

PALIMPSEST

THE STORY OF A NAME

Stephen

a story told by Mary Stephen

Produced by 24images, ProduSa Limited, Volos Films

OFFICIAL SELECTION

tiff50

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2025

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



International Competition, IDFA 2025



Winner, Best Editing, Best Documentary
62nd Golden Horse Awards

Palimpsest: the story of a name by Mary STEPHEN

Trailer

<https://vimeo.com/1108319066?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Technical Information

108 mn

English, Chinese, French

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. It is not intended to be a narcissistic exploration but rather an effort to uncover the dissonances and 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 and diaries, 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 invasion, 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 the Australian outback, Montreal and Toronto, London and Cambridge, Paris and Cassis in the south of 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 irresistible temptation to rewrite one’s story, and on the universal human impulse to fictionalize the self.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

After editing with the Nouvelle Vague director Eric Rohmer, for decades, in the past years I've been much too busy helping other directors' films - mostly first and second films - but also veterans like Ann Hui, Du Haibin, to have enough time for my own creations. This was not time lost, however: in this process of contributing to bring to life another filmmaker's vision, I was also nourishing and polishing my own skills as a filmmaker and storyteller. My project of Palimpsest was in my mind almost two 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. 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 that were closed to the public before. Having been selected as a Fellow at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis in the south of France 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 and completed the on-going process. In 2023, the Hong Kong Film Festival's invitation to be part of their jury and the selection to be recipient of the Reel Asian Fire Horse Award in Canada, brought me back to places where key elements of the Palimpsest story are: childhood traces in Hong Kong, my father's 8 and 16mm films stored in Toronto, first years of immigration in Montreal. 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. I started to bring these different aspects of the project together and worked on weaving them into a complex and beautiful tapestry which can resonate with those who have had similar questionings on origins, race, cultures. Along the way the tapestry is enhanced by the haunting and innovative music of Haruyuki Suzuki-san from Japan, the layered and evocative soundscapes created by Wu Chen-Yu and Tu Duu-Chih in the legendary 3H Sound Studio in Taipei, and the meticulous and painterly details brought by coloriste Pascal Torbey at Paxine PostMédias in Paris. All these elements were woven into a whole, aided by the care of a team of dedicated producers on different continents: Annie Ohayon-Dekel, Farid Rezkallah in France, Teresa Kwong in Hong Kong, Stefano Centini in Taiwan, and some indispensable partners such as Rasha Salti of Arte La Lucarne, as acknowledged in details below.

Some stories need to sit and mature for some time before they can be told. I finally feel that it's 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, associate-producing 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*, Tiffany Hsiung's *The Apology*, Nicole Schafer's *Buddha In Africa*, Michka Säal's *China Me*, Ann Hui's *Our Time Will Come* and *Love After Love*. Her filmography as a director includes the recently-restored **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 Golden Horse Awards, Asian Film Awards, Hong Kong Film Awards, Turkish Film Awards, Cinema Eye Honors, 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, Ministry of Culture, France) in 2018.

A member of Rough Cut Service, Mary Stephen is also a mentor and teacher in institutions and workshops such as China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, Venice Biennale Cinema College, Docs By The Sea, 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 Doo-Chih (3H Sound Studio, Taipei)

Colorist: Pascal TORBEY (Paxine PostMédias, Paris)

Trailer: Siru Qian

Poster Design: Julie Stephen Chheng and Thomas Pons

Production Team

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

ProduSa Limited, Teresa KWONG (Hong Kong)

Volos Films, Stefano CENTINI (Taiwan)

Partners

ARTE France, LA LUCARNE

Centre national du cinéma et de l'image imprimée

Région Pays de la Loire

PROCIREP/ANGOA

National Culture and Arts Foundation

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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2025

2025 金馬獎 62ND
GOLDEN HORSE AWARD
WINNER, BEST EDITING AND BEST DOCUMENTARY

idfa
International Competition
2025

PALIMPSEST: THE STORY OF A NAME

隱蹟之書:重寫自我

A FILM BY MARY STEPHEN
雪美蓮作品

"PALIMPSEST: THE STORY OF A NAME" A FILM BY MARY STEPHEN
PRODUCED BY ANNIE OHAYON-DEKEL FARID REZKALLAH (FRANCE)
TERESA KWONG (HONG KONG) STEFANO CENTINI (TAIWAN)
CINEMATOGRAPHER JOHN CRESSEY LEUNG MING KAI, HKSC EDITOR MARY STEPHEN, CCE
MUSIC HARUYUKI SUZUKI SOUND DESIGN AND MIX WU CHEN-YU TU DUU-CHIH COLORIST PASCAL TORBEY
A PRODUCTION 24 IMAGES PRODUCTIONS LIMITED VOLOS FILMS AND ARTE FRANCE IN ASSOCIATION WITH CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINEMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
WITH THE SUPPORT OF PROCIREP/ANGOA, RÉGION PAYS DE LA LOIRE, NATIONAL CULTURE AND ARTS FOUNDATION

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ANGOA

Graphic design: Julie Stephen-Chenev / Thomas Pons / Jonathan Stephen-Chenev

Palimpsest: the story of a name by Mary STEPHEN

Press clippings:

Richard Brody, The New Yorker “What-to-see-in-the-2025-New-York-film-festival’s second-week”

“Stephen’s storytelling here is as richly detailed and as startlingly creative and multi-layered as it is in *“Shades of Silk,”* while also wry and playful, conveying the warmth and occasional strangeness of family ties along with the imaginative implications of family lore.”

“The only problem with Mary Stephen’s terrific new film *PALIMPSEST: THE STORY OF A NAME* is that it’s playing only once rather than getting an official release, which it deserves, since it’s far superior than much that gets released.”

Nirris Nagendrararjag, Fête Chinoise “Unfolding Stories, Asian Cinema at TIFF 2025”

“It is Stephen’s seemingly seamless way of organizing the sheer wealth of information, while finding time to experiment with framing and fictionalizing the material to the point of provoking us to wonder what is real and what is fabricated, that makes *Palimpsest* such a gratifying portrait of the intricacies of identity. She suggests there is more to one’s name than meets the eye. “

Rachel Ho, POV “Palimpsest: The Story of a Name Review – What’s in a Name?”

“*Palimpsest* steadily weaves its way through its initial question with the precision and organization of a science experiment. However, *Palimpsest*’s affecting power comes from its ability to give space and catharsis to Stephen, and all of us who grew up on lands not of our ancestors...*Palimpsest* serves as a family investigation and a personal essay for Stephen, but what her efforts uncover — a desire for acceptance and belonging — finds connection across a broad spectrum.”

Alice Shih, Original Cin “Palimpsest: What’s in a Name? Maybe the Difference Between Affluence and Poverty”

“Being a seasoned editor, Stephen masterly weaves these traces of fact using her father’s visuals and her mother’s writings to propel the intriguing narrative forward, sharing with her curious viewers her journey of self-discovery while uncovering deceptions.”

contacts

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