

SHADOW AND LIGHT

by Karen Rathmell



Allie Light

Allie Light and Irving Saraf have fingernails hanging from the chandelier in their sitting room. In most homes this might be strange, but Light and Saraf are poets and filmmakers, so it's perfectly natural.

"Do you like our fingernails?" asks Light as she takes the nails down from the light and holds them out for me to see. They are long, bony looking, bent grotesquely and tipped with blood-red polish. "I love the way they look," she says, glowing like a new mother praising her baby. And Saraf, her husband and collaborator for nearly twenty years, is no less excited. But there's a slight touch of chagrin in his voice. "We've been trying to figure out how to make them come out of the ground," he says. "We've already filmed them two or three times, unsuccessfully."

They are waiting for the sun to come out so they can try once more. The image is for their current work-in-progress, *Dialogues with Madwomen*, set to be premiered at San Francisco's Castro Theater on July 16. The film is about the interior life of seven women, including Light, who have at some time in their life succumbed to "the dark side of the imagination," which is sometimes called "madness."

This new film will be the first feature-length documentary to be released by the team since the 1991 Oscar-winning *In the Shadow of the Stars*, about the lives and ambitions of the San Francisco Opera Choristers. Although both films are interview-based, Light and Saraf are attempting to dig even deeper beyond the exterior in *Dialogues with Madwomen*.

"Both of us have evolved in such a way perceptually that we want to break the boundaries of documentaries," says Light. "I feel that there isn't any way, using the standard methods of documentary filmmaking, to explore the inner life of anyone. You can't just take a camera and point it at something and expect to see what's under the skin."

Utilizing reenactments, archival footage, music and sound effects, *Dialogues with Madwomen* attempts to illicit the personalities beneath the surface.

"There's imagery," says Saraf, "that reflects a person's life-that creates a parallel to their emotions. A lot of what we're doing is looking for the equivalent emotion or feeling in nature or art, or in the past."

In the case of the fingernails, the image is very personal for Light. "When I was a really small child," she explains, "my mother would tell me these stories that would just frighten me to death. She told me that after you're buried, your fingernails and your hair keep growing."

That constant digging beneath the surface and into the past can be extremely painful for the subject, especially when one of the subjects of the film is also one of the filmmakers.

"When I was in my late twenties I had an episode of depression, and at that time I committed myself to a psychiatric day ward," says Light. "It was 1963, and I was very isolated. The way I was treated in the hospital just enhanced that. I had less power, less control."

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The time Light spent in the hospital has profoundly influenced her life, and as an artist and teacher, she shared her experience with her students. Each semester she would tell her class about what had happened to her, and each semester she discovered that there were many women who had had similar experiences but were afraid to share them.

"There's such a stigma attached to ever having been in an institution," explains Light. "But I know now, that if I had talked to just one woman who had experienced depression, or who was experiencing depression, it would have helped."

Knowing that, Light decided that she wanted to make a film about her own experience, and the experiences of some of the women she had met over the years of teaching in Women's Studies and Art. But digging into other people's lives isn't nearly as frightening as digging into your own.

"Being in front of the camera is very different from being behind the camera," says Light. "I don't think I will ever approach an interview with another person the same way I did before. I understand how difficult it is -- how very careful you have to be as an interviewer. Sometimes Irving would say just one word to me that would make me feel so small, and this was the person I love and trust most in the world."

Almost all of the subjects in *Dialogues with Madwomen* are women Light and Saraf have known for years. Most were students during the time they were both teaching.

"Both of us were teachers at San Francisco State for years," says Light. "Half our friends and most of the people who work with us on our movies are former students."

Both Light and Saraf have been a part of San Francisco's film and

art scene since the sixties. Saraf graduated from UCLA film school in 1955, "before it was a big deal," and came to San Francisco soon after. The first few years were spent cleaning film at KQED. Then, with the gift of a \$500 Bolex camera, he began producing. With the success of his first series of films came funding for more equipment, and soon the KQED film unit was born. After sixteen years and over 150 films, what Saraf began with a single camera grew into one of the largest, and most respected documentary film centers in the country with a staff of 42 people.

They have watched the independent film industry wax and wane for twenty years, and have participated in some of the most significant projects to come out of San Francisco, and they are hopeful about the future of the industry.

"I'm an old-time filmmaker," says Saraf, "but there are more inde-

pendent filmmakers in San Francisco now than ever before. People say, 'Oh, the wonderful old days,' and all that -- it's not true. Most of the important documentaries in the country are coming out of this area. Look at the nominees for documentaries at the Oscars and festivals."

Speaking of Oscars, the two they won for *In the Shadow of the Stars* sit majestically on the mantle. When asked about their significance, Light responds that "it was really validating. But the documentary itself doesn't bring offers of 'come and direct my film.' It just doesn't."

Although they love their medium, both Saraf and Light have a vested interest in the other arts, especially poetry and music.

"Nothing in the world moves me to tears like music and poetry," says Saraf. "But the one thing that film has over other mediums is

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