

A Sex Surrogate in Private Practice

★★★ PRIVATE PRACTICES:
THE STORY OF A SEX SURROGATE
(Unrated) A documentary about the treatment of two sexually dysfunctional men by a Los Angeles sex surrogate, Maureen Sullivan, who teaches them how to make love. Bizarre, yet fascinating. At the Bleecker Street Cinema, 144 Bleecker St.

By Joseph Gelmis

The hot ticket at the recent Margaret Mead Film Festival — an annual showcase of anthropological films at the American Museum of Natural History — was "Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate."

The hour-long documentary about sex therapy as a cottage industry (some 300 sex surrogates practice their trade at home in the United States) has been held over for a commercial run at a Greenwich Village art theater.

"Private Practices" is a provocative and fascinating documentary — alternately creepy and poignant — that defies simple categorization. It was inexpensively videotaped (the tape was later transferred to film) during a 15-week period in 1983 at the suburban Los Angeles tract home of sex surrogate Maureen Sullivan.

At the time producer-director Kirby Dick taped her, the 30-year-old Sullivan was ministering to a dozen clients a week ("I'm a workaholic," she said at the time), charging \$85-\$100 per 90-minute session. After a long search, the director found two men with sexual problems and paid for their therapy in exchange for their allowing a camera to record the treatment.

The two clients were Christopher Walker, 25, a student whose sole sexual



A scene from 'Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate'

experience had been with a prostitute, and John Christ, 45, a recently divorced high school math teacher who was a premature ejaculator with an inferiority complex.

Though this may sound like the scenario for a cassette from the adult (i.e., porno) section of your favorite video store, "Private Practices" avoids prurience with a relatively tasteful approach in camera angles and by treating its subject as worthy of serious investigation.

Sullivan's treatment consists of instilling confidence in her clients by reassuring them they are normal and by hands-on teaching of sex techniques. She begins with having them look at themselves naked in a mirror and accept their bodies, and progresses, gradually, through touching to the clinical examination of her body to — in some cases, but not all (we are told) — intercourse. The only member of the crew in the room during the session was a female camera operator. The director was in another room, watching a monitor and communicating by walkie-talkie.

The footage includes follow-up meet-

ings between the clients and their psychotherapists, interviews with John Christ's two daughters, discussions between Christopher Walker and his half-brother, and a scene with Sullivan and her father and brother.

Sullivan's father regards her work as no different from what a hooker does. She disagrees, says her job is to cure the men, not gratify them sexually. And then she and her brother devastate their father on camera by describing how terrible their childhood was because he regularly beat their mother. The old man, near tears, asks forgiveness.

In another scene, at a fast food restaurant, John Christ, a sad, chronically insecure man, asks Grace, his ex-wife, if she will take him back if he becomes better at sex. No, she says. Why not? he asks. She crushes him with her matter-of-fact reply: "You're a slob."

Later, in still another character-revealing scene, it's the turn of sex surrogate Sullivan to have her defenses penetrated. She weeps, as a woman psychotherapist probes her motives for what she's doing, her fears of binding relationships, her blurring of the distinctions between sex and love.

Sullivan's credentials are not stated in the film. The American Psychological Association does not recognize sex surrogates, but they have their own organization in L.A. (International Professional Surrogate Association), which sets their standards.

Soon after "Private Practices" was shot, Maureen Sullivan nearly died in a head-on auto collision. Her face is still undergoing reconstruction. Kirby Dick is currently working on a fictional NBC television film based on "Private Practices." III