

Observer-Dispatch

Utica, N.Y., Thursday, November 15, 1990

It's not exactly 'Father Knows Best' in Friedrich's 'Sink or Swim'

By JONAS KOVER
Observer-Dispatch

One part of Su Friedrich's film "Sink or Swim" focuses on shots of 1950s television series with pictures of Donna Reed's or Robert Young's happy TV family smiling and kissing.

This is in such sharp contrast to the family life traced in the rest of the film that one quickly sees the fantasy of television reality.

Friedrich, an independent filmmaker, will present her 48-minute film at 7 tonight at Utica College and will be there to answer questions.

Although called avant garde, the film is very accessible. Superbly edited, it is a child's alphabet story revolving about the relationship of father and daughter that is wrought with emotions and told with a mythlike quality.

Language and myths are used very dramatically. Friedrich's father was an anthropologist and a philologist and their very use shows the effect he had over her.

The simple language spoken in a naive adolescent voice is so potent that on first viewing one may think that "Sink or Swim" is

Film review

"Sink or Swim"

● **Time:** 7 tonight

● **Location:** Macfarlane auditorium, DePerno Hall, Utica College.

● **Admission:** Free.

● **Reception with filmmaker Su Friedrich follows.**

entirely an aural experience. But Friedrich is a clever and subtle filmmaker. She mesmerizes the viewer with images semi-related to the words. They go by quickly and seep into the system like a memory or a dream only hazily recalled.

The story is about a girl's rapport with her father; how he influenced and frightened her and how his presence was felt even after he had left the family.

The film is composed of 26 narratives accompanied by natural shots of people at the beach, going to confirmation, in a school yard, playing chess, at a parade.

Scenes from home movies and television and a potpourri of other images are skillfully patched together.

The narrative is in third person. A young girl describes incidents and episodes, but the remembrances are powerfully adult. The episodes follow the alphabet in reverse. The first is Zygote, where one sees an egg impregnated by sperm. The last is Athena or Aphrodite, where the adult-child makes a symbolic split with her father.

While the film is pregnant with meaning, it easily works at a subconscious level.

The stories range from the father leaving his family while her mother threatens suicide; to his method of teaching his daughter how to swim; to a meeting between the adult daughter, her father and a child of his third wife.

Some of the tales are powerful and out of the ordinary, but each person probably could come up with memories of parental misdoing that they could splice into the viewing.

The result is a highly personal statement both for Friedrich and her audience.

Friedrich's visual accompaniment may at first seem inconsistent, but it is very regulated; one segment augments another.

The film concludes with an alphabet song and a home movie of Friedrich. The song asks a question: "Tell me what you think of me?" One is not sure if Friedrich is asking this of her audience or her father.

Jonas Kover is a feature writer who covers arts and entertainment. Send comments and suggestions to: Jonas Kover, Living Department, Observer-Dispatch, 221 Oriskany Plaza, Utica, N.Y., 13501.