

New Release

from Women Make Movies

Blind Spot: *Murder by Women*

A film by Irving Saraf, Allie Light and Julia Hilder
1999, 87 minutes, Color, Video

Because murder by women is still relatively rare— only one out of eight murders in the United States is committed by a woman— women's own stories provide unique insights into the circumstances leading to these violent acts. In this absorbing documentary, intimate one-on-one interviews with six women murderers are combined with re-enactments of their background experience and visual re-creations of their interior lives. Sharing and reflecting on their memories, fantasies, dreams, and anger, the six women candidly describe their actions as perpetrators in detail and address the issue of having taken a life. Interspersed between their separate stories are their individual reflections on coping strategies, around life and relationships in prison. From the Academy and Emmy-award winning filmmakers responsible for *Dialogues With Madwomen*, *Blind Spot* is a provocative and riveting encounter with throw-away children, out-of-control adults, and the emotional, psychological and spiritual consequences of murder.



“Provocative, disarming...a brief essay in the banality of evil.”
— Sura Wood, *San Francisco Mercury News*

“An exceptional piece of work, Blind Spot provides an unique perspective into the minds of murderers.”
— Craig Marine, *San Francisco Examiner*

BLIND SPOT: MURDER BY WOMEN

Credits

Producer and Director

Irving Saraf
Allie Light
Julia Hilder

Editor

Irving Saraf
Allie Light

Videographer

Irving Saraf

Additional Camera

Allie Light
Julie Hilder

Location Sound

Sara Chin

Music

Larry Seymour

On Line Editing

Ed Rudolph, Video Arts

Re-recording Mix

Samuel Lehmer
Saul Zaentz Company

Archival Footage: Film bank, ABC News Video Source, KSL TV-- CH. 5,-Salt Lake City—UT, WCJB TV 20- Gainesville —FL, Kevin Devo, Bill Jersey—Quest Productions, Sharon I. Monroe, Steve Okazaki—Farallon Films, Diane Orr, Gordon T. Allen—I.T. News

Funders: National Endowment for the Arts, American Film Institute, Lucius and Eva Eastman fund, The Playboy Foundation, Fleishhacker Foundation, Marta Drury

Fiscal Sponsor: Film Arts Foundation

BLIND SPOT: MURDER BY WOMEN

Filmmaker's Statement

One out of eight murders in the United States is committed by a woman. Because of the relative rarity of murder by women, their stories in *Blind Spot* provide additional insight into the dark and violent side of the human psyche. These intimate interviews reveal the women's fantasies, dreams, and angers. The inclusion of background stories lend understanding to the circumstances leading to their crimes. Each woman admits to being the perpetrator, describes the murder in detail and addresses the issue of having taken a life. Interspersed between individual stories are discussions about specific subjects: prison wives and girlfriends, prison families, afterlife.

Blind Spot is a film about throw-away children, out of control adults and the emotional and psychological consequences of murder. Childhood trauma, like a Greek chorus, casts its shadow across the individual soliloquies of six women murderers whose dramatic stories stun and captivate the viewer. — Irving Saraf and Allie Light

THE WOMEN

Twenty eight at the time of her crime, Marnie, was a drug dealer caught up in the protection of her territory. She is serving four life sentences—two for first degree murder and two for weapon charges. She has been in prison for seven years.
I must have been a monster that night to do what I did. I don't even know how I did it...

Venus has a long juvenile record. She committed her crime at the age of 16 and received a life sentence. She was released shortly after we interviewed her. She had served 13 years. While in prison, Venus gave birth to a son.
My case is not right and I shouldn't have never did all this time. But, as much as it hurts, as much as it took away from me, I think it was necessary because I was hard and nobody cared about me, so I didn't care about nobody.

After killing her abusive husband, Jennifer “woke up to a charge of second degree murder”. Since she has been in prison, she has lost her parental rights and her son has been given to his paternal grandparents.
I shot again and, well, it hit him. It's like the world stopped— I didn't see any blood, I didn't see him fall, there was no wind, the clouds were not moving, there was no air— it was just still. Everything was still. And I picked up Zachary and he looked at me and said "Mama, want to go night-night," just like nothing had happened.

Melinda's desire to have a child led to a bizarre plan that resulted in two life sentences—one for first degree murder and one for kidnapping.
I was going to scare her and she got shot instead and she died. I sat there with her for a long time and was screaming at her to wake up and I knew she wasn't going to.

Kaysie's first letter to us described herself as a "dead man walking". Originally she was given a death sentence which was changed on appeal to 25 years to life. Hers was a violent crime of greed in which her mother participated.

I remember looking down at the dog and saying "Oh my God, what are you going to do? Your master's dead," and putting him in another room and shutting the door because I didn't think the dog could handle it.

Michelle's history of parental neglect, foster homes and drug addiction prepared the way for her violent act against a helpless 76 year old victim. At the age of 15 Michelle was charged as an adult and sentenced to 25 years to life. She has served 12 years.

I took what money she had in her purse and while I was in the house, I went into the kitchen and there was a knife there and I picked the knife up...

THE STRUCTURE

Blindspot is a film built on intimate one-on-one interviews that use a narrative structure to shape the individual stories. Each story is developed through reenactment and by visually creating the interior life— particularly memory and dream. In the reenactments, no actors were used. Ordinary people were chosen as stand ins for the women at different stages of their lives, or to represent those people who were part of a woman's past: parents, peers, victims. Natural images are used as metaphors for emotion: fog, wind, trees. These images we call emotional equivalents. We use dramatic elements to shed light on the different aspects of the life portrayed— for in life, as in film, reality and fantasy shift depending on the moment and the point of view.

BLIND SPOT: MURDER BY WOMEN

Biographies

IRVING SARAF, winner of the 1991 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, *In the Shadow of the Stars* and National Emmy Award for *Dialogues With Madwomen*, (both with Allie Light) works in fiction and documentary film as producer, director and editor with over 150 films to his credit, mostly made for television. He was the filmmaker of *Poland, Changing World* (Emmy Nomination). His directorial work includes *Going International* (six films about living and working abroad, producers: Copeland-Griggs) and *We Are Driven* (Japanese production in the U.S. : Frontline PBS). Among his editing credits: *Battle of Westlands* (Dupont-Columbia & Peabody Awards), *Las Madres* (Oscars Nomination) and *Three Warriors* (United Artist release). With his partner Allie Light, he has also produced and directed *Mitsuye and Nellie*, *Visions of Paradise* (five half hour films about contemporary American folk artists), *Shakespeare's Children* (director only) and *Rachel's Daughters* (HBO). He was founder and former head of the KQED-TV film unit and former manager of Saul Zaentz Production Company. Irving is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

ALLIE LIGHT, winner of the 1991 Academy Award for Best Documentary feature, *In the Shadow of the Stars* and 1994 National Emmy Award for Best Interview Program, writes, directs and produces documentary films with her partner Irving Saraf. Her credits include: *Rachel's Daughters: Searching for the Causes of Breast Cancer* (HBO), *Dialogues with Madwomen*, (Emmy Award; Freedom of Expression Award, Sundance Film Festival), *In the Shadow of Stars*, (Academy Award), *Mitsuye and Nellie*, *Asian American Poets*, *Visions of Paradise* (five half hour films about contemporary American folk artists) and *Shakespeare's Children* (director only). She has published a book of poems, *The Glittering Cave* and edited an anthology of women's writings *Poetry From Violence*; an interview with her is included in *Film Fatales: Independent Women Directors*, by Redding and Brownworth (Seal Press, 1997). Allie is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

JULIA HILDER has been a television journalist for more than ten years. A graduate of San Francisco State University in Broadcast Journalism, she has anchored and reported the news for El Paso, Houston and Austin, Texas television stations. She has worked in media relations with the Houston Police Department. Currently, Julia, co-owner of Media Savvy, a consulting service, also works as an independent documentary film producer. *Blind Spot* is her debut film. Her next production, *Desert Dogs*, has completed filming in New Mexico.

Oscar-winners Irving Saraf and his wife, Allie Light, enlisted the help of their daughter, Julia Hilder, a former journalist. Saraf says their new documentary is not likely to be favored by Oscar voters.



S.F.-based filmmakers document jailhouse interviews with six female murderers in 'Blind Spot'

A KILLER SUBJECT

By Craig Marine
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

WITHIN EVERY human soul exists the capacity to take another's life. Everyone, in moments of anger, has likely uttered, or at least thought, "I'm going to kill that guy!"

Why some people cross the fragile line and actually commit murder is a subject of great fascination, a window into the complex and ultimately unfathomable workings of the mind.

With their new documentary, "Blind Spot," Academy Award-winning producers and directors Allie Light and Irving Saraf — joined by their daughter Julia Hilder — take viewers deep into the minds of murderers. Six inmates, in riveting jailhouse interviews, examine their own psyches and try to explain why they used a shotgun, or a knife, or a belt or whatever weapon was at hand to

erase another person from the planet.

All of the killers in "Blind Spot" are women; 1 out of 8 murders in the United States is committed by a woman. The subject matter couldn't be more different from Light and Saraf's Oscar-winning documentary, "In the Shadow of the Stars," about members of the S.F. Opera chorus. "Blind Spot" will be shown at a special benefit preview Wednesday at the Castro Theatre at 7 p.m., as the 17th annual Film Arts Festival of Independent Cinema begins.

"We have always been curious about what it takes for a person to kill," said Light. "And when we found out how many women were sitting in prisons for murder, we thought trying to interview some of them might give us more insight, maybe a different perspective."

Light, 65, and Saraf, 68, spoke as they sat around the kitchen table of their home in San Francisco, along with Hilder, who had finally decided

[See DIRECTORS, B-4]

Filmmakers talk with female murderers

to move on from her successful career as a television news anchor and reporter to venture into the less secure world of filmmaking. Their collaboration, two years in the making, succeeds as much on their ability to navigate the puzzling and frustrating world of prison bureaucracies as it does on their cinematic skills.

"Men are trained as killers," said Saraf, a marksman in the Israeli army as a young man. "It is the men who are supposed to be violent — women, we are taught, are not supposed to kill. Yet there are thousands of convicted female murderers. Maybe, we hoped, by dealing with the exceptions, we would be able to more easily draw out the emotions that were present at the time of the violence."

With her background in news reporting, Hilder, 40, a product of Lowell High School and San Francisco State, was able to help her parents with the logistical aspects involved in obtaining permission for the interviews, as well as add an experienced eye to the process.

"I guess I'm much more cynical than they are," Hilder admitted with a smile. "Frankly, I expected these women to feed us a load of bull. That wasn't the case, although they all did try to maybe soften the image the public might have of what they had done, which is understandable. They didn't want to come across as monsters, even though it would be easy enough to see them in that light based solely on the nature of the crimes they committed. If anything, I helped to cut through some of the kid-glove treatment and get to the point."

By sending out 160 letters to various women killers, the trio whittled down the prospective interviewees and, through extensive correspondence, worked to establish a mutual trust that resulted in the frank and insightful stories the six women told on camera. Incredibly, there were only nine interviews conducted, with three of the women being excluded for various

reasons: one for space, another for lying and another for changing her story once the camera was rolling.

"We got half an hour to set up the lighting and, if we were lucky, an hour-and-a-half to conduct the interview," said Saraf. "That was it. We weren't allowed to return and do any follow-up questioning."

What they found out was that, while the circumstances of the crimes were different, there were some common denominators among the murderers.

"In every case, there was neglect during childhood," said Light. "And there was abuse, and there was some kind of substance abuse. As you can tell, particularly from a couple of the participants, these are incredibly articulate and intelligent people damaged by a world they were brought into, over which they had no control. So much of this is about tragedy — the lives wasted by the killers and the lives lost by their victims."

While sharing her parents' sentiments, Hilder was quick to add that "Blind Spot" wasn't made as a vehicle to excuse the women from their crimes.

"Every one of those people should have been punished for what they did, no matter their upbringing," Hilder said forcefully. "As one of the women says herself, there are a lot of people with horrible childhoods who don't go on to become killers."

"Blind Spot," along with the unique perspective it provides into the minds of murderers, also deals with diverse subjects including prison wives and girlfriends, and views on life after death. It uses regular people as stand-ins in reenactments of parts of the crimes, as well as some newsreel footage. But while it is an exceptional piece of work, the trio hold no illusions about their chances of holding statuettes come Oscar night.

"The subject matter is much too disturbing, I think, for the Academy," offered Saraf, who interestingly enough is on the nominating committee (though he can't nominate his own work). "It seems to me, from my experience, that this isn't the type of film that would win an Oscar."

The Mercury News

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F I L M

Women who kill and their stories



Kaysie, one of the convicted murderers in "Blind Spot."

By Sura Wood

Special to the Mercury News

In the United States, women commit one of every eight murders. That statistic challenges the commonly held supposition that women are not inherently violent. When murder is perpetrated by a woman, it's regarded as a crime against nature.

This provocative subject is explored in "Blind Spot: Murder by Women," the latest documentary from Oscar-winning San Francisco filmmakers Irving Saraf and Allie Light and their daughter Julia Hilder.

Though men still dominate the ranks of death row, the number of women in prison for murder is growing. "The first prison that was willing to send us a list was in Oregon," remembers Saraf. "When the warden asked if I wanted all 86 female murderers, I practically fell off my chair, because I didn't expect there'd be that many from such a small state; but, then we found out there were more than 500 in Florida."

"Blind Spot" will be

MURDER | Film examines what makes women kill

Continued from Page 1E

shown tonight to open the Film Arts Film Festival. The documentary uses candid interviews with six women who have been imprisoned for first-degree murder. The inmates tell their stories directly to the camera, describing their crimes and recounting their personal histories, which have been characterized by drug use, prostitution and a legacy of sexual abuse as children.

Light corresponded by mail with more 150 women before settling on the six who appear in the film. "The criteria were that they had to be the perpetrators rather than accomplices, they had to admit their guilt, have some understanding of the consequences, and they had to not be lying to us," says Light, who adds that the crew had only an hour with each prisoner.

Over the past 20 years, Light and Saraf have delved into eclectic topics, from the environmental causes of breast cancer in "Rachel's Daughters" to "In the Shadow of the Stars," a backstage view of the San Francisco Opera.

"We have always been interested in the emotional lives, the interior lives of ordinary people," says Saraf.

Touches of evil

And after all, it is ordinary people who kill. Savagery can be triggered in certain people under the right circumstances, and extreme cruelty may wear the face of the girl next door. The film, which takes a disarming, straightforward approach to its subject, is a brief essay in the banality of evil. "I went into the project thinking of Medea and Lady Macbeth and believing that there would be

some dramatic revelation," says Light. "But that didn't happen."

There's Kaysie, a remorseless, cold-blooded murderer who brutally killed an elderly woman for money; Michelle, a young, pretty, cherubic-faced woman who could easily pass for a sorority girl if it weren't for the fact that she stabbed a 76-year-old woman 37 times in the face and head during a robbery; and Venus, who killed another girl in a gang fight and has been in prison since she was 16.

"I wouldn't want to kill nobody," Venus says. "But it's so easy."

It's just that feeling that prompted the film's title. Each woman experienced the sense of dislocation while committing the murder — a moment when they stood outside themselves and became observers of their own actions.

Unfettered view

Though Light and Saraf saw the actual crime scene photos and found them repugnant, the filmmakers, in an effort to present the women without judgment, decided not to show the pictures in the film. "We know much more about these women than you get from seeing them on screen — what their victims looked like and what they did," says Light. "It was very traumatic for both of us."

Saraf says, "They should be in jail, because they definitely committed the worst crime that can be." She says she approached the project without preconceived notions. "I was just fascinated with what it takes for someone to cross that line and actually kill somebody. What really affected me the most is how mundane the act of murder can be. It doesn't feel like anything. It's like a piece of meat."

BLIND SPOT: MURDER BY WOMEN

Opening night of Film Arts Film Festival of Independent Cinema

Where: Castro Theater, Castro and Market streets, San Francisco

When: 7 tonight

Festival information: (415) 552-FILM or www.filmarts.org