

Home movies

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

Good documentaries reveal the truth. Better documentaries ask, What is truth? *Capturing the Friedmans* is a great documentary because of the way it suggests there is no absolute truth about this family in turmoil. The film, which won the Grand Jury Prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival, is the debut feature of Andrew Jarecki, the man who founded Moviefone and made a bundle selling it to AOL.

The film begins on Thanksgiving Eve 1987, when the Friedman house is raided by police who discover child pornography belonging to the family patriarch, Arnold, an award-winning math teacher and respected member of the community. His entire family is stunned, especially his wife, Elaine. The situation then gets worse: Arnold and his 18-year-old son, Jesse, are accused of committing rape and sodomy in an after-school computer class that they taught together.

From that point the film follows two separate paths in an attempt to encompass the story. The first path deals with evidence of the crime itself. To that end, Jarecki interviews policemen, lawyers, judges, writers, victims, friends and family, including Arnold's younger brother, Howard, who may have been the first person Arnold molested when they slept together in the same room as boys. (Arnold claims he did. Howard doesn't remember it.) The second path charts the Friedmans' complex family relationship, which turns out to have a huge impact on the legal case itself.

Arnold and Elaine have three sons: David, a clown for children's parties; Seth, who chose not to participate in the making of the film; and Jesse, the youngest. David is at the center of the film because it was through him that Jarecki was reminded of the notorious case. Jarecki was originally doing a film about children's entertainers when David told him that yes, he was that David Friedman. He also said he had many hours of videotape he had shot of his family. It is during the viewing of these painful videotapes that viewers discover the malignant family dynamics.

The three sons adored Arnold, a quirky, funny man who had left college to play in a mambo band under the name "Arnito Rey." They defended him to the hilt, willing to overlook his penchant for lewd pictures of young boys, figuring that this was as far

as the sexual obsession went--and this was what they needed to believe.

But Elaine wasn't so sure. Theirs had never been a particularly close or romantic relationship, and if one sordid thing might be true, why not another? As a result, she was unwilling to stand behind Arnold the way the sons expected, which led to her being even more ostracized from the group.

Jarecki reveals information in the same order that he discovers it--which gives viewers time to digest each bit of evidence before encountering something that might contradict it. This approach keeps us on our toes, since we're never quite sure we've heard the whole story.

As the film progresses and the verbal evidence against Arnold mounts (there was never any physical evidence), Jarecki's second path becomes even more important. In a stunning move that infuriates his sons, Arnold decides to plead guilty, rationalizing that this may, in some curious way, help Jesse. But in one of the movie's most revealing moments, Elaine postulates that Arnold needed to go to jail not for the crime he was accused of, but for everything else--real and imagined--that he did over the years.

In an ironic twist, Arnold's confession, instead of exonerating Jesse, all but guarantees that he too will be imprisoned. After all, if Arnold is guilty and Jesse was there, how could he be innocent? (Amazingly, Arnold made no deal for Jesse when he pled guilty.) And sure enough, Jesse has the book thrown at him, despite the sneaky attempt by his storefront attorney to pass the buck back to the old man by claiming that Arnold molested Jesse (a claim they both deny).

It is with Jesse's imprisonment that the greater moral dilemma of the film becomes evident. This isn't just a case of two people caught in a Kafkaesque legal system that relies on mass hysteria and selective memories to mete out justice. It is also a study of the harmful ways that the sins of the father may be visited upon the son and how one injured man's search for penance can lead to a hellish existence for one who loves and believes in him.

Early in the film, Arnold shows his sons an old black-and-white 8 mm. movie from his childhood, which includes a few frames of a pretty young ballerina. Arnold explains that it is a film of his sister, whose death from blood poisoning at a young age led to his parents' divorce and the destruction of his family.

It may seem overly dramatic to suggest that the shot of his sister dancing is Arnold Friedman's "Rosebud" moment, but there is little doubt that whatever pain he experienced as a boy was passed on to his son Jesse.

The search for truth, in this movie, is an endless peeling of the onion: there is always another layer. Just when you think you have it in your grasp, you are stunned to discover that the questions keep mounting. Just ask Jesse Friedman.