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Spielberg: A director's life reflected in film

(The following is a script from "Spielberg" which aired on Oct. 21, 2012. Lesley Stahl is the correspondent. Ruth Streeter and Rebecca Peterson, producers.)

Say "Steven Spielberg" and we all see a dozen images: a shark, an alien space ship, Indiana Jones in a snake pit, soldiers landing on the beaches of Normandy. His movies educate and enthrall; boggle and terrify. And now he's directed his 27th film about one of the most admired men in history and one of his heroes, Abraham Lincoln.

But before we tell you about that, we discovered things about Spielberg that took us by surprise: stories from his childhood that are reflected in many of his extraordinary films.

Steven Spielberg is now 65. He told us that when he's directing, he still gets just as worried, panicked, filled with dread as he did when he first started out.

Lesley Stahl: You're a nervous wreck.

Steven Spielberg: Yeah, it's true.

Lesley Stahl: Is it a fear?

Steven Spielberg: It's not really fear. It's just much more of an anticipation of the unknown. And you know, the unknown could be food poisoning. It's just the kind of level of anxiety not being able to write my life as well as I can write my movies.

Lesley Stahl: What about a way to handle your fears?

Steven Spielberg: There's no better way than to tell a story about them and infect everybody else. Although, I'll tell you something, it doesn't get it off your chest. It doesn't.

Lesley Stahl: The fear comes right back again?

Steven Spielberg: Comes right back again like it belongs to you. I own my fear.

Lesley Stahl: And you're going to hold onto it, actually, it sounds like to me.

Steven Spielberg: Well, it's commercial, so I don't want to.

Lesley Stahl: Exactly, exactly.

Steven Spielberg: I don't want to lose it.

He's been scaring us for almost 40 years. But he's also touched us, amazed us, inspired us, filled us with wonder and brought history to life.

With such an eclectic repertoire, we wondered if anything tied his movies together. It turns out there is:

Lesley Stahl: You have said that all your movies go back to your childhood.

Steven Spielberg: Most of them do.

Spielberg spent his childhood in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, with his three sisters, mom and dad.

Leah Adler: Anything he wanted, we did.

Arnold Spielberg: Yeah, that's true--

Leah Adler: We never said no.

Arnold Spielberg is now 95 and Leah is 92.

Leah Adler: Steve really did run us. He called the shots.

Leah was a full-time mom who Steven says was his co-conspirator.

Steven Spielberg: My mom didn't parent us as much as she sort of big-sistered us. She was Peter Pan. She refused to grow up.

Arnold was a computer engineer.

Steven Spielberg: I missed my dad a lot growing up, even though we were together as a family. My dad was really a workaholic. And he was always working.

Leah Adler: They were not close. You-- you were always so involved.

Arnold Spielberg: I was busy at work.

Steven had trouble fitting in: he wasn't a good student, and wasn't good at sports. He was bullied.

Steven Spielberg: I was a nerd in those days. Outsider. Like the kid that played the clarinet in the band and orchestra, which I did.

Leah Adler: We lived in an all non-Jewish neighborhood. These people used to chant, "The Spielberg's are dirty Jews." And one night, Steve climbed out of his bedroom window and peanut buttered their windows, which I thought was marvelous.

Lesley Stahl: Do you remember what you did?

Steven Spielberg: I took Skippy peanut butter and smeared it all over their windows.

Lesley Stahl: Yeah.

Steven Spielberg: Did she say that to you?

Lesley Stahl: Yes, she did.

Steven Spielberg: She told you that?

Lesley Stahl: She told us that.

Steven Spielberg: OK. I guess this is-- I guess right now we're beyond the statute of limitations, so I can't get sued for vandalism.

Lesley Stahl: But, you came under some serious anti-Semitic attacks. How did you react? How did you deal with it?

Steven Spielberg: I denied it for a long time.

Lesley Stahl: Denied what? That--

Steven Spielberg: My Judaism.

Lesley Stahl: --you were Jewish? Oh.

Steven Spielberg: Uh-huh (affirm).

Lesley Stahl: Were you ashamed?

Steven Spielberg: Uh-huh (affirm). I often told people my last name was German, not Jewish. I'm sure my grandparents are rolling over in their graves right now, hearing me say that. But I think that-- you know, that I was in denial for a long time.

Lesley Stahl: So when people say that a lot of your movies are about outsiders, that's what you must've felt.

Steven Spielberg: Oh, yeah. I was an outsider for all-- most of my formative years.

What saved him was a camera he got from his dad.

When he was 16 he made his first talkie called "Firelight." A science fiction thriller he produced, directed, wrote, edited and showed at the local movie theater.

Lesley Stahl: You obviously got a lot of approval for these early films. You got a lot of attention. Was that what motivated you to go on with it? Was that, "Oh my God, I'm finally being accepted?"

Steven Spielberg: Well, I had found a way to accept myself in my own life by making movies. I had found that I could do something well.

And he kept on doing it with a TV movie, now a cult thriller called "Duel" about a menacing truck. By 22 he was the youngest director ever signed to a long-term Hollywood contract, and soon he was churning out hits, like one of his biggest hits, "E.T." It was based on his parents divorce when he was 19.

Steven Spielberg: "E.T." began with me trying to write a story about my parents' divorce.

Lesley Stahl: That was your family; that was your mother?

Steven Spielberg: Uh-huh.

Lesley Stahl: She's quite upset that the father has left.

Steven Spielberg: Sure.

Lesley Stahl: As if he walked out on her.

[From the film "E.T."]

Mother: Maybe you ought to call your father and tell him about it.

Son: I can't, he's in Mexico with Sally.

Daughter: Where's Mexico?

Lesley Stahl: This was your sense of it? So you blamed your father?

Steven Spielberg: I did pin it on him.

But that wasn't what really happened.

Arnold Spielberg: She fell in love with another guy.

Leah Adler: Yes, with one of his friends.

Lesley Stahl: You fell in love with one of his friends. Did Steven know that?

Arnold Spielberg: No. He didn't know that right away. He thought I divorced her.

Lesley Stahl: So, wait a minute, you fell in love with his friend. You left him, but Steven blamed you.

Arnold Spielberg: That's right--

Lesley Stahl: Thought you had left her.

Arnold Spielberg: Yeah--

Lesley Stahl: And you didn't tell him?

Arnold Spielberg: That's right, not for years.

Lesley Stahl: Why?

Arnold Spielberg: I don't know, I think I was just protecting her, because I was in love with her.

Lesley Stahl: Even though she left you, you were still in love with her?

Arnold Spielberg: Yeah, still do.

Leah Adler: He forgave me I think. I was so unhappy. He covered for me.

Steven Spielberg: Even after I knew the truth, I blamed my dad.

Lesley Stahl: Oh, my goodness.

Steven Spielberg: It's still a mystery to me, but even though my mother was like an older sister to me, I kind of put her up on a pedestal. And my dad was much more terrestrial, much more grounded, much more salt of the earth. And for some reason, it was easier for me to blame him than it was to someone who I was already-- exalted.

This may explain why the workaholic, absent father is a recurring character in Spielberg's movies like the businessman in hook

[From the film "Hook"]

Father: Jack, next season I'm coming to six games. I promise, my word is my bond.

Son: Yea, junk bond.

Arnold Spielberg: When he blamed me, he-- it came right out in the movies.

Lesley Stahl: You were the bad guy?

Arnold Spielberg: Not so much the bad guy as absent guy.

Lesley Stahl: That's the way he saw it.

Arnold Spielberg: Probably, expressed his need for more attention than I gave him.

Lesley Stahl: You stayed kind of angry at your dad for years.

Steven Spielberg: I did. For too long, for many, many, many wasted years.

Lesley Stahl: Fifteen years.

Steven Spielberg: Fifteen years. It was bigger than I was, and I wasn't able, really, to come through it for a long, long time.

It was Steven's wife, actress Kate Capshaw, who encouraged him to make peace with his father.

Steven Spielberg: My dad and I had an amazing reconciliation, which is going on almost-- almost 18 years, where we have really, really been in each other's lives. And those feelings that I expressed earlier, I no longer feel today.

Lesley Stahl: I see this, you tell me if I've got it right. When you were angry at him, you made a lot of movies about fathers who abandoned their kids--

Steven Spielberg: Yeah.

Lesley Stahl: -and left their kids, and the fathers are bad guys. And all of a sudden there's a change. And the fathers start becoming the heroes.

Steven Spielberg: Exactly.

"War of the Worlds" for instance starts out with Tom cruise as an impatient, inattentive father.

[From the "War of the Worlds"]

Son: You're an [bleep]. I hate coming here.

Father: Why you act like such a [bleep].

After he courageously saves his children from an alien invasion, the movie ends up with an emotional father-son reconciliation. Even "Schindler's List" about the Holocaust grew out of a decision by Spielberg to face down the anti-Semitism he grew up with in Phoenix.

Lesley Stahl: You never expected people to go see it, I heard.

Steven Spielberg: No. I didn't. That's why I shot it in black and white. I did everything I needed to do to tell the story the way I thought the story should be told, to give it as much integrity as I could, never expecting it to make a dollar.

But it did, and then some: it made 320 million. Spielberg won his first Oscars for Directing and Best Picture. And his career went to a whole new level.

And now he's turned his nervous energy into making a movie about Abraham Lincoln, a subject he researched for twelve years: immersing himself in the look, the sounds, the smallest details of life in 1865.

Steven Spielberg: I've always wanted to tell a story about Lincoln. I saw a paternal father figure, I saw someone who was completely, stubbornly committed to his ideals, to his vision.

The movie is about how Lincoln gets the 13th amendment abolishing slavery passed by Congress. It's a little-known story in the last four months of his life. Daniel Day-Lewis is Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln: Abolishing slavery by constitutional provisions settles the fate for all coming time. Not only of the millions now in bondage, but of unborn millions to come.

Lesley Stahl: There's not a lot of action. There's no Spielberg special effects.

Steven Spielberg: Right.

Lesley Stahl: It's a movie about process and politics. Have you ever done a movie even remotely--

Steven Spielberg: Never. Like this?

Lesley Stahl: Not even close.

Steven Spielberg: Never. No. I knew I could do the action in my sleep at this point in my career. In my life, the action doesn't hold any-- it doesn't attract me anymore.

With only one brief battle scene, the movie's more like a stage play with lots of dialog as Lincoln cajoles and horse trades for votes.

Abraham Lincoln: Bloods been spilt to afford us this moment. Now, now, now!

Spielberg decided to hold off releasing the movie until after the November election, because he didn't want the film to become a tug of war about party politics.

Steven Spielberg: I think the film is very relevant for today. It's about leadership.

Lesley Stahl: And there are certainly lessons about talking with people from the other side.

Steven Spielberg: Right. And about telling the truth about how you feel.

Lesley Stahl: But what about the brooding, depressed Lincoln?

Steven Spielberg: I think there is a sense of a darkness with him. He was living with two agendas, both of which had to do with healing, had to do with a solution, first, to abolish slavery, end the war. But he also had his personal life. And I think there's darkness in there.

In his personal life, he was contending with his depressed wife, played by Sally Field.

Abraham Lincoln: No one has ever lived who knows better than you.

And this being a Spielberg film, you also see Lincoln struggling to raise his sons.

Lesley Stahl: This is definitely a heroic father movie.

Steven Spielberg: He was the father of the nation in need of repair. And in a sense, the movies I've made recently have reflected the positive relationships that my dad and I have enjoyed for 20, 25 years.

Lesley Stahl: How important was that reconciliation for your ability to make a movie like this?

Steven Spielberg: I think one of the worst things that happened to me was, you know, my voluntary fallout with my father. And then the greatest thing that happened to me

was when I saw the light, and realized I needed to love him in a way that he could love me back.

Lesley Stahl: Steven does say that his own creativity seems to still grow out of this household.

Arnold Spielberg: Well, we must've left some sort of impression.

Lesley Stahl: I'll say that.

Leah married Arnold's friend, who has since died; Arnold and his wife are now close to Leah.

Lesley Stahl: The three of you are very close?

Arnold Spielberg and Leah Adler: Yes.

Lesley Stahl: Isn't life something.

Arnold Spielberg: Yeah.

Leah Adler: Isn't it a hoot.

Lesley Stahl: Isn't it a hoot.

Arnold Spielberg: And she's a nice woman.

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