

A Bountiful Fall Season For New York Filmgoers



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"Kipper" in "Private
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Screen: 'Private Practices'

Sex Surrogate

PRIVATE PRACTICES, directed and produced by Kirby Dick; camera, Christine Burrill and Catherine Coulson; edited by Lois Freeman and Mr. Dick; released by the Kino International Corporation. At the Bleecker Street Cinema I, 144 Bleecker Street, at La Guardia Place. Running time: 75 minutes. This film has no rating.

Interviewers

Catherine Coulson and Kirby Dick
Narration..... Noreen Hennesey

THE first thing to be said about "Private Practices" is that it treats in remarkably straightforward fashion a subject that has a way of bringing out clinical pretentiousness or juvenile snickers. Kirby Dick's documentary, which opens today at the Bleecker Street Cinema after having been shown at the Margaret Mead Film Festival at the American Museum of Natural History, is subtitled "The Story of a Sex Surrogate."

The surrogate in question is a Los Angeles woman, probably in her early 30's, who when the documentary was made, in 1982, was serving 10 clients a week, referred to her by their own therapists. We meet two of them — a 25-year-old called Kipper, who can't bring himself to make an approach to a woman, and a 45-year-old called John, whose marriage and a subsequent relationship broke up, he believes, because of his sexual inadequacies.

The movie begins with the men's somewhat nervous arrival at the home of the surrogate, Maureen Sullivan, who is attractive and inviting enough to defeat most male inhibitions. In addition to sitting in on parts of their subsequent sessions, we also meet both the men's and Miss Sullivan's psychotherapists and relatives.

In the months leading up to the men's final, reluctant farewells, we witness the techniques (too formal a word perhaps for Miss Sullivan's natural manner) by which she encourages sexual self-regard. With her alluring body and soft ways, she is the incarnation of common male fantasies: "I want you to take pleasure doing anything you want to do using my body." She assures her clients of their attractiveness and of the pleasure they are giving her. When she compliments Kipper — "This is as good as it ever gets" — you may suspect she tells that to all the men. Still,

you'll have no trouble believing that her ministrations can help a fellow gain confidence or that when the time comes, Kipper and John should be downcast about breaking off from so forthcoming a therapist.

The camera of Christine Burrill and Catherine Coulson manages to be at once explicit and discreet. We see a lot, but not everything. Several of the scenes are highly sensual, with not a hint of prurience. There are a few mentions along the way of the documentary team's cameras and lights, but from all appearances, the participants soon got used to them.

Why is Miss Sullivan in this line of work? Nobody mentions money; we don't learn how much she charges. But there seems to be something more. Her responses to an off-screen interviewer, a session with her own therapist and an affecting conversation with her father and brother reveal that despite appearances, she is no model of sexual health. By working on others, she is somehow working on herself. "I have so much to learn," she jokes, "that I have to practice 10 times a week." (A post-script reports that two years after the movie was filmed, she had found a boyfriend and was taking fewer clients.)

No discussion of sex surrogates can avoid a certain amount of silly-sounding stuff. (Miss Sullivan talks about "sharing," and John says earnestly, "It's been a rewarding experience.") But witnessing Miss Sullivan in action allays skepticism. Whatever her training — another matter we are not informed about — she appears to have a natural sympathy for the worries of her clients, what she calls Kipper's "super uptightness" and John's shame about his tendency to premature ejaculation. No doubt her performance is practiced, the apparent spontaneity professionally controlled, but she knows how to use her feelings as well as her body to give her clients a boost to the ego and to the id as well.

Her method involves a lot of touching, and when the time arrives for separation, you may be touched, too, by this sympathetic account of a sort of human frailty that is not easy to talk about, much less make a movie about.

Walter Goodman