

Datebook

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S GUIDE TO ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT ♦ APRIL 17-23, 1994

'DIALOGUES WITH MADWOMEN'

Allie Light's documentary about women's experiences with mental illness plays Friday through April 26 at the Castro Theater, 429 Castro Street, San Francisco. Call (415) 621-6120.



FILM

From Oscar-winning documentary maker Allie Light

INSIDE THE MINDS OF 'MADWOMEN'

BY ERIKA MILVY

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Most people take little notice of the question on the driver's license application that asks: Have you ever been in a mental hospital? When Allie Light checked "yes" and was subsequently denied a license, the experience jump-started emotions that would consume her professional as well as her personal future.

"Never tell," her doctor counseled when shown the letter of rejection in 1964. "Until they change the laws, never tell." Light, an award-winning documentary film maker, did just the opposite. She made "Dialogues With Madwomen," a dramatic documentary about her experience with mental illness and the experiences of six other women.

Response to 'Never Tell'

"This film," Light said, "is a response to that 'never tell.'"

Light and her husband/producer, Irving Saraf, won a best-documentary Oscar last year for their film "In the Shadows of the Stars," about the starry-eyed christers at the San Francisco Opera. Yet the award actually hampered their efforts to raise money for the new project, as everyone assumed they had pockets of cash. So Light sent a letter to every woman she knew asking for \$25 to make the movie. She "came out" about her psychological history and promised to make a film that would tell the truth. "Dialogues With Madwomen" has won the Freedom of Expression award at the Sundance Film Festival, the Grand Jury Prize at the Atlanta Film Festival, and has moved some members of audiences in Europe and in the United States so much that they have lined up to tell Light about their own experiences with madness.

Clinical Depression

Light describes her own brief bout as clinical depression. As a housewife in the '60s, Light said, she watched as her husband marched off for a new adventure every day while she stayed at home. "I thought my life was over," said Light, who checked herself into a mental institution at age 28. It now seems tragically funny that her psychiatrist gauged Light's recovery on her ability and enthusiasm to roast a turkey.

After nearly 20 years of film making, the director finally experienced the nakedness one feels in front of the camera. "I think that's why the women were able to trust me because they knew that I was doing it myself," Light said. "It keeps me from feeling like a voyeur."

In "Dialogue," Light interviews an array of women who have suffered from some form of mental illness. While their stories vary, the women share feelings of isolation and self-blame that Light hopes this film will combat. In an endearing series of interviews, Hannah, a manic depressive, articulates the inner workings of her mind. An avowed Bob Dylan fan, Hannah describes her illness as being tuned into several radio stations at once, unable to shut off the sound. During one euphoric, manic stage, she literally bought out an entire flower store.

Other women's tales are more disturbing. Remarking that she did not set out to make a film on sexual molestation and child abuse, Light acknowledges that it became a recurring theme. Mairi is one subject who dealt with the trauma of incest and abuse by "splitting" into multiple personalities.

Deedee mutilated herself after construing in Catholic school that martyrdom and self-mutilation were deemed good.

Light always asked her subjects not just what happened to them but why they think it happened. "I asked them to give us an analysis of what's going on, and everyone rose to the occasion.

"I wanted to make a film that shows that women can think as well as feel. When you turn on Oprah, you get a sound bite and it's always an emotional one, but you never get a chance to know how the woman dealt with her problem or what she thought about it."

Light's other concern was to steer clear from the standard "talking heads" documentary style. "Madwomen" is unique for the extent to which it includes re-enactments and dramatizations. While some of the subjects actually re-enact events that occurred, Light also uses archival footage to represent the women's experiences. Female patients are shown roaming a hospital ward like caged tigers.

Nameless and Faceless

"These are nameless and faceless women who lived 40 or 50 years ago who suffered a lot," Light said of the footage. "And in some way the film gives them a face and a name; they were used as stand-ins for ourselves."

Other images are used as "emotional equivalents," a term Light takes from photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Such scenes conjure a mood or a feeling that the subjects have expressed. The film's closing scene follows one woman as she walks, suitcase in hand, into the ocean. For Light, it is an affirmative image. The woman is embarking on a mysterious adventure, an adventure that Light, the 1950s housewife, would have longed to go on.