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Markie in Milwaukee

William L. Blizek
University of Nebraska at Omaha, wblizek@unomaha.edu

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Markie in Milwaukee

Abstract

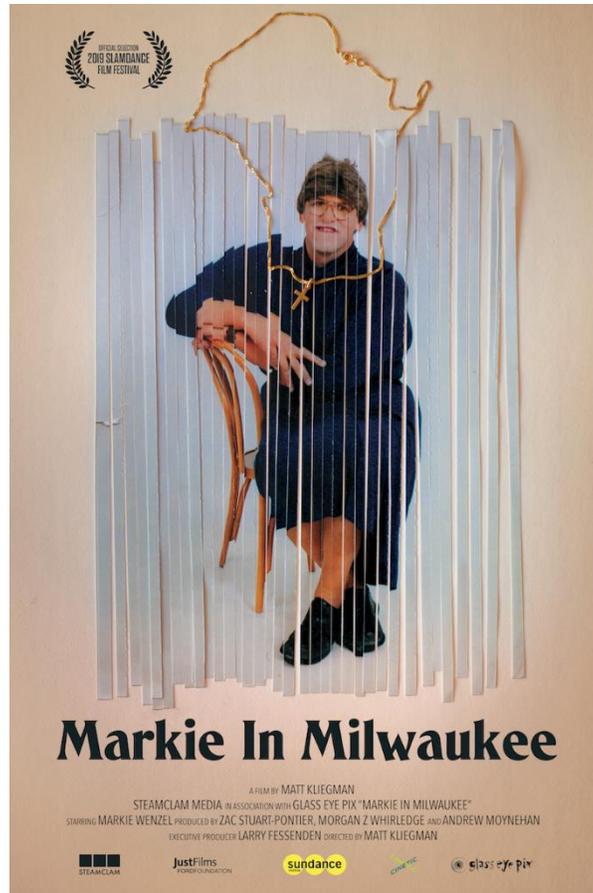
This is a film review of *Markie in Milwaukee* (2019) directed by Matt Kliegman.

Keywords

Transgender, Religion, Baptist minister

Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).



Markie in Milwaukee (2019), dir. Matt Kliegman

Markie in Milwaukee is a fascinating memoir and an amazing documentary film, making its world premiere at Slamdance. Here's the story. Mark Anthony Wenzel discovers at an early age that he is a woman in a man's body. This is a problem for Mark for all of the usual reasons, but it is also a special problem because when Mark is in college, he is seven feet tall and weighs 360 pounds. He is a defensive lineman on his college football team. But Mark goes on to marry, have three children, and becomes a Baptist preacher. Now, however, Mark decides that the life he is living is one in which he cannot be true to himself. So, he enters a transition program. His family is horrified and angry. He separates from his wife and loses contact with his children. But God remains the cornerstone of his life and God helps Mark make the change from Mark to

“Markie in Milwaukee.” Now Markie feels as though she can be herself, even though the alienation from her family and her church are quite painful.

Eventually Markie gets a job at the TSA, a different church accepts Markie as she is, and her children begin to communicate with her. Markie thanks God for allowing her to be herself. But the loneliness continues. When the moment comes for Markie to have surgery, she is not able to go through with it. Markie is not able to deal with the permanence of the surgery. Then a voice from her soul—the voice of God—speaks to Markie and tells Markie that he is a man. So, Markie skips the surgery, stops wearing wigs and dresses, and takes his place in the world as a man and as a minister of the gospel. Mark says that God pulled him back from the brink and put him on his journey home. As a minister he decries the transgender community. And his children are now accepting of him, the church is accepting of him, and his fellow workers accept him as a man, even if his ex-wife does not accept what has happened. It is easier for Mark to function satisfactorily in the world as a man. The upshot of this is that Mark is no longer all alone: he is no longer lonely.

Oh, you thought that was the end of the story? Hah! In the following scenes we find Mark dressing in a wig and women’s clothes, saying that he has not been able to give up Markie altogether. At home, Wenzel lives as Markie, and in public, Wenzel lives as a man. At the end of the film, Wenzel sends out a Christmas card. It has a picture of Mark and a picture of Markie on it and it is signed “Mark and Markie.”

What makes this story fascinating is not the switching back and forth of Wenzel’s identity, not the fact that he is seven feet tall and weighs about 400 pounds now. What makes the story fascinating is that it raises crucial issues with being transgender. For example, one of the ministers claims that God made a man (to be a man) and a woman (to be a woman). This is put forward as an obvious truth—God’s truth—without ever raising the issue about who created Wenzel. Didn’t

God create Wenzel as well as men and women? If so, what does God ask of transgender (or gay and lesbian) individuals and what does God ask of those—especially Christians—who interact with people whose sexuality is not like their own? You cannot miss this obvious omission on the part of the minister, nor can you miss the importance of the question.

The story also raises the question of whether religion helps or hurts transgender individuals. When Wenzel is transitioning to womanhood, he thanks God for helping him be true to himself. When Wenzel goes back to being a man, he again thanks God for helping him find his true self. At the end of the film he is not thanking God. Is religion crucial to our self-understanding or is it an excuse for our phobias about sexual orientation and identity? You cannot leave the theater without raising this question. There are other similar and important questions that are raised by the story, questions that make this a fascinating narrative.

Markie in Milwaukee, however, is also an amazing film. It is a documentary; not a docu-drama, where you can make up whatever story you want. This film documents Mark's and Markie's journey, as well as Markie's torment and struggles. It does so in a remarkably sensitive fashion that allows us to see clearly how the narrative affects Wenzel and how it affects those around him and how religion plays or does not play into the journey of *Markie in Milwaukee*. The movie is not just about Mark or Markie; it is a window into the souls of all of us.