sister Kim's life always seemed to be easy. She was the first child born to her attractive parents, into an extended family of tall Montana farmers. She was high school class president and valedictorian, voted most likely to succeed. She was also captain of the football team — you see, Kim used to be Marc's younger brother. Having these two siblings in the same grade in a small Montana town made for a perfect storm of brotherly rivalry.

Twenty years later Marc and Kim return home to their small Montana hometown, a springboard that hurtles Prodigal Sons into a year in the life of this Montana family, forcing them to face challenges no one could imagine. Seen through the eyes of Kim, the filmmaker, she is the most surprised of all as she discovers her brother Marc is still trapped in the brotherly rivalry she long ago abandoned. She sets out to unravel this complex history, and learns it is she who needs to resolve bygone days by confronting the ghost of her male past. Her rare access delicately reveals both family's most private moments and an epic vista, as the film travels from Montana to Croatia, from high school reunion to jail cell, and from deaths and births to commitments of all kinds.

Marc and Kim's relationship is an ideal polarizing test case for the universal issues every family confronts: sibling rivalry, gender, nature versus nurture, and the question of whether anyone can reinvent oneself. Their bond, which defies both Kim's gender and Marc's pedigree, exists as the fascinating heart of the film, and is orbited by a colorful, articulate cast of characters, including jailhouse chaplains, Montana farmers, intrigued high school classmates, and Orson Welles' soul-mate Oja Kodar, among others. Carol, the remarkably resilient mother who accepts her children's surprises with grace and optimism, provides a strong backbone for the family, as well as a clear-eyed entry-point to this drama of Wellesian proportions. All along the way surprising revelations abound: Marc's innate savant ability to play the piano, Kim's smooth acceptance from schoolmates and community, and their younger brother Todd's well-adjusted attitude about being gay.

In the end, we see that transformation happens when least expected. After pulling for this family through its trials and tribulations, we learn that a poignant sense of hope will carry them through.

— **director's statement** —

I started out making a film about my adopted brother's journey to discover his new lineage. It was undeniably a great story, a real-life fairy tale. I also felt guilty that life had been easy for me but not for Marc. I imagined that by celebrating his amazing tale I could ease his pain, and maybe heal our relationship. I thought I'd be making a film about the second chapter in our lives. Little did I know we weren't done with the first.

Anyone who has met Marc will tell you that you can't tell his story without telling mine. Our rivalry growing up was the most important dynamic in his life, and remains so to this day. So I knew I'd end up in this film, but I had no idea it would become the personal journey it did.

When you change your sex, you get tremendous pressure to bury your past, to let it disappear like the "M" that used to be on your drivers license. If you pass well in your new gender, the pressure is even stronger, especially from other transgender people who see passing as the Holy Grail. Returning to your past, much less reveling in it, is unthinkable. Before making this film I shared that view. But as the film evolved, and Marc and I began to have a relationship again, he was the only one who wouldn't let me get away with forgetting my past. I wanted Marc to let my male past die as I had, but he had enshrined this history and even insisted on cherishing remnants of it. As much as I resisted this, I couldn't ignore the kernel of truth in what he was saying: I had to stop renouncing my history.

I started out believing this film was about Marc's quest for identity, but it was about my own. I thought my transition was complete, but instead Marc taught me I was only halfway, and that I had to somehow resurrect the first half of my life I had buried alive. This freed me to return home and reclaim my past. Though my situation is rare, everyone I know who has a sibling relates to the dynamic between Marc and me, and to my desire for my family to recognize who I've become instead of who I was when I left home.

Prodigal Sons has a deep reserve of high-octane dramatic fuel, but the film is so much more than its astonishing characters or the explosive moments we caught on camera. What sets this film apart is its exploration of the universal truths every family grapples with. In the end, this film is quite simply about love, and how one family faces challenges and triumphs that no one would have ever imagined.

— characters & creative team —

CHARACTERS

Kimberly Reed — filmmaker, sibling
Marc McKerrow — sibling
Carol McKerrow — mother
Todd McKerrow — sibling
Oja Kodar — Orson Welles' companion; co-writer & star of F for Fake
Claire Jones — Kim's partner
Debbie McKerrow — Marc's wife
Jan Haima — Carol's sister
McKerrow family — aunts, uncles, cousins
Helena High School Class of 1985

CREATIVE TEAM

directed by — Kimberly Reed
produced by — John Keitel, Kimberly Reed
co-produced by — Louise Rosen
director of photography — John Keitel
executive producers — Robert Hawk, Gail Silva
associate producer — Israel Ehrisman
edited by — Shannon Kennedy, Kimberly Reed
a production of Big Sky Film Productions Inc., in association with:
executive producers for CBC — Diane Rotteau, Catherine Olson
supervising producer for Sundance Channel — Ann Rose
executive producer for Sundance Channel — Lynne Kirby
executive producers for BBC — Nick Fraser, Greg Sanderson

piano music by
Marc McKerrow

director
Kimberly Reed

producers
John Keitel
Kimberly Reed

co-producer
Louise Rosen

director of photography
John Keitel

editors
Shannon Kennedy
Kimberly Reed

executive producers

Robert Hawk

Gail Silva

associate producer

Israel Ehrisman

consulting producer

Peter Broderick

field producer, reunion

Stephanie Cannon

composer

T. Griffin

title design

Glenn Rosko

legal services

Robert L. Seigel, Esq.

Cowan Debaets Abrahams & Sheppard LLP

featuring (in order of appearance)

Kimberly Reed

Carol McKerrow

Marc McKerrow

Claire Jones

Lea McKerrow

Gordon McKerrow

Kathy McKerrow

Glenn McKerrow

Jasmine Fuentes

Helena High School Class of '85

Frank Mayo

Cyndee Moe

Tim O'Leary

Diana MacDonald

Todd McKerrow

Debbie McKerrow

Kelsie McKerrow

Oja Kodar

Sasha Welles

Nina Palinkas

Jakov Sedlar

David Cannon

Bridget Maley

Jan Haima

Pita Rodriguez

Chaplain John Moran

The Lady from Shanghai
Courtesy of Columbia Pictures

F for Fake
Courtesy of Françoise Widhoff of Les Films de l'Astrophore, and Criterion Collection

a production of Big Sky Film Productions Inc.,
in association with:

executive producers for CBC
Diane Rotteau
Catherine Olson

supervising producer for Sundance Channel
Ann Rose

executive producer for Sundance Channel
Lynne Kirby

executive producers for BBC
Nick Fraser
Greg Sanderson

Biographies

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER KIMBERLY REED

After studying cinema at UC Berkeley (B.A.) and San Francisco State University (M.A.), Kimberly Reed was looking forward to a promising career as a filmmaker. She was a young, award-winning filmmaker (*Views of My Father Weeping*), had worked as a commercial editor, had traveled the world directing and producing travel documentaries, and had become an early expert in the nascent field of digital filmmaking and postproduction. But then she transitioned genders and did what transsexuals are encouraged to do: She disappeared. Sequestering herself in the world of publishing, she applied her filmmaking knowledge to her position as editor-in-chief of DV magazine, and established her reputation as a frequent speaker and oft-quoted digital filmmaking expert in publications like the New York Times and USA Today. *Prodigal Sons* is her first feature-length documentary film, and marks her coming-out, in more ways than one. Kimberly Reed is already recognized as the first transgender feature filmmaker. She was selected for the Yaddo Artists' Community, the Squaw Valley Community of Writers Workshop, and Al Gore's Current TV Symposium on the Future of Non-Fiction Film. Her work has been featured for four consecutive years at IFP's Independent Film Week, and she was named one of Filmmaker Magazine's 25 New Faces of Independent Film.

PRODUCER, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN KEITEL

John Keitel is an award-winning filmmaker whose work has screened at festivals from Sundance to Berlin and aired on MTV, HBO, Showtime, A&E, and BET. Current projects include *JUSTLY MARRIED* (Producer, Director) featured on Advocate.com, *SAVING THE BOOM* (Producer, Director) and *YOURS TRULY MISS CHINATOWN* (Executive Producer). He is also a frequent contributor to Current Television. Additionally, he produces, shoots, and edits many behind-the-scenes specials and features for studios. He has collaborated on two documentaries with Drew Barrymore, and is the writer/director of the award-winning feature film *DEFYING GRAVITY*, as well as the editor of *LATTER DAYS* and *KISS THE BRIDE*. His documentary, *AN ALL-AMERICAN STORY* was an official Sundance selection and received the Gold Plaque award at the Chicago International Film Festival and won The David L. Wolper Certificate from the Independent Documentary Association. He is a graduate of Stanford University (B.A.) and USC Film School (M.A.).

INTERNATIONAL SALES, CO-PRODUCER LOUISE ROSEN

Louise is a documentary specialist with 25 years experience in international film and television. She has set up co-productions and presales on a wide variety of projects, including Oscar, Emmy, Sundance, Prix Italia and International Emmy winners. Current projects include *THE PRICE OF SUGAR* from Uncommon Productions, *HOLLYWOOD CHINESE* from triple Sundance-winning filmmaker Arthur Dong, Unity Productions Foundation's highly acclaimed *MOHAMMAD: LEGACY OF A PROPHET* and *CITIES OF LIGHT: ISLAMIC SPAIN*, *SO MUCH SO FAST* (West City Films), *AL OTRO LADO* (Altamura Films), *KILLER POET* (Northern Light Productions), *SECRECY* (Robb Moss, Peter Galison), *VOWS OF SILENCE* (Jason Berry) and *THE POWDER AND THE GLORY* (Arnie Reisman, Ann Carol Grossman). Louise is also a co-producer on several projects including *SIR! NO SIR!* (David Zeiger), and *ZERO* (Jan Egleson and Michael Williams of Scout Productions). Louise teaches and tutors each year at Europe's Discovery Campus Master School, is a featured speaker at the Real Screen Summit, a moderator at the HotDocs Doc Forum and guest lecturer at Emerson College.

Biographies (CONTINUED)

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ROBERT HAWK

Hawk, a venerable member of the indie film world for over 20 years, has his own business, ICI (Independent Consultation for Independents, www.filmhawk.com). Recent producing credits include Dayna Goldfine & Daniel Geller's *BALLETS RUSSES*, Jim Fall's *TRICK*, Alex & Andrew Smith's *THE SLAUGHTER RULE*, and Kevin Smith's *CHASING AMY*. Hawk has been credited with discovering and/or nurturing the talents of such filmmakers as Rob Epstein, Kevin Smith (beginning with *CLERKS*), Ed Burns (*THE BROTHERS MCMULLEN*), David Siegel and Scott McGehee (*BEE SEASON*, *THE DEEP END*), Nathaniel Kahn (*MY ARCHITECT*) and Geller & Goldfine (Emmy award, *KIDS OF SURVIVAL*). He has consulted on many narrative films and hundreds of documentaries, including Oscar winners/nominees such as *COMMON THREADS*, *REGRET TO INFORM*, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS*, *COMPLAINTS OF A DUTIFUL DAUGHTER* and *TROUBLESOME CREEK*. He served on the Advisory Selection Committee (1987-1998) of the Sundance Film Festival and on juries for many domestic and international festivals. Hawk has also curated special film series for, among others, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the International Documentary Congress in Los Angeles, and Sundance Film Festival.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER GAIL SILVA

Gail Silva is an advisor and curator for arts organizations, individual artists and filmmakers. With nearly 30 years of service to the independent media field, Silva has garnered a reputation as midwife to countless film projects, maverick consultant and curator, and gadfly to the establishment. She currently serves as the President of the Board of California Newsreel, the leading distributor of films on the African American experience, films from Africa and a recent initiative on labor and globalization, and Treasurer of the Board of Shadowlight Productions, a shadow puppet performance group. Advisory Board, San Francisco Cinematheque; World Doc selection committee, Sundance Film Festival; Nominating Committee, National Coalition of Independent Public Television Producers; Director & President, Film Arts Foundation 1979-2005; Director's Award, California Arts Council.

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER ISRAEL EHRISMAN

Israel Ehrisman co-produced Michael Aker's *PHOENIX*, which screened at the 2006 Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. He has also been the Director of Logistics for the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, and has worked at NewFest, the North Carolina Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, and the Sundance Film Festival.

EDITOR SHANNON KENNEDY

Shannon Kennedy edited *THE TRIALS OF DARYLL HUNT*, which was shortlisted for an Oscar, won 15 awards, and aired on HBO in 2007. In *A WALK INTO THE SEA: DANNY WILLIAMS AND THE WARHOL FACTORY* she applied her background as a visual artist to an exploration of Danny Williams's disappearance from Andy Warhol's Factory. The film won the Teddy Award for Best Documentary at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival, and the New York Loves Film Award at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival.

COMPOSER T. GRIFFIN

T. Griffin is a songwriter, composer and producer working in Brooklyn, New York. Alone and with his band The Quavers he has released four critically acclaimed CDs of songs in a homespun electronic style that's been described as 'porch techno'. He has scored films for Michael Almereyda, Esther B. Robinson, Peter Sillen, Kimberly Reed and Jem Cohen, plays for Anne Bogart, and created live soundtrack shows for Cohen, Brent Green and for an international tour of the late Danny Williams' Warhol Factory films. As a producer, player and arranger he's worked with musical luminaries including Vic Chesnutt, Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine & members of Godspeed You Black Emperor, Fugazi and The Ex.

PRODIGAL SONS – PRESS

Winner / FIPRESCI Prize / Thessaloniki doc festival
Special Jury Prize / Bravery in Storytelling / Nashville film festival
Special Jury Prize / Fearless Filmmaking / Florida film festival
Winner / Best Documentary / NewFest NYC LGBT festival
Winner / Best Documentary / Copenhagen LGBT festival
Winner / Best Documentary / Tampa Int'l LGBT festival
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Winner / Honorable Mention / Viennale film festival
Winner / Volunteer Award / Frameline SF Int'l LGBT festival
Best of Fest / Audience award / Palm Springs Int'l film fest

CRITICS' PICK! "Kimberly Reed's compelling documentary, 'Prodigal Sons,' is filled with revelations."
- Jeannette Catsoulis, [The New York Times](#)

CRITICS' PICK! "One of the strangest, most heartbreaking docs you'll see this year." -[New York Magazine](#)

"Engrossing, unpredictable, often heartbreaking." –Gerald Peary, [The Boston Phoenix](#)

"Unique...bracing. Tennessee Williams looks like "Sesame Street" compared to this."
-Todd McCarthy, [Variety](#)

"Stirring and provocative...this is a film not easily forgotten." –Sheri Linden, [Los Angeles Times](#)

"An example of superb documentary filmmaking...no one could make this believable if it were fiction."
–David Wiegand, [San Francisco Chronicle](#)

"Exceptional...you will never think of Rosebud the same way again." –Ed Gonzalez, [Village Voice](#)

"Powerful ...(a) brave, unflinching film." –Michael O'Sullivan, [The Washington Post](#)

"Brilliant! Astonishingly intimate, brave." –David Lambie, [Bay Area Reporter](#)

"Well-crafted and intense ...render(s) real life with the tension and thematic depth of great drama."
-Noel Murray, [Onion AV Club](#)

"Fascinating...See it!" - A.O. Scott, *At the Movies*

"Powerful, riveting."-Michael Musto, [The Village Voice](#)

"Intimate, captivating documentary." –Bill Stamets, [Chicago Sun-Times](#)

"Unforgettable." – David Wiegand, [Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

Grade: A! "Astute, engaging documentary."-Cindy Fuchs, [Philadelphia City Paper](#)

"You can't make this stuff up ...a compelling and sensational real-life story."
–Liam Lacey, [Toronto Globe and Mail](#)

"Anybody who has ever doubted that truth is stranger than fiction should see 'Prodigal Sons.'"
- V.A. Musetto, [New York Post](#)

"Dredge up the usual clichés -- truth is stranger than fiction, you can't make this stuff up -- and they all fit.
Harrowing and entertaining, this whiplash doc heralds an exciting talent."
-Michael Fox, [San Francisco Weekly](#)

“Unflinching, epic scope...absolutely engrossing.” -[Flavorpill](#)

“A wondrous documentary... the kind of jam-packed experience that's a joy to behold... A head-spinning drama rife with revelations, "Prodigal Sons" is too true to be good: compelling, distressing, it's pretty great.” –Ray Pride, *New City*

“ ‘Prodigal Sons’ takes viewers on an intense emotional journey, but a rewarding one nonetheless...riveting!”-Gary M. Kramer, [Gay City News](#)

“Will make you pinch yourself to make sure you haven’t fallen asleep and begun to dream this story up... do not miss it.”-Michael Tully, [Hammer to Nail](#)

“Triumphant... a raw and altogether remarkable debut.”-*SF 360*

“Leaves you flabbergasted and enraptured...so shocking and incredible that it is hard to believe...An exceptionally personal and involving film.” -[Austin 360](#)

“Compelling, profound.” –J.R. Jones, [Chicago Reader](#)

“Vivid, unflinching, absorbing.” -[Boxoffice Magazine](#)

"[4.5 stars] ASTOUNDING! Fascinating and utterly compelling." -Gary M. Kramer, *Instinct Magazine*

“Full of surprising revelations and agonized turnabouts, Reed's film is impressive as a personal document about self-definition and as a uniquely intimate tale of searching compassion.”-[Filmmaker Magazine](#)

“A unique journey into deepest Montana and deep family secrets...galaxies removed from metaphorical, all-American Kansas.” –Doris Toumarkine, [Film Journal International](#)

"No doubt, one will find something to identify with in the McKerrow- Reed family's travails."
–Chris Carpenter, [Movie Dearest/Long Beach Blade](#)

“Profound, eye-opening.” –Rob Humanick, [Gone Cinema Poaching](#)

“A vivid example of the power of biology, chemistry, geography and fate to shape lives.”
–Dan Woog, [Gay Today](#)

“One of the most admired and buzzed about films at this festival. (Outfest)” –Bryan Stamp, [Indiewire](#)

“A sweeping family saga that spans the globe and uncovers disturbing secrets as well as some remarkable connections...gathers a Shakespearian momentum, and which could make even the stoniest among us weep.” -[Oxford American](#)

“Revealing and moving...not to be missed.”-Erica Marcus, [Bay Times](#)

“This documentary proves to be a masterpiece study of sibling rivalry.” –Alexis Whitham, [Frameline](#)

“A beauty of a film.” –[Still in Motion](#)

“Thoughtful, bracing treatment of what amounts to some seriously heavy shit.”
–Andrew Schenker, [Slant Magazine](#)

“A Hidden Gem.”-Lisa Kennedy, [Denver Post](#)

“Truly stranger than fiction.” –[The Toronto Star](#)

"[An] incredible story . . . a really focused look at sibling dynamics, which we can all empathise with."
-Harry Byford, [The Independent](#)

"Edgy and tense...sure to provoke some thoughtful conversation." –Peter Metcalf, [New West Missoula](#)

"Pretty amazing...takes you to some remarkable places." –Todd McCarthy, [Variety](#)

"A documentary both gripping and, like life, unexpected." –Tim Plant, [Metro Weekly](#)

"Rarely since *Capturing the Friedmans* has there been such a brave and bracing portrait of a family in crisis as *Prodigal Sons*." –Jason Anderson, [Eye Weekly](#)

"I have trouble believing that anyone who sees it won't be impressed by what they see. I guarantee you have never seen anything quite like this."-David Kemper, [Big Picture Big Sound](#)

"There's a lot of America that would benefit from realizing how much this family resembles their own."-Moriarty, [Aint it Cool News](#)

"Fascinating...if this were fiction, frankly, you wouldn't believe half of it."
-Norman Wilner, [NOW Magazine](#)

"Not to be missed, this documentary proves to be a masterpiece of sibling rivalry."
–[Reel Affirmations Festival](#)

"The most amazing examination of sibling rivalry I've ever seen on film."
–Margaret Murray, [Tampa International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival](#)

"PRODIGAL SONS is the best documentary I have seen this year, and that's saying something." –Lou Mindar, [The Documentary Film Blog](#)

The New York Times

Movie Review

Prodigal Sons (2008)

[NYT Critics' Pick This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.](#)

February 26, 2010

Family Dynamics

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS

Published: February 26, 2010

Leaping from Helena, Mont., to Split, Croatia — by way of Old Hollywood — Kimberly Reed's compelling documentary, ["Prodigal Sons,"](#) is filled with revelations.

Some of these are emotional, as when the filmmaker returns home to Helena after a 20-year absence to find that her high school friends treat her no differently from when she was a handsome jock named Paul McKerrow. Others are circumstantial, like the bombshell that reveals her adopted brother, Marc, as a blood relative to Hollywood royalty.

At the film's core, however, is the loving but long-combative relationship between Marc and Ms. Reed, a connection that ties both to a past that neither recalls with fondness. Seriously brain-damaged in a car accident, Marc suffers from seizures and terrifying mood swings (in one particularly painful scene, he brutally attacks the sexual choices of his sister and their gay brother, Todd), but Ms. Reed and her cinematographer, John Keitel, never sensationalize. Maintaining a simple, naturalistic style, they patiently capture the shifting dynamics of a family hanging in without giving out.

A tale of two siblings — one basking in memories, the other fleeing them — "Prodigal Sons" grapples with identity through the prism of sibling rivalry. In the end its conclusions have little to do with gender and everything to do with acceptance.

PRODIGAL SONS

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Directed by Kimberly Reed; director of photography, John Keitel; edited by Shannon Kennedy and Ms. Reed; music by T. Griffin; piano music by Marc McKerrow; produced by Mr. Keitel and Ms. Reed; released by First Run Features. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 26 minutes. This film is not rated.

'Prodigal Sons': A family's shifting identities

[G. Allen Johnson](#)

Thursday, March 4, 2010

"Things are going a bit nuts - which is a good problem to have," Kimberly Reed said on the phone from her home New York.

No kidding. It's not often that small, independently released documentaries are featured for the whole hour on Oprah Winfrey's TV show, but since Reed flew to Chicago last month for an appearance, the UC Berkeley and San Francisco State graduate has been in overdrive handling the increased interest in her film. "Prodigal Sons," which opens Friday, is the incredible story of a woman who not only used to be a man but was also the star quarterback on his small-town Montana high school football team. About the time she decides to attend her 20-year high school reunion, her adopted brother learns he is the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth - and Welles' longtime lover, Oja Kodar, wants to meet him.

An important part of "Prodigal Sons" was shot in San Francisco, where Paul McKerrow decided to become Kimberly Reed. Paul went to Cal for undergraduate work and earned a master's in film from San Francisco State. When he made the decision to become a woman, he had neighborhoods, stores and restaurants he would go as Kimberly, and other places he would go as Paul.

"I was working as a freelance editor as I was transitioning, slowly," Reed said. "It's hard enough to graduate from film school and develop a career as a freelance editor, but I was trying to do that with two client bases - one when I was male and one when I was female."

Reed has been traveling on the festival circuit with the film since late 2008 and said she is gratified and a bit surprised by the feedback she has gotten from others who were inspired by or helped by "Prodigal Sons." One person who is transitioning wrote to Reed, "You have made life a little bit easier to live," a note that Reed keeps close by at her home.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the film is her improved relationship with her brother, Marc, who always felt as if he lived in Paul's, and then Kimberly's, shadow.

The film "kind of gave us that thing that made us able to connect," Reed said. "We're kind of like twins in some ways. We had the same friends. We were in the same grade in school. Now I'm closer than ever with Marc."

Marc, it seems, with the help of some Wellesian DNA, finally seems comfortable with his own identity. So is Kimberly.

"I think the reason ('Prodigal Sons') has been connecting with so many people is because it's not just about my story, or my brother's story," Reed said. "It's about how these stories of shifting identities are situated in the terrain of a family, and how that gets worked out."

The Washington Post

Movie review: 'Prodigal Sons'

By [Michael O'Sullivan](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, March 12, 2010

Kimberly Reed started out to make a movie about starting over, but then life got in the way. It didn't make her job harder. It made the movie better.

"Prodigal Sons" begins with footage of Reed's 20th high school reunion, where the transgender documentary filmmaker -- born Paul McKerrow, but now a lesbian called Kim -- first reveals her new identity to her former, and for the most part un-shocked, Montana classmates. So far, so good. It feels like an interesting but somewhat familiar twist on the classic American theme of reinvention. An initially less compelling side story concerns the director's attempt at reconciliation with an estranged brother, Marc, an adoptee with whom she hasn't spoken in 10 years.

Marc, we learn, suffers from wild personality changes, the result of brain damage caused by an automobile accident. There's also a little resentment on his part, given the fact that Kim, back when she was still Paul, was the school's handsome star quarterback, while Marc was, well, not. Now fat, balding and angry at life, Marc is something of a loser. Kimberly, on the other hand, is still blond, successful and gorgeous.

Do these narrative threads even belong in the same movie? The high school reunion plays like an inspirational memoir, while the sibling-rivalry drama comes across like reality television.

Along the way, something happens that fuses the two streams, showing that they are one and the same.

During filmmaking, Marc begins a search for his birth mother, discovering that he has rather more illustrious roots than anyone ever thought. I won't spoil the surprise, but you've almost certainly heard of his maternal grandparents, who were Hollywood icons of the 1940s. Rather than vindicating Marc's sense of self-worth, however, the revelation only strengthens the movie's emerging theme. Slowly, it becomes clear that the movie isn't about the elasticity of identity at all. Rather, it's about the tension between who we want to be and who fate will allow us to become.

There's a lot of talk in the movie about beginnings and endings. The filmmaker speaks about letting go of her former self, about leaving Paul behind and starting over as Kimberly, as though her life were a book, with chapters. She also wants to begin anew with Marc, to put the past 10 years behind her and to move on. Marc would merely love to get his meds straightened out and to go forward strengthened by his newly discovered birthright. His gift for piano playing despite never having had lessons, for instance, is chalked up to his talented ancestry.

But destiny has a way of screwing up the best-laid plans. Slowly, inexorably, Marc deteriorates, winding up temporarily confined to a psychiatric hospital after a frightening episode of violent and self-destructive behavior during family get-togethers.

That's bad news for Kimberly's family, but it makes for a powerful coda to her brave, unflinching film. The human capacity for self-invention may be strong, but it's not limitless, the movie shows. We may not be the same people we were in high school, but neither are we fully authors of our own biographies.

None of us ever really gets to start over. We only continue.



Coming Home

Remarkable doc captures family's joust with trans, gay, and mental health issues

Published: Thursday, February 18, 2010 6:13 PM CST

BY GARY M. KRAMER

Kimberly Reed, the transgendered director of “Prodigal Sons” — a documentary about her family — started making movies when she was growing up as a boy in Helena, Montana. As Paul McKerrow, he filmed his brothers playing parts in Super 8 home movies. Marc, who was adopted, loved being the center of attention and always had the lead. Reed’s brother Todd, who is gay, always played the female.

Now that the children are adults, Reed films her family again. This time, however, the story is very different — and much more painful. Returning home after a long absence, the director hopes to reconcile with her brother Marc, whom she has been estranged from for many years. She is also coming to terms with her own identity, introducing her girlfriend Claire to her family, and reuniting with her high school friends, all of whom are meeting her as a woman for the first time.

What happens in “Prodigal Sons” is, as they say, stranger than fiction. Marc suffers from mental illness that resulted from a head injury he sustained as a young man. He has some frightening onscreen outbursts. What is more, Marc discovers that he is the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. At one point, Kimberly accompanies him on a trip to Croatia to meet Oja Kodar, Welles’ last lover.

Although this resolves some identity issues for Marc, his illness soon gets the best of him. His subsequent fighting with Kimberly — he literally pummels her in one horrific moment — forces the family to deal with Marc’s demons. Yes, much of the film is difficult to watch, but it is also riveting.

In a telephone interview, Reed talked about making “Prodigal Sons” and “balancing” the storytelling by focusing on her relationship with Marc and their simultaneous struggles with identity.

“What I was trying to do with the structure of the film was to make a statement about being transgendered through understatement — letting that issue disappear.” At times, however, Reed reminds viewers of the burdens of her gender identity, as when Marc shows pictures of Kimberly as a boy to folks in Croatia, something that upsets her.

Marc is not always seen in a positive light, but Reed felt she had to be hardest on herself.

“It’s tricky when you work in the first person in any means of expression,” she explained. “The first job you have is to explain yourself and be as tough as you are. Otherwise, it’s a solipsistic journey that others can’t relate to.”

Her personal approach benefits the film immensely. An outsider would not be able to capture the family intimacy Reed does on camera, such as a tense moment when the police are called to prevent Marc from hurting himself and others at a holiday gathering.

“The increasing intimacy develops as the film moves along,” Reed said of its narrative arc. “I don’t think an outsider could ever have been privy to that.”

The filmmaker also defended her decision to show Marc and her family at extremely low moments. Significantly, she argued that “Prodigal Sons” does not exploit her siblings or their mother by presenting this difficult chapter in their lives.

“I have a really amazing, resilient family that is capable of tremendous love and support,” she said. “I knew if I kept the camera rolling, that would come out as much as the challenging times.” Reed added, “What fueled me and my mom, who has become quite an activist, is giving” those with mental illness such as Marc “a voice.”

The juxtaposition of Marc and Kimberly’s stories illustrates the growth Reed went through filming her brother, even when their relationship hit problems.

“When I was making the film, he said, ‘The truth is the truth,’” she recalled. “And, to use a good, overly pretentious word, I was obfuscating. I really learned from Marc how to make peace with my past by admitting that the truth was the truth.”

“Prodigal Sons” takes viewers on an intense emotional journey, but a rewarding one nonetheless. Reed candidly described her film as “a really rich, dense family opera. I thought much more about epic literature and opera and big grandiose structures instead of simple forms.”

As the film played in festivals, Reed felt vindicated.

“What’s been heartening is just seeing people who appreciate those wide swings of emotion in an hour and a half,” she said. “That’s the world that I live in, where there are really exhilarating highs and rough lows that seem insurmountable.”

“Prodigal Sons” is a remarkable story of a family’s transformation, as well as evidence of how much Reed has developed as a person and a filmmaker.

Filmmaker Kimberly Reed offers a sneak peak at the film when she appears at the Center Voices program, LGBT Community Center, 208 West 13th Street, February 23, 6 p.m. Admission is \$10.



Transsexual Lesbian Takes Hollywood!

***Prodigal Sons* director Kimberly Reed fills me in.**

By [Michael Musto](#) Tuesday, Feb 23 2010

Prodigal Sons is just another documentary by a transsexual lesbian from Helena, Montana, who's working out delayed issues with her adopted brother, a bitter but sometimes appealing guy who flies into rages because of an old head injury but calms down on learning that his grandparents were movie legends Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth.

But that's just the initial pitch. What emerges from **Kimberly Reed's** film is a powerful mass of conflicted-family emotion, as frustrations collide with hope and forgiveness to create a riveting picture of people on the edge desperately trying not to push each other off it. I recently paused in the middle of watching *The Lady From Shanghai* to chat with Reed about her achievement.



Richard Koek
Ex-high school quarterback Kimberly Reed

Me: Hi, Kimberly. Congrats on the film. Is it harder for you to come out as a transsexual or a lesbian?

Reed: The hardest of all is both because it totally messes with people's heads. But I personally find it easier to come out as lesbian. It just raises so many more eyebrows when you're trans.

Me: I know! But I was amazed when you and your brother, Marc, went to your high school reunion in the film and the eyebrows stayed put. Is Montana a fairly liberal place?

Reed: Montana defies a lot of expectations. It's one of those purple states. In 2008, they voted in a Democratic House, Senate, and governor, but they voted for McCain. More than anything else, it's a spot where people don't want to be told what to do. Growing up, we didn't even have a speed limit: "No government is gonna tell us how fast we can drive." But the scary thing is, the rule was you had to drive in a "reasonable and prudent manner." Whether they liked your haircut or bumper sticker might affect the decision-making process.

Me: Well, *your* hair's great. But basically, Helena is a long way from Laramie, Wyoming, right?

Reed: Yes. There are a lot of independent thinkers. That's one of the reasons the reception at the reunion was as smooth as it was.

Me: Were you hoping for a lot more conflict there, for the sake of the film?

Reed: We weren't trying to trump anything up, but we were expecting a bit. The big surprise is that the other stuff—the family history—comes roaring back. Being in the context of a reunion where everyone's comparing themselves to everyone else heightened a lot of those comparisons between Marc and me.

Me: If it was one of those BS reality shows, your old classmates would have surely been throwing yearbooks. It's bad enough that your brother flares up with very real homophobic and transphobic rages. Is that his head injury talking?

Reed: When people have a frontal-lobe injury, they lose impulse control, and he certainly did. But while I think his head injury is taking a lid off his inhibitions, I don't think it created any of that. There's deep, complicated background information that's going on in our story. You can't make that stuff up!

Me: Since the film, has Marc's Orson Welles connection meant much to him? *I'd* be working it!

Reed: It was more about his identity—not about finding Hollywood stars. He was most interested in finding if he was gonna lose his hair and go bald!

Me: Well, that's in the female gene, so he might still not know. How about *your* intimate relations? Are you still with Claire, your girlfriend from the film?

Reed: It's brought us closer. This film is the hardest thing I've ever done by far, and that includes transitioning. Putting this story out there put me through a lot of soul searching. The bulk of her support was all the times you don't see—night after night of tossing and turning.

Me: Well, you, she, and Marc are all movie stars now. Get ready for more conflict!

Violet Tendencies

The love child of Orson Welles and Carol Channing, **Lady Bunny** co-stars in the high-pitched Off-Broadway comedy *When Joey Married Bobby*, which has observations like, "**Newt Gingrich** understands the sanctity of marriage. He's had three wives!" Bunny's sparkly pantsuit alone is enough to get gay marriage approved in the purple states.

Bathed in not-so-mellow yellow, **the Blonds'** fashion show was a glittery success, starting with a creature in a gorilla suit ripping it off and turning out to be **Phillipe Blond** as the crowd went apeshit. In the front row, I ran into my favorite mammal, **Patrick McDonald**, who had a good sense of humor about **Andrea Peyser's** insane contention in the *Post* that he looks ready for a circus or a homeless shelter. "I'd like to treat her to a ticket to the Big Top," cracked the oft-photographed dandy, "but she'll have to pick it up at a homeless shelter!"

Some big tops—and bottoms, too—are lining up to see the revival of **Mart Crowley's** pivotal play *The Boys in the Band*, about a bunch of gays burying their angst in cracked crab, Hermès sweaters, and sadistic parlor games. The environmental production, which places you smack-dab in the lead character's apartment, is uneven but bold and dark (literally, you can't see faces a lot of the time), and this time around, you tend to notice the work's extra haunting facets, like how it starts with a flippant discussion of someone with a virus!

DETAILS

THE AMAZING TALE OF THE HIGH SCHOOL QUARTERBACK TURNED LESBIAN FILMMAKER

Growing up, she was Paul, the smart, popular golden boy QB everyone envied. Now, as Kimberly Reed, she's something more.

By [Rick Moody](#),

Photographs by [Mark Heithoff](#)

January 2010 Issue

High-school quarterbacks, it's reasonable to assume, look upon their high-school reunions as moments of triumph. Oh, those romantic conquests! Oh, those hagiographic articles in the local press, those tailgate parties, those long-ago legends—let us now relive them! What could be more *Friday Night Lights*, therefore, than the 20th reunion of Helena, Montana's own Paul McKerrow, who was not only Helena High's starting quarterback and football co-captain but its class valedictorian and the student voted most likely to succeed? Those of us who languished on the sidelines of high-school life can only imagine such a return. But was the grand entrance we're imagining here really the stuff of local history? Or was it something else?

Because Paul McKerrow, it must be said, is no longer Paul McKerrow. He is, these days, Kimberly Reed, filmmaker, New Yorker, and transgender person. It was Kimberly who in 2005 strode into the 20th reunion for Paul, and who got light-headed enough to wear her name tag, which had her new name, and an old photo of her former self. It was Kimberly who in the months after the reunion made a very moving documentary about it, [Prodigal Sons](#), to be released in theaters in late February by First Run Features and broadcast on the Sundance Channel in June.

Let's go back a little bit: Once, there was an upstanding ophthalmologist out West, who, with his wife, was unable to start a family. They adopted a bundle of joy, therefore, in 1966, and then, as is often the way with such things, they managed to conceive almost instantly, maybe even the very day their first child arrived home. When that second baby was born, at a nearby Army hospital, the doctors took one look and said, "Oh, it's a little baby girl!" And then, "Oh, wait a moment . . ." And thus began Paul's life of gender-related ironies. Just over a year later, a third son likewise arrived the old-fashioned biological way, and so the prodigal sons were assembled.

Marc, the adopted son, had problems almost immediately. Not given to concentrating, he was unable to settle down in preschool, and the educators encouraged the McKerrows to hold him back a year. Unfortunately for Marc, he then landed in the very same grade as his unadopted younger brother, Paul, the Golden Boy. "There was always this rivalry between us," Kimberly Reed says now, from the vantage point of her early forties, and this is understatement of the sort that only a woman could fashion to describe the behavior of men.

Since I am already committing the sin of journalism, let me pause to observe that by any barometer, Reed, despite being over six feet and having the lean physique of an athlete, is a stunning and

beautiful woman, **The Amazing Tale of the High School Quarterback Turned Lesbian Filmmaker**

(Continued)

which is to say that she could pass, which is a political statement in certain redoubts of the transgender community. Kimberly Reed can pass, though the heroic journey of Paul McKerrow has made this less important to her, if relevant at all. She is blonde, modest; smiles easily. She has none of the stoic, determined, slightly overcalibrated femininity that I sometimes associate with women who have transitioned. On the contrary, Kim Reed is a little goofy, with a bit of the former straight-A student about her. If anything, she's what you would expect of a woman who grew up in Montana, whose grandparents worked the land, and whose extended family still does.

I met Reed at one of those artists' colonies, the one called Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, New York. She was there crafting a screenplay while I was finishing my fifth novel, and I remember well the night she strode into the Linoleum Room looking for mail, because I thought, Extremely tall and very pretty and startlingly normal. Not another art-colony head case! We had some friends in common. So I was interested and intrigued when Reed volunteered, a night or two later, that she was going to show a small group of us her film in the drawing room. I don't know what I was expecting from *Prodigal Sons*, but certainly not the harrowing family drama that ensued, in which Reed's transition from male to female is only the first and most obvious layer.

In high school, see, she would do anything to be taken for a boy, so much so that she says, "If someone had tortured me back then and asked me if I had these feelings about gender, I think I could have successfully resisted giving up the secret." Does this mean that Paul's confusion about gender dates to his earliest memory? According to Kim, that's exactly what it means, that when he looked in the mirror, he worried that he saw a girl, and when he made movies with his brothers—"The Mad Doctor" and "Rocky," for example—he made sure that he never played the ingenue parts (these roles, almost invariably called "Lady," were assigned to the youngest brother, Todd). Beneath the surface of Paul's seemingly placid Rocky Mountain life was the feeling that, though he was attracted to girls, he wasn't anything like a boy and had never been. In the rural West, this can't have been a frequently encountered complaint, this discomfort with one's sex, and Kim refers to Renee Richards, the 1970s transgender tennis pro (born Richard Raskind), as one of the few public examples of sexual reassignment that she knew anything about. Faced with so much uncertainty, so much discomfort, Paul did assume the one kind of drag, the one kind of masquerade that would loft him above scrutiny in the matter of gender. Paul joined the high-school football team.

True, it was not a very good team, and he wasn't even varsity until senior year. They had a losing record with Paul as quarterback, and yet he still represented much of what young men imagine they want to be, blond and considerably handsome, with a charming smile and a graceful determination, even as opposing linemen were bearing down on him. He was a good leader, on the field and off. "Quarterback is about marshaling all these burly guys and trying to get them to do your bidding," Reed says. "I think I was good at it. I think I was a good leader in high school." And yet Reed's recollection of the big games is of "anxiety" and not much else—the anxiety of tossing the perfect spiral, the anxiety of confronting the crosstown rivals and their threats of violence, and the anxiety of losing yet again. Still, the one thing the high-school football team did indisputably bestow on Reed was the elusive masculine street cred. A credibility that, in this case, might have allowed Paul to lead something like a normal childhood, to the best of his ability, one with best friends, movies, records, driving downtown on a Saturday night prowling for girls, and so on. No one, not a soul, knew what was happening under the surface. When asked what sustained Kim while Paul was her daily performance, Reed is quiet for a while and then alludes to noncontroversial influences like *Monty Python* and Penelope Spheeris' *Decline of Western Civilization*. Not exactly girly, and probably more distracting than sustaining, but still decidedly out of step with the prevailing Mellencamp and country-and-western culture of Montana. Paul also found time "to read every book on transitioning in the Helena public library."

The Amazing Tale of the High School Quarterback Turned Lesbian Filmmaker

(Continued)

It was when Paul McKerrow went to UC Berkeley, to get far, far away from Montana, to study rhetoric, art history, and film, that he began to see that he could and would become Kimberly. It was not a transition without conflict—they never are—but Reed took it slowly ("In retrospect I now realize I was comparatively young, and it actually didn't take me inordinately long to transition, but it felt dreadfully slow at the time"). A year abroad in Norway in the late eighties, with a lot of time spent on his own, began the process. And by the time Paul matriculated at San Francisco State in 1990, in pursuit of an M.A. in film, he was in his mid-twenties and living part of the time as Paul and part as Kim. The Bay Area was a safe place to begin this daunting process. Even so, on one occasion, upon encountering an old friend, a guy, while wearing the outfits that were more Kim's than Paul's, she ran and hid behind a tree. Gradually, however, Kim began to let go of Paul. Eventually, she was done. Paul McKerrow checked into San Francisco as a former high-school quarterback, and Kim Reed checked out as a lesbian filmmaker.

There's another kind of high-school-reunion experience—the kind in which the infamous party animal returns to the site of the crime. Here the path is much less glamorous, if well-worn. Here there is, arguably, some regret, if there is also pride for an adolescence lived to the fullest. Something along these lines might well have been Marc McKerrow's experience at the Helena High reunion. To understand Marc McKerrow, you have to know a little about Thrill Hill, just outside downtown Helena, where you tried to crest the summit in your father's Buick Riviera, let's say, at the highest possible speed, before the road veered hard right at the underpass, the one with the cement pilings. Marc McKerrow holds the Thrill Hill speed record, according to Kim. He was also stopped by the authorities driving his father's car at 120 mph outside Helena once. And in his later teens he stole his dad's credit card, too, and rented a suite at the best hotel downtown, and invited everyone to come and party. He was used to wresting the limelight from his brother the quarterback ("He has an inability to be embarrassed," Reed says of Marc); if he wasn't good at school, he was great on the weekends. At least, that is, until the accident. He was driving his Chevy Blazer, with the tinted windows and the vanity plates (BLKBLZR). Paul was away, beginning the process of becoming Kim, when Marc totaled his SUV after his 21st-birthday celebration in Vegas and sustained a massive head injury.

Massive: meaning that part of his front brain eventually had to be removed. Meaning that he had a "personality change," which is a polite way to describe significant brain damage, impulse-control problems, seizures. Of this last: Marc had multiple surgeries to relieve the seizures, but afterward he required even more medication, both for neurological symptoms and for emotional ones, and though he was able to marry (a startlingly patient woman) and to produce a daughter (quite sweet), he was never much able to work.

The Amazing Tale of the High School Quarterback Turned Lesbian Filmmaker (Continued)

Because of his persistent short-term-memory issues, Marc is preoccupied with the distant past, with the time he can remember, with the particulars of his adoptive family, the minutiae—family photos in great profusion, Paul's skis, a baseball hat that Paul and Marc shared in high school—and of course with stories, all this material from the time before his accident. When Kim was Paul, when all three boys were in school together, and he, Marc, was "more popular" than either of his brothers. For Marc, events of the present—like family get-togethers, visits for the holidays—are furrowed under in this constant need to talk about those years, to talk about high school, the good times, to enumerate the rights and wrongs committed by family members, the moments of glory, the injustices, and the football-playing brother he seemed to both admire and dislike in equal measure (in the film he once calls Kim Paul in a fit of anger). And sometimes when Marc doesn't get the response he wants, there are bouts of cruelty, tongue lashings that go on and on and on, or, worse, explosions (and some of these are depicted in *Prodigal Sons*, to gruesome and painful effect) in which things around the house, pictures and dishes, are busted up, knives brandished, threats leveled, and so on. The Marc McKerrow of youth was bad, but bad in a way that some people found likable and even amusing. The Marc McKerrow of adulthood is hurt, confused, broken, and besieged from all sides. He veers among arrogant, defeated, and paranoid.

This, then, was the McKerrow constituency for the 20th high-school reunion in Helena: not just Kimberly Reed, the transgender filmmaker from New York City, but Marc McKerrow, the fun-loving partier, now replaced by Marc McKerrow, the forgetful, slightly impaired, and heavily medicated guy occasionally given to violence. The reunion attendees, 200-odd, knew about Kim, because she had come home for her father's funeral, knew to expect her to be a her, but most of them knew nothing about Marc. He had spent the decades suffering largely in silence, hadn't even successfully graduated from high school in the first place, so his name tag had to be hand-lettered on the spot with no photo on it.

In the months before the reunion, Marc decided to learn more about his biological parents. There was information only on his biological mother. She too had lived something of a helter-skelter life, sometimes in squats, sometimes not in the best of shape. But there was a lot of information about Marc's grandparents, because Marc's mother, the free spirit, the hippie, was the daughter of two of the most famous entertainment figures of all time—the very biggest names in Hollywood. What if the couple was Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth? By the time Marc was in touch with his mother, by the time he was sure he wanted to meet with her, she was on her deathbed. No meeting ever took place. His grandparents were gone too. However, Marc McKerrow did, after the reunion, find himself in touch with Orson Welles' last great love, Oja Kodar, the Croatian star of *F for Fake*. Soon he was off to the Balkans to meet her, having never before set foot outside the USA. Somehow, through the agency of a specifically American fate, from the great citadel of show business, Marc had fallen into the family of an ophthalmologist out in Big Sky country. And all the while, despite the malevolent scar on his head, it was clear that he really was the spitting image of the director of *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*.

If this all sounds kind of farcical, it's because it's hard to document in a mere recitation of the facts. You begin to get a sense of the darker shadows in the McKerrow clan when you see the video footage they shot of themselves, which culminates in *Prodigal Sons* itself. In one of Paul's childhood films, "Mad Doctors," for example, Marc plays the "Crazy Kid," who is given to Incredible Hulk-like fits of acting-out, and Kim feels certain that even then she was trying to understand his "erratic behavior," and then there's Todd, who came out as gay while Kim was transitioning, cast in numerous cross-dressing roles. At the same time, the father also lugged around primitive video equipment, and filmed the big football games. He filmed the holidays. The McKerrows are nearly as film-addicted as the Friedmans of *Capturing the Friedmans*. And so perhaps it's a matter of course that despite Kim's inability to talk at length about her own hardships, she is completely willing to document Marc, as he is willing to be violent for all to see. I asked Kim why, in the scene in *Prodigal Sons* in which she is getting beaten by her brother, she didn't hit back. Though she said that "not hitting him back may be a typically feminine response," it's not that she recoiled because she is given to typically feminine responses ("I feel like I'm making peace with both sides of myself") but that she still cares about her brother, no matter his dire circumstances.

The Amazing Tale of the High School Quarterback Turned Lesbian Filmmaker (Continued)

So instead of demonizing Marc, let's situate him too at the reunion, dancing a bit to the classics from the eighties, or recounting, for the umpteenth time, that he has a brain injury and isn't able to work. And maybe somewhere, in some back room at the hotel in question, Marc finds a piano, settles himself down to do some of his uncanny piano playing, which has a Windham Hill quality to it—all improvised, all very pretty, all completely untutored.

The *bad boy* has his part to play at the high-school reunion, and it's less predictable and more mixed than the cocksure guy he once was. There's a poetry there, a poetry of time literally lost. And what about the high-school quarterback? In the transgender community, Reed says, "it's bad form to talk about your childhood"—your gender dysphoria—"unless you have to." It's all the more courageous, then, that this filmmaker did show up at her 20th high-school reunion wearing a name tag with the picture of Paul on it. And maybe in so doing, without ever getting falling-down drunk or hitting on her best friend's wife, or tailgating, or stealing the crosstown rivals' mascot, she was the life of the party. There was even a welcome from many of her classmates. She brought along her partner, Claire, and she wore a short skirt and smiled gracefully, and she danced some, and she was patient with her brother—and she did all this without ever denying her inner quarterback, the one who knew about the West Coast Offense and lionized Joe Montana. In fact, it was here that she began celebrating Paul. And in this way she embodied a cherished *masculine ideal*: She told the truth about herself without regret and without apology to whoever asked. "The numbers are off slightly," says Reed, "but bear with me here: I spent the first third of my life pretending not to be a girl, and the second third of my life pretending not to have been a boy." Not too many get to travel down this road, and here I'm not necessarily referring to Kimberly Reed's knowing something true and important about both genders—though that *is* heroic. Here I'm referring to something equally rare: She had a good reunion.



Prodigal Sons

Director: [Kimberly Reed](#)

Cast: Kimberly Reed, Carol McKerrow, Marc McKerrow, Claire Jones, Oja Kodar

By [Cynthia Fuchs](#)

PopMatters Film and TV Editor

I think what I've found is this pretty interesting hole in the theory that there's actually such a thing as a real man or a real woman.

—Kate Bornstein, [My Gender Workbook \(Routledge 1997\)](#)

"I was just playing whatever my lovely fingers played. That's the thing I don't understand. I don't know where it came from." Puzzled and also pleased by his ability to play the piano, Marc McKerrow figures there's a reason for it. If he learned at one point in his life, he can't remember it. Marc doesn't have much hold on his own past, for a number of reasons. For one thing, he's adopted, with no information regarding his birth parents. For another, he says, "I had a horrible accident when I was young, I rolled my truck." A couple of years later, when he was just 23, he goes on, "I had part of my brain removed, so it's been a tough one."

It's still a tough one. As revealed in the documentary *Prodigal Sons*, Marc continues to suffer mood swings, sometimes leading to aggression that frightens his family and, when he thinks about it, Marc as well. "The most precise diagnosis he'd gotten," says filmmaker Kim Reed, "was 'personality change due to head injury.'" Her movie is partly about Marc, who worries that he's not the man he wants to be, not a good husband to Debbie or father to their daughter. His focus on family, as a source of both identity and difficulty, is also Kim's. Not only is she Marc's sister, but she also used to be his brother, Paul. Now living in New York City, she's come home for a high school reunion after two decades away from Helena, Montana, where she, Mac, and their other brother Todd grew up.

"My classmates had heard about me," Kim reports as she drives into town, "but this was the first time most of them would actually see me." The moment of seeing is another tough one. Kim has worked hard to leave her past behind, not discussing her previous life with current friends and not looking at pictures or videos of herself as a high school quarterback (including an announcer's enthusiastic commentary: "I wouldn't be surprised a bit if he went to a major college"). "Do you know who I am?" she asks an old acquaintance. When she discovers that her story has preceded her arrival, Kim changes her question: "Does anybody in the city not know who I am by now?"

As Kim comes to discover and discuss in *Prodigal Sons*, this formulation—"Who I am"—is exceedingly complicated. While most people assume that they possess a single and stable identity, recognizable from moment to moment, even year to year, she and her brothers, along with their mother Carol, are faced with questions concerning their identities and memories, pretty much daily. Here the question of identity is

focused through gender—itself an arbitrary binary system. As Kim tries to explain differences between sexuality and gender to a friend at the reunion, the ambiguities and indefinities only begin to surface.

If Kim, as she says more than once, has left her own memories behind, Marc is struggling to recover and make sense of his. His questions have to do with his birth parents, his physical trauma, and his loss of memory. They also have to do, crucially, with the memories he does maintain, which appear to be primarily of his childhood rivalry with Paul. Awkward and hard-drinking as a teenager, Marc discloses that he resented Paul's apparent prowess (even as Kim insists on her own turmoil at the time: "If being masculine meant throwing a football, then I was going to throw the perfect spiral. I thought that would fix me and that it would prove to me and to everyone else that I was normal"). The film presents several confrontations (including a blow-out during Christmas when Marc laments Paul being a "pussy"), each ending differently. Kim has one story in mind for her return to Helena, but runs smack into Marc's. "I just wanted us to be able to move on, but before I knew it, we were exactly where we left off."

Maybe not exactly. The past in *Prodigal Sons* is pervasive and formidable, to be sure, but it is hardly fixed. While the film sets events in some sort of chronology—this black and white photo shows the boys as children, that grainy footage captures a 20-year-old football game—and presents exchanges among the siblings in which they recount what happened when, the point is that each has versions of the past, and that none is exactly in tune with the others. At times, the movie's narration is too explicit (Kim looks out on a sensational Big Sky sunset as she sorts out, "I felt like Marc would have given anything to be the man I'd give anything not to be"), and at times, the camera's point of view is overtly manipulative (watching Kim walk away from an argument, so frustrated). But if the movie can't answer the questions it poses—what makes a "real man," as Marc calls himself, what makes memory, and what makes family—it doesn't let them go, either.

For all his fury and confusion, Marc articulates the essential irresolution of identity, the shifts in relations that frame and maybe undermine the fiction of coherent selves. "I don't know about you," he asserts:

But the truth is the truth, and if you can't just bring out a little bit and piece of where she came from and what she was all about, then the truth of the story isn't there, because that's the reality of what my life's all about, and that's the reality of what Kim's life is all about. She can't say she's always been where she's been.

Marc's pursuit of a truth, his belief in a "where she's been," as well as where he's been, remains unfinished in *Prodigal Sons*. As Marc insists, on occasion, to have found "the real me," the film suggests that the "bit and piece" of each brother's past can't result in a single "reality." The returns of all three sons—to Helena, to Carol, and to one another—lead to painful excavations, some understandings, and occasional revelations. But the returns don't end anything, they only restart the process of storytelling.

Rating:  8