

PALIMPSEST

THE STORY OF A NAME

Stephen

a story told by Mary Stephen

Produced by 24images

Coproduced by ProduSa Limited, Volos Films

OFFICIAL SELECTION



TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2025

World premiere at TIFF's 2025 Centrepiece, on 9/11/2025

Trailer

<https://vimeo.com/1108319066?share=copy>

Technical Information

108mn

English, Chinese, French

Palimpsest: the story of a name by Mary STEPHEN

SYNOPSIS

"With this film, I continue doing what I've always done as an editor and director: telling stories that intrigue and move me, stories wrapped in mystery."

Spanning eight decades and four continents, filmmaker and editor Mary Stephen embarks on a personal investigation into her English surname—not to indulge in a narcissistic exploration but rather to uncover the dissonances, the contradictions in our heritage that, in spite of our all-too human desire for harmony and continuity, are the fundamental elements that shape us. It is in this spirit that this intimate journey unfolds.

Drawing from her father's home movies, family photographs, her own travel footage, fragments of oral history, and official archives, Stephen constructs a layered, polyphonic narrative where personal memory and collective history converge. The film traverses a turbulent period in China's past—marked by the fall of a fading dynasty, civil war, Japanese occupation, and the eventual rise of the Communist Party. Against this backdrop, Hong Kong—under British colonial rule since 1842—emerges as a paradoxical space, where Western modernity collides with Eastern heritage: a city of one million Chinese governed by twenty thousand Europeans.

The film moves between Hong Kong's working-class neighborhoods, where schoolteacher Hilda Yik marries laborer Chan Tik-Fong amid petty trade and Hollywood dreams; to Wuhan, where British intellectual Julian Bell—son of Vanessa Bell and nephew of Virginia Woolf—engages in a scandalous affair with a renowned married Chinese writer; to far-flung places like Australia, London, and Cassis in France, tracing unlikely crossings and quiet revolutions. How, and why, did Hilda Yik and Chan Tik-Fong eventually become Hilda and Henry Stephen? Mary Stephen assembles a delicate, fragmented mosaic meditation on reinvention, on the yearning to rewrite one's story, and on the universal human impulse to fictionalize the self.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

After editing with the Nouvelle Vague French filmmaker, Eric Rohmer, for decades, in the past years I've been much too busy helping other director's films - mostly 1st and 2nd films, but also veterans like Ann Hui, Du Haibin... - to have more time for my own films. In this process of contributing to creating another filmmaker's vision, I am also nourishing and polishing my own skills as a filmmaker and storyteller. My own project of Palimpsest was in my mind almost 2 decades ago when a writer friend told me about Virginia Woolf's maiden name of STEPHEN and I started reading about the Julian Bell story in Wuhan and finding out the missing dots that connect the two STEPHEN stories in China. When I finally had time to pick up the project again and plunge fully into its rethinking, many things occurred that made me realize it was necessary to have left it dormant. A lot of archives are much better catalogued and accessible now and I discovered many more details closed to the public before. Having been selected to be a Fellow at the Camargo Artist Residence in Cassis in the south of France last fall gave me the necessary time to reflect about the best way to compose this work aesthetically, being physically where Virginia Woolf spent her summers with her sister and her nephew Julian Bell. It opened up a whole new chapter in the mirror-story of the STEPHENS, and the research writing and location filming I was able to do there, inspired the rest of the process. In 2023, the Hong Kong Film Festival's invitation to be part of their jury and then being selected to be recipient of the Reel Asian Fire Horse Award in Canada, bringing me back to places where key elements of the Palimpsest story are: childhood traces in Hong Kong, my father's 8 and 16mm films, other historical archives (eg. Michael Rogge in Hong Kong). The digitization of this valuable footage of family archives became the perfect counterpart of all the sights and sounds I was able to collect in Cassis a few months prior. Now I want to bring these different aspects of the project together and weave them into a complex and beautiful tapestry which can resonate with those who have had similar questionings on origins, race, cultures. Some stories need to sit and mature for some time before they can be told. I feel confident and hopeful that now is finally the right time to share this personal and universal story.

Mary STEPHEN

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY



Born in Hong Kong, Mary grew up in Canada and lives in Paris. She was French New Wave director Eric Rohmer's editor and occasional music co-composer, starting from *The Aviator's Wife* as Cécile Decugis' assistant, to his last feature film *The Romance of Astrea and Celadon*. In the last 15 years, she has worked with documentary and fiction directors from several continents, editing, script-consulting, coproducing and mentoring, a partial list includes Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home*, Seren Yüce's *Majority*, Hüseyin Karabey's *My Marlon and Brando*, Du Haibin's *1428* and *A Young Patriot*, Jessey Tsang Tsui Shan's *Flowing Stories* and *Winter Chants*, Adam Wong's *The Way We Keep On Dancing*, Amos Why's *Dot 2 Dot* and *Napping Kid*, Freddie Wong's *The Drunkard*, Tiffany Hsiung's

The Apology, Nicole Schafer's *Buddha In Africa*, Michka Säal's *China Me*, Evans Chan's *Datong*, Ann Hui's *Our Time Will Come* and *Love After Love*. Her filmography as a director includes **Shades of Silk** (Ombres de soie), **Justocoeur**, **Vision From The Edge** : **Breyten Breytenbach** **Painting The Lines** and **The Memory of Water**.

She has been nominated for numerous awards such as the Golden Horse, the Asian Film Awards, the Hong Kong Film Awards, the Turkish Film Awards, the Cinema Eye Award etc. She is a member of AMPAS (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) and was distinguished as Chevalier de l'Ordre des arts et des lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters, France) in 2018.

A member of Rough Cut Service, Mary Stephen is also a mentor and teacher in institutions and workshops such as the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the Venice Biennale Cinema College, Docs By The Sea, the Yamagata Documentary Dojo, etc. and participates in juries and commissions.

Technical List

Director and Editor: Mary STEPHEN (CCE)

DoP: John CRESSEY, LEUNG Ming Kai (HKSC)

Sound: Andy KING, CHUNG Chak Ming

Original Music: Haruyuki SUZUKI

Sound Design and Mix: WU Chen-Yu, TU Duu-Chih

Colorist: Pascal TORBEY, PaxinePostmédias

Production Team

Production: 24images, Annie OHAYON-DEKEL, Farid REZKALLAH (France)

Coproduction: ProduSa Limited, Teresa KWONG (Hong Kong)

Volos Films, Stefano CENTINI (Taiwan)

Partners

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PALIMPSEST

THE STORY OF A NAME 隱蹟之書:重寫自我

A FILM BY MARY STEPHEN
雪美蓮作品

24IMAGES PRODUSALIMITED VOLOS FILMS PRESENT "PALIMPSEST: THE STORY OF A NAME" A FILM BY MARY STEPHEN PRODUCED BY ANNIE OHAYON-DEKEL
FARID REZKALLAH (FRANCE) COPRODUCED BY TERESA KWONG (HONG KONG) STEFANO CENTINI (TAIWAN) CINEMATOGRAPHER JOHN CRESSEY
LEUNG MING KAI EDITOR MARY STEPHEN MUSIC HARUYUKI SUZUKI SOUND DESIGN AND MIX WU CHEN-YU TU DUU-CHIH COLORIST PASCAL TORBEY
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