



bigsoniamovie



@bigsoniamovie



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TRT 93 mins. | Nov. 2016 festival premiere | Fall 2017 theatrical premiere

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Community Screenings Contact - caitlin@filmsprout.org



T R O U E
PRODUCTIONS

ARGOT PICTURES

siff

SKYWALKER
SOUND

4
CULTURE

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AWARDS

(for a full list of film festivals please visit www.bigsonia.com)

- Grand Jury Prize: Best Documentary**, Barcelona International Film Festival, 2017
- Best Film/Audience Award**, Cleveland International Film Festival, 2017
- Best Documentary**, Wilbur Award for Religious Communicators, 2017
- Best Documentary/Audience Award**, Napa Film Festival, 2016
- Best Heartland Documentary**, Kansas City Film Festival, 2017
- AARP Movies For GrownUps** Nominee, 2017
- Best Documentary/Audience Award**, Monadnock International Film Festival, 2017
- Audience Award**, Seattle Jewish Film Festival, 2017
- Audience Award**, Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival, 2017
- Audience Award**, Mendocino Film Festival, 2017
- Shanghai International Film Festival** (only US-made doc in competition), 2017
- Audience Award, Best Feature Documentary**, Tallgrass Film Festival, 2017
- Audience Award**, Berkshire Jewish Film Festival, 2017
- Jury Award, Most Lovable Character**, BendFilm, 2017
- Best Documentary**, Dallas VideoFest, 2017
- Best Local Film**, Movie Trip Cinema (Kansas City), 2017

Short SYNOPSIS

In the last store in a defunct shopping mall, 91-year-old Sonia Warshawski—great-grandmother, businesswoman, and Holocaust survivor—runs the tailor shop she’s owned for more than thirty years. But when she’s served an eviction notice, the specter of retirement prompts Sonia to revisit her harrowing past as a refugee and witness to genocide. A poignant story of generational trauma and healing, BIG SONIA also offers a laugh-out-loud-funny portrait of the power of love to triumph over bigotry, and the power of truth-telling to heal us all.

Long SYNOPSIS

For years, Sonia Warshawski (91) has been an inspirational public speaker at schools and prisons, where her stories of surviving the Holocaust as a teenager have inspired countless people who once felt their own traumas would leave them broken forever. But when Sonia is served an eviction notice for her iconic tailor shop (in a dead mall), she's confronted with an agonizing decision: either open up a new shop, or retire. Ironically, Sonia’s shop is the last open business in an otherwise desolate Kansas City mall, but it contains enough color and liveliness to make up for the entire empty complex. For a woman who admits she stays busy “to keep the dark parts away”, facing retirement dredges up fears she’d long forgot she had, and her horrific past resurfaces. BIG SONIA explores what it means to be a survivor and how intergenerational trauma affects families and generations. Will you let your trauma define you? Or will your past make you stronger?



BIG TALK

"Engaging and thoughtful... Key to the strength of *Big Sonia* is its refusal to give in to easy bromides. Its use of animation to illustrate Sonia's memories spins off her own artful drawings in a way that amps the sense of unspeakable horror rather than sugarcoating it. The filmmakers, like Sonia herself, acknowledge the ongoing struggle that's essential to surviving such trauma."

- ***The Hollywood Reporter***

"Such a beautiful documentary... an unexpected and vital exploration... in a time we need it most. I love Sonia!"

- ***Rosie O'Donnell***

"This is not like any Holocaust survivor film you've seen. And if you're like me, you're not likely to forget *Big Sonia* any time soon."

- ***Janice Convoy-Hellmann, Atlanta Jewish Times***

"(The movie) speaks to us here and now because the world hasn't changed, but we still can."

- ***Melinda Henneberger, Kansas City Star***

"Sonia is made up of many opposites and even seeming contradictions. *Big Sonia* is really about choosing how we respond to what is thrown at us."

- ***Michèle Taylor, Vice Chair, DNC National Finance Committee & Member, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council***

"I have seen the film 3 times and never tire and will see it yet even 3 more times if I can. Why? Because it is such a warmhearted portrayal of a woman who after the years of the Holocaust now spreads love and joy to all she meets. I showed the film to 200 public school teachers in June 2017 and they laughed, cried and gave Leah a standing ovation for 5 minutes after seeing the film. Enough said."

- ***Dr. Miriam Klein Kassenoff, Director, Holocaust Teacher Institute, University of Miami***

"Captivating. Moving. Fresh. Painful. Hopeful. Magic."

- ***Kim Frank, SVPN Magazine***

"...you must know by now how deeply your film's impact is felt. Through laughter at foil scarcity, there is tremendous respect for Sonia. She is resolute to mentor another generation; to reveal that inhumanity can exist in monstrous ways. She becomes our guide to keeping precious bonds within family & community. And always, rejoice that we have life."

- ***Jean McGlothlin, Festival Director, Sebastopol Documentary Festival***

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Sometimes the really big stories come from the smallest places. As filmmakers, we travel all over the world chasing stories about people making an impact. In making *BIG SONIA*, we realized some of those stories are right in our own backyards and that you don't have to go *far* to come *home*.

When we began filming in 2011, my grandmother Sonia Warshawski was 85 years old, and Todd and I had just started dating. On the heels of our last feature documentary, *FINDING HILLYWOOD*, our intention was to make a short film about my grandmother's small tailoring shop, John's Tailoring, and the steady stream of loyal customers that came in for the conversation as much as for tailoring. My extended family had joked about using the shop as the subject of a reality show for as long as I can remember. We'd all long witnessed Sonia holding court from her counter-top podium, doling out marriage advice, recommending books about WWII to teenagers, and doing interviews for local news stations. We knew Sonia had a gift for making anyone in her shop feel like they were the most important person in the world. And we knew the shop was her own refuge from the horrors of her past as a teenage Holocaust survivor.

However, once we started filming for our short, our anticipated *weeks* of production turned into *months*. It soon became apparent to us that customers were drawn to John's Tailoring not just for gossip and a bit of human connection, but for their own redemption. They came in because Sonia sets a glowing example of how an ordinary person can move past deep personal and historical trauma to find peace and heal others.

Still, our time with Sonia revealed her complex side. Her interactions with customers--many of whom she sees as her best friends--are very different from her relationships with her own family, which have often been tense and tender, overshadowed by decades of survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress. During the course of production, we began to perceive the trauma suffered not just by Sonia, but by my aunts and father, who had survived their own brand of trauma in a household gripped by grief and loss. As a third-generation survivor, I also began to see the ways in which Sonia's pain had branded me, the grandchild of refugees, and the child of a parent who'd long grappled with his own mother's distance and pain.

Then, suddenly, the plot turned. Sonia got an eviction notice for John's Tailoring, her home-away-from-home for 35 years. Her panic was palpable. And while we knew Sonia would survive the physical loss of her shop, we were also compelled by her store's powerfully symbolic role as a forum for human connection--a stronghold and a place of safety for Sonia and so many others. We continued to fundraise and film, and our "short" turned into a feature. Oh, and somehow in the middle of it all, Todd and I got married. The store was now woven into the fabric of our lives, too.

Despite featuring a Holocaust survivor, *BIG SONIA* is not a "Jewish movie." And it's not a "Holocaust movie." More than anything, *BIG SONIA* is a story about humanity: our human potential to overcome even the worst of the world's sins and atrocities with love, compassion and understanding. It's a tale about survival, yes, but not only the heroic kind--the kind that was forced upon Sonia and is forced upon other victims of genocide and hatred. It's also about the everyday acts of survival we must all undertake just to be human: to overlook slights and disappointments, to rise above bigotry and ignorance and self-doubt, to push for peace and forgiveness even when our instincts urge retribution or bitterness.

We premiered *BIG SONIA* at bi-coastal film festivals the day after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, we had no way of knowing that the themes of our film would find new relevance in our current political moment. Sonia's life story has been called an antidote to the hate and fear we see around us, and we hope that is true. But the real lesson of *BIG SONIA* is that we've *all* got the capacity to combat the worst humanity has to offer. Like Sonia, we all have the opportunity to create for others the places of comfort and connection where survival takes root.

- Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday, Co-directors, *BIG SONIA*



BIG LITTLE TEAM

LEAH WARSHAWSKI | CO-DIRECTOR / PRODUCER

Leah Warshawski (Producer, Co-Director) specializes in producing/directing documentary-style features, television shows, commercials, and branded content in remote parts of the world. She has a BA in Japanese language from the University of Hawaii and her first feature film FINDING HILLYWOOD (2013) won six awards including the Critic's Award (Sebastopol Documentary Festival) and the

Audience Award (Napa Film Festival), and screened at more than 65 film festivals. Before developing FINDING HILLYWOOD, Leah worked in Hawaii in the marine department for major features and shows on the water including LOST and HAWAII. She is currently co-ep for a feature documentary about the "personhood" movement in America called PERSONHOOD (2018), and she consults with filmmakers about outreach, marketing and hybrid distribution plans. In addition, Leah co-founded "rwandafilm.org", a "LinkedIn" for Rwandan filmmakers and a tool to help grow the film economy in East Africa. This site is supported by a number of international partners including Bpeace (Business Council for Peace) and The Academy of Motion Pictures. *Leah is also Sonia's granddaughter.*



TODD SOLIDAY | CO-DIRECTOR / DP / POST SUPERVISOR / EDITOR

Todd Soliday (Co-Director, DP, Editor) has directed, shot, edited and posted feature films, corporate brand films (Starbucks, Microsoft, T-Mobile, etc), and music documentaries for major networks and companies. Avid snowboarder, mountain biker, vintage collector,

adventure-seeker, and world traveler, Todd's true passion is documentary storytelling. Recent projects include OUT OF LUCK (2015 feature doc), THE BREACH (2014 feature doc), FINDING HILLYWOOD (2013 feature doc), PLATINUM: THE MT. BAKER LEGENDARY BANKED SLALOM (2007 feature doc) and VOYAGE: ALONE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC (2006 series and pilot). For samples of his work please visit www.toddsoliday.com.



ERIC FRITH: STORY PRODUCER

Eric creates films that have screened at top film festivals including Sundance, Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), South by Southwest (SXSW), Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) and dozens of other festivals around the world. These projects have received numerous awards and been acquired for distribution, both nationally and internationally, by Miramax, Dream Entertainment, Cinema Management Group, Off the Fence, Independent Lens, American Masters PBS, and Phase 4 Films. Most recently, Eric served as editor on the documentary FINDING HILLYWOOD which premiered at SIFF in 2013, screened at over 50 other film festivals winning two best doc awards and one audience award. He edited director Megan Griffiths' EDEN (2012), which premiered at SXSW won the audience award there, along with 1st runner up for best film at SIFF, and then was distributed by Phase 4 Films. In 2011 Eric both produced and edited A LOT LIKE YOU, which premiered at SIFF, screened at festivals around the world winning 6 best Doc awards. Eric also edited THE HEART OF THE GAME (2005) which premiered at TIFF, was distributed by Miramax, and heralded as "...an Oscar level piece of work" by film critic Richard Roeper. Eric edited and co-wrote SONG OF THE NEW EARTH (2013) and THE BREACH (2014). He also edited DEEP BURIAL starring Dominic Monaghan, Tom Sizemore, and Sarah Habel.

Additional CREDITS

CREW (full bios at bigsonia.com/crew)

- **Rachel Ignotofsky** | Graphic Artist - <http://www.rachelignotofskydesign.com>
- **Brad Anthony Laina** | Composer - <http://bradanthonylaina.com>
- **Dawn Norton** | Animator
- **Doug Loviska** | Assistant Editor
- **Dave Stewart** | Graphics
- **Chelsea Mohr** | Production Assistant
- **Gloria Baker Feinstein** | Still Photographer

Executive PRODUCERS + ADVISORS

- **In Association with** True Productions
- **Tom Wright** | Executive Producer
- **Ni'coel Stark** | Co-Executive Producer
- **Claude & Bertina Thau** | Co-Executive Producers
- **Brian Newman (Sub-Genre)** | Distribution Advisor
- **SuEllen Fried** | Education Advisor
- **Lucy Bernholtz** | Fundraising Advisor
- **Jennifer Tavernaro** | Education Advisor
- **Todd Milton** | Education Advisor

Finishing Services Provided By:

- **Skywalker Sound** (Audio + Sound Design)
- **Lightpress** (Color + Mastering)