

film

Growing up with Steven Spielberg, by his little sister

Nancy Spielberg tells Anne Joseph about being roped into her brother's childhood films and her own career as a producer

Nancy Spielberg has decided to turn off her camera. It is mid-morning, Chicago time, and the award-winning producer confesses that she is still in her pyjamas. "I'm so embarrassed," she says with a hearty laugh. "I'm a go-getter, jump in the morning, grab my coffee and do things, so I've been working. I'm not a slacker. I haven't had a chance to get dressed and brush my teeth. And I look like shit."

Spielberg, 66, is certainly busy. For several years, based in New York, she has run Playmount Productions, the company her father, Arnold, established in 1962 for her elder brother, Steven. Since 2013 its projects have focused mainly on Jewish-themed documentaries. The latest, *Closed Circuit*, is a powerful Israeli film examining the trauma of the survivors of a terrorist attack in a Tel Aviv food market in 2016.

Spielberg's interest began with a cold-call email. "I get many emails from strangers saying, 'I have a script, I have a movie, give it to your brother,'" she says, but this one, written by the first-time director Tal Inbar, made a particular impression. Inbar wanted to develop her nine-minute student film into a feature documentary about the terror attack on June 8, 2016. "And it hit me like a ton of bricks because I was in Israel on that day. It was the day after my birthday and I was celebrating with friends in a restaurant [in Jerusalem] at that same time. So, I said, 'Let's talk.'"

The film felt relevant "on so many levels. Terror doesn't check your ID. It's happening everywhere. Look at America with these random acts of violence." Indeed, during production, Spielberg recalled that her father had been on a hijacked El Al flight in the 1960s. Maybe this was another reason she was drawn to the film. She agrees. "When I first jumped on this, it was because of my being there. Then I remembered him giving me the brochure that the terrorists handed out on the runway."

There is a nine-year gap between Nancy, the youngest of the four siblings, and Steven. "I was the surprise child," she says. "But my mum said I was the best one — of course, she probably said that to each of us." She recalls experiencing antisemitism as a little girl in Phoenix, Arizona, with neighbours calling them dirty Jews. "We definitely stood out a little because we were practically the only Jews in the neighbourhood." Some of the children may not have loved them, she says, but on summer nights, when they showed films that Steven had rented, setting them up in their backyard and using a bedsheet as a screen, "they sure came and watched".

Nancy grew up immersed in film-making. Steven would draft his sisters in as cast and crew on his early films. "We just did whatever Steve said because he sort of ruled the house." Was it fun? "Not always. But you didn't have a choice because the punishment was that he would scare the crap out of us. He would draw this Medusa scary face with the snakey hair and the big skeleton eyes on a chalkboard. And he would say, 'If you can sleep with this staring at you, I will give you ten cents.' And we didn't want to say no. We tried, but ended up in mum's bed half the time."

Her brother's tornado game terrified her the most, she says. "He would pretend to be a radio announcer, make this staticky noise and say, 'We interrupt this programme to bring a special announcement: a tornado is headed to Nancy and Sue's house,' because he always tortured Sue and me, the two youngest." Her other sister, Anne, was his "script girl, his, 'Go do this, Annie. Go bake me a cake. I need to cut the icing and see if it curls like the Betty Crocker commercial on TV.' And if it didn't, it was her fault. But this is what we did, and I guess we grew to love some of it in the end." Their mother, Leah, would also play her part. "Steve was too young to drive for some of his movies, so she'd dress up as a man and drive the army Jeep."

Arnold's job as a computer engineer took the family to northern California, but it was not a happy time, Spielberg says. She was ten when her parents divorced. When they told her, "I was hysterical. Crying. And I was furious." They were, she says, very different people. Leah was a concert pianist "and the kid. My dad was always the responsible adult. We felt the tension and my mum was sad." It was on the train back to Arizona that she told the girls (Steven stayed in California with Arnold)



FAMILY BUSINESS Top: Steven and Nancy Spielberg. Above: Paul Dano, Michelle Williams and Seth Rogen in *The Fabelmans*. Below: the director Tal Inbar



'We just did whatever Steve said because he ruled the house. You didn't have a choice'

***Closed Circuit* will be screened at JW3, London NW3, on Tuesday and Thursday**

the reason for her sadness and why they were returning to Arizona: she was in love with Bernie Adler, their father's best friend and a familiar figure in their lives. "He was our friend. And I had enough understanding to know that meant something beyond just being friends. I was so angry. That, to me, crossed a line. Of course, I loved Bernie so much and I got over that pretty quickly. Bernie was a father to me, my second father, so we lucked out."

Spielberg and her sisters discovered that art had uncovered life when they read the draft script of *The Fabelmans*, Steven Spielberg's semi-autobiographical film. They learnt that their brother had inadvertently filmed a romantic moment between Leah and Bernie during a camping trip and kept it a secret. "We didn't know [what he had seen] until he called and said, 'I'm thinking of doing this, and I need you girls to be OK with this and tell me what you think.'"

What was her reaction to the script? "I was bereft. I was overwhelmed," she replies. However, she adds: "I had absolutely no hesitancy. We're an open family. This is a matter of heartbreak and love, and people go through this. It's not unique to the Spielies."

And what if they had not wanted him to go ahead? "I think he would have said, 'OK, I won't do it,' or, 'Let's talk about it. What bothers you the most? Can there be changes that still make this the kind of film I have this need to tell?'" She says they were mostly concerned for Anne, a scriptwriter who, years before, had thought of doing something similar. "But he was very smart. He said, 'I can't do it without you guys,' which made us feel very important."

The sisters acted as consultants for the film. "We were very involved," Spielberg emphasises. "Every painting you see on the walls is a painting that hung in our home." They advised on everything from wardrobe, food and furniture to perfume

and coffee cups. She was only six months old when the family lived in New Jersey in the 1950s and had no recollection of their house. "But I suddenly got to walk into it, which was really weird. Oh, my God, the email chains," she says. "It was such a nostalgia dump."

The need for authenticity and meticulous detail was twofold. "I think I would have been furious if I'd seen it done wrong. Secondly, the authenticity of it just set Steve into a mindset where he was able to really conjure up and deliver the true emotion. He was in tears so many times on set."

The Fabelmans shows Sammy (aka Steven) blaming their mother for the divorce. "But in real life, he held it against my dad for many years," Spielberg says. "Later, he repaired everything. He realised he blamed my dad for what was not my dad's fault, and they started to hang together and talk all the time. Dad would be on every movie set, and Steve would give him scripts and ask which films he should do."

Spielberg has watched *The Fabelmans* 11 times. "Now it's playing on the airplane; every time I fly, I put it on. Even if I'm not watching, I just want to hear the lines. I cry every time." It won a Golden Globe for best motion picture. "We're kvelling," Spielberg says. "Our chests are so puffed out with pride for our big brother." It amuses her when people tell her what they don't like about her brother's films. "They feel it's their duty."

After writing some films and consulting on others, Spielberg began producing them in her fifties. "Never too old to start," she says. "I decided to jump into the icy deep end, but I was really scared. I was intimidated by the other Spielbergs in the room." Now, she says she "feels good" and is confident in her own abilities.

"I think I'm doing the right thing on the right scale for me. I don't have to be guided by the box office. Instead, I'm guided by the stories, their impact and it's very liberating. I don't have to be a gun for hire and do things that I don't believe in. So what's not to like?"