

THE STAIRS



A FILM BY HUGH GIBSON

PRESS KIT

The Stairs follows the triumphs and heartbreaks of three resilient people, who perform social work while struggling with their own addictions, told over five turbulent years.

THE STAIRS

DIRECTOR & PRODUCER:	Hugh Gibson
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:	Alan Zweig
CINEMATOGRAPHER:	Cam Woykin & Hugh Gibson
EDITORS:	Andres Landau & Ryan J. Noth
SOUND:	Finlay Braithwaite, Gabe Knox, Lucas Prokaziuk, Marcel Ramagnano
GENRE:	Documentary
LENGTH:	95 minutes
FORMAT:	DCP, Colour, 1.78:1, 5.1 Stereo
SALES:	Grasshopper Film (Digital & Edu., N. America) Midnight Lamp Films (All other, Worldwide)
AWARDS:	Toronto Film Critics Association (2016) Winner: Rogers Best Canadian Film Award
Regent Park Film Festival (2016) Winner: Audience Award	RIDM (Montreal Int'l Doc Festival, 2016) Runner-up: Magnus-Isacsson Jury, Student Jury
Toronto Film Critics Assoc. (2016) Runner-up: Best Documentary Award	Canadian Cinema Editors Awards (2017) Nominee: Best Editing, Feature Documentary
SCREENING HIGHLIGHTS:	Toronto International Film Festival (2016) <i>(World Premiere)</i>
Mar del Plata Int'l Film Festival (2017) <i>(International Premiere)</i>	Jeonju International Film Festival (2017) <i>(Asian Premiere)</i>
Maryland Film Festival (2017) <i>(U.S. Premiere)</i>	Museum of the Moving Image (2018) <i>(New Adventures in Nonfiction series)</i>
BAMcinématek (2018) <i>(Reel Impact series)</i>	Metrograph (2018) <i>(New York City Premiere)</i>
Goa Int'l Film Festival of India (2018)	Guangzhou Int'l Documentary Festival (2018)
VOD PREMIERE:	MUBI "Canada's Next Generation" series (2018)

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ABOUT THE FILM

The Stairs follows three people who use their experiences surviving decades of drug use and sex work to help their community. Told over five years, their surprising stories reveal a world often misunderstood. Exec-Produced by Alan Zweig (Director of TIFF & Hot Docs prize-winners: *Hurt*, *When Jews Were Funny*, *A Hard Name*).

Marty, Greg and Roxanne live and work in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood, where they have lived and survived decades of street life. Each is funny, articulate, surprising: mother, grandfather, poet – and a habitual drug user. Performing outreach in their community – trying to give back – they struggle with tenuous lifestyles and past choices. With incredible access, this character-driven film follows each person from 2011, creating intimate portraits that challenge preconceptions.

Subject Bios:

Marty:

A crack user for 22 years, Marty performs outreach for his community's homeless and drug using populations. After living in stairwells for years, things are stable – until an incident and old habits suddenly threaten everything.

Roxanne:

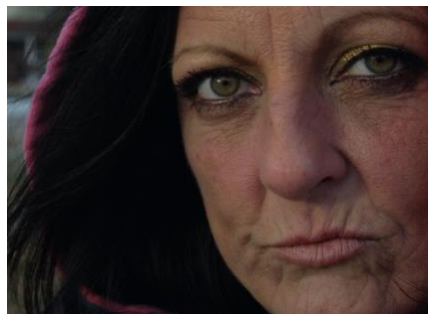
A sex worker for decades, Roxanne is now a social worker. Her witty, wicked sense of humour masks her daily struggles with a dark, painful past. Like Marty and Greg, she works in harm reduction – a non-judgmental approach to health care.

Greg:

At the start of filming in 2011, Greg has recently gone back to school and is working steadily. After a run-in with police, combined with his ongoing struggles with crack use and housing, Greg's situation changes dramatically. He then tries to maintain his dignity in severe circumstances.



Marty



Roxanne



Greg

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Each character in *The Stairs* leads a volatile life, where progress can be difficult to gauge. Defining the direction they're heading in their own narrative can be tricky. The stairs are also a very real place: somewhere to use, work, sleep and even die.

In a dramatic, transitional period for Toronto, the complex struggles of these characters continue to intensify. Given Canada's changing legislation regarding drug policy and sex work, and ongoing debates about violence against women, the material has never been more relevant. While the film's location is specific, its stories are universal. Greg's encounter with police is but one example. The same conflicts with public health, housing and crime happen everywhere: there's a Regent Park in most cities.

Since 2011, I've been granted remarkable access to vastly misunderstood and misrepresented lifestyles. There are many films about poverty, drug use and sex work, but very few that allowed subjects to take ownership of their stories, using the film as a conduit for their own self-expression.

As I got to know Marty, Roxanne, Greg and others in their community, I felt that I'd rarely seen their experiences on film, and rarely seen anything that captured the essence of their personalities: funny, warm, unapologetic; focused on family and their community.

In a large community of under-serviced individuals, many yearn for expressive outlets. Together we saw the film as a way of capturing the honesty of their experiences; revealing their perspectives. I wanted to see, understand and feel stories that don't get reported.

Harm reduction remains unknown to most North Americans, despite affecting millions. Like the film's subjects, its non-judgmental approach to health care has often been ignored, or hidden in plain sight. A crucial element of harm reduction is dignity. In my film, each character seeks to attain or restore it, and is routinely denied. It's also integral to my artistic approach. Subjects spoke for themselves and I strove to accurately capture their stories. Understanding their perspectives and giving them a voice is significant, given the community's rampant stigma and discrimination. Dignity was part of technique, as well as subtext.

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BIOS

Director/Producer: Hugh Gibson

A graduate of York University (BFA: Film), Gibson participated in the Berlinale Talent Campus ('05), TIFF's Talent Lab ('06) and TIFF STUDIO ('12). Selected credits include writing/directing the acclaimed short drama, *Hogtown Blues* ('04: TIFF, Bilbao: Audience Award), and producing short doc *A Tomb with a View* ('14: TIFF, VIFF). He produced *A Place Called Los Pereyra* ('09, IDFA, RIDM, BAFICI), which screened extensively in Latin America and Canada. *The Stairs* is his feature debut as director. He lives in Toronto.

Executive Producer: Alan Zweig

Alan Zweig is among the most respected directors in Canada. His films include, *Hurt* ('15), which premiered at TIFF, winning the Platform Prize, and later a Canadian Screen Award for Best Documentary, and *When Jews Were Funny*, which won Best Canadian film at TIFF ('13). His many laurels include a Genie Award for *A Hard Name* ('09), and career retrospectives at Hot Docs and the Winnipeg Film Group. Other films include *There is a House Here*, *Hope*, *15 Reasons to Live*, *Lovable*, *I Curmudgeon*, and *Vinyl*.

Cinematographer: Cam Woykin

Born in Calgary, graduate of University of Lethbridge, and York University (MFA: film production). His films, installations, and photography have been exhibited at festivals (including TIFF), galleries, and alternative spaces across Canada and internationally. He maintains an active practice as a media arts instructor, encouraging experimental and hybrid approaches to narrative filmmaking. He previously taught at OCAD, and currently teaches film and video production at the University of New Brunswick.

Editor: Ryan J. Noth

Multi-platform filmmaker, editor, and producer, whose work has screened at Berlinale, SXSW and Rotterdam, as well as winning both Genie and Gemini Awards. As director, his short doc, *The Road to Webequie*, premiered at TIFF ('16) and was nominated for a Canadian Screen Award, and his short docs, *Beyond The Horizon* ('15) and *A Tomb With A View* ('14) also premiered at TIFF. Credits include *The National Parks Project*, *No Heart Feelings* and *Gros Morne*. As a documentary editor, credits include *A Place Called Los Pereyra* and Tess Girard's *As The Crow Flies*.

Editor: Andres Landau

With over 15 years experience, Argentina-native Andres Landau is an award-winning editor and post-supervisor. Recently, he edited Charles Officer's award-winning, *Unarmed Verses* ('17). In 2011, he oversaw post-production for *The National Parks Project*, and edited *Sirmilik*, the 2012 Genie Award winning short documentary by director Zacharias Kunuk. Selected credits include *The Missing Tourist*, *Cree Code Talker*, *Mission Asteroid*, *A Tomb with a View*, *Warm Man*, *Dead of Winter*, *A Simple Rhythm*, *A Place Called Los Pereyra*.

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NOTES ON PRODUCTION

The Stairs' genesis was in 2011: I directed two educational films commissioned by Regent Park non-profit agencies, detailing harm reduction programs for sex workers and substance users. I developed close ties with many clients and the projects became far more personal than I could have imagined. The projects focused on clients' voices and personal experiences, unfiltered and unrehearsed. Inspired by their concern for one another, while they courageously combated discrimination and personal demons, I also witnessed first-hand some of their hardships. Together, participants and I were quickly compelled to go further, uninhibited. Those films were deemed a success in the community and opened doors for me. The bonds I formed, along with my non-judgmental approach, afforded me intimate access.

The Stairs' title comes from a poem written by Marty, which he performs in the film. He wrote it before filming began in 2011, and surprised me by performing it. In the poem, Marty recalls his days and nights spent living in stairwells.

During an initial group meeting with subjects to discuss the documentary, one subject asked, "How do you know if the movie will have a happy ending?" Before I could respond, someone immediately interjected, "That depends on us, doesn't it." That moment immediately stood out and stayed with me. The person who said it, Lisa, was intended to be a lead character. Soon after, she passed away suddenly, before principal photography commenced.

Alan Zweig's *A Hard Name* ('09), is the most intimate documentary I've seen about poverty. Zweig's startlingly honest examination of ex-cons, connected by experiences with childhood sexual trauma, is raw and minimalist: like its characters, the film is laid bare. Subjects are presented respectfully, without pretence or judgment. After I'd made the educational films in 2011, we were introduced by a mutual friend. He attached himself to the film and remained a valued advisor throughout the entire process.

The film was made over the course of 5 years. Typically, the crew was limited to 2 people, or sometimes just myself alone with the subjects.

During production, I explored people's memories through location. Inviting subjects to select a space with particular meaning, we created scenes around it. It could involve conducting an interview, sharing an experience, reciting poetry. Locations varied: street corners, parks, apartments – the choice was entirely theirs, allowing participants to take ownership of their stories, sharing in a meaningful way for them, letting them speak through my camera. I told them I want to be surprised: show me something new, something about your life that nobody understands. Responses ranged widely, taking me to current and former haunts (e.g. a hidden user's space called "Field of Dreams"). Roxanne showed me her old corner. Marty wanted to show his t-shirt collection (purchased with "drug money: money (he) would have spent on drugs").

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Budget under \$100,000, primarily funded by Arts Councils.

A 25 min excerpt of the work in progress was screened at the 2015 International Harm Reduction Conference in Kuala Lumpur, in a red carpet ceremony for AIDS research, attended by heads of state.

In summer 2015, a 60 min excerpt of the work in progress was screened at Harm Reduction Coalition in New York for a monthly peer group of similar ages and life experiences to those depicted in the film. The response was overwhelmingly positive, particularly that the film's stories mirrored those of people in NYC, and their feedback was incorporated into the final film.

This is the third collaboration between myself and Ryan Noth, Andres Landau and Finlay Braithwaite. We previously worked on *Los Pereyra* and *A Tomb with a View*.

This is my feature debut as director. I previously produced the feature doc, *A Place Called Los Pereyra* (www.lospereyra.com). The Argentina-set film was praised by critics and filmmakers (including Carlos Reygadas, Cannes Best Director: *Post Tenebras Lux*). Screened extensively in Latin America and Canada (ran for nine weeks in Toronto), played in Best New Argentine Films series at Buenos Aires Cinematheque (2010).

This was my third film at TIFF. I wrote/directed short drama, *Hogtown Blues* ('04) and produced short doc *A Tomb with a View* ('14).

SELECTED PRAISE FOR THE STAIRS

[Globe & Mail](#) "One of the Best Toronto films ever made. Unforgettable." [Barry Hertz]

[Toronto Star](#) "**Sarah Polley** called *The Stairs*, "a huge contribution to the country and to everybody. Because it's shining a light on something we don't see and that's so shockingly inspiring, what these subjects of the documentary are doing, in terms of giving back to their community while facing their own struggles. The film is so respectful to them and I loved it."

[RogerEbert.com](#) "Riveting", "Exquisite", "With an attention to nuance worthy of Kartemquin."

[NOW Magazine](#) "The 10 Best Toronto Movies of the Decade" (Ranked #2) [Radheyana Simonpillai]

[Filmmaker Magazine](#) "One of the best documentaries of the year... has an intelligence and humanism reminiscent of Allan King, paying attention to people, their behaviour and self-articulation, without trying to fit the material into some convenient message-driven box."

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POV “Extraordinary.... *The Stairs* will endure in the history of Ontario documentary filmmaking.” [Adam Nayman]

Little White Lies “A sensitive and important portrait... a vital and emotional feature debut.” [Manuela Lazic]

MUBI Notebook “Hugh Gibson’s feature film debut represents the arrival of a major new voice.” [Michael Sicinski]

TFCA “What makes *The Stairs* so revelatory is Gibson’s maturity as a filmmaker, putting aside assumptions to document a world that is tragic, yet simultaneously poetic.”

Cinema Scope “Fascinating... striking... Gibson’s sympathetic, perfectly distanced, humanely engaged camera... gets us far deeper into the complicated reality of drug dependence and recovery than standard television-style docs can reach.” [Shelley Kracier]

Sean Baker (Director, *The Florida Project*): “Important filmmaking for our times.”

Gabor Mate (Author, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*) “A gripping film. Beautifully and sensitively captures the anguish, humanity and individual personhood of its subjects.”

Johann Hari (Author, *Chasing the Scream*) “A haunting and beautiful film, that everyone who cares about addiction – or humanity – should watch.”

Postmedia “Five stars (out of five). One of the year’s best films.” (Ottawa Citizen, Calgary Herald, Edmonton Journal) [Chris Knight]

CBC “Eye-opening... This poignant documentary will change how you look at street life.” [Tina Hassannia]

Georgia Straight “*The Stairs* delivers humanizing portraits... needed more now than ever before.”

Winnipeg Free Press “...timely, intelligent and important Canadian documentary. Compassionate and intimate, the film finds its hope in the complicated humanity of its subjects.”

Reverse Shot “...the camera becomes fully entrenched in the lives captured. If it is still true that the only ending is when you’re dead, as Marty says, then it might also be the case that the difficult moments leading up to this inevitable conclusion can also alleviate some of the pain and suffering through communal endeavor—which could very well include the work of documentary making itself.” [Josh Cabrita]

Toronto Film Scene “This is one of the finest docs ever produced about life in Toronto. To call it essential would actually be selling it short.”

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LINKS AND CONTACTS

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