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DOCUMENTATION OF A FILM MAKER

By LINDA GROSS

All of my life I've fought to be taken seriously," said Amalie R. Rothschild, a New York-based documentary film maker. "It's always been a double bind because there were double messages: 'Be a success and achieve' but, at the same time: 'Don't you dare. While I had the will to do what I had to do, underneath it all I didn't have the self-confidence to be comfortable about it.'"



Los Angeles Times
Amalie R. Rothschild

An assured and intense brunette who exudes pervasive professionalism, Rothschild gives the impression of never having experienced any self-doubt. But that's far from true. In a recent interview, the 36-year-old Rothschild talked forthrightly about her internal struggles as well as the difficulties of making documentary films. (Rothschild's latest film, "Conversations With Willard Van Dyke," a study of the photographer, plays at the Nuart today and is reviewed by Sheila Benson in the accompanying story.)

"For example," Rothschild said, "I never let the fact that there wasn't anybody else interested stop me from going to see a movie by myself. But once I got there, I'd often be miserable because I'd see other people together. It's hard to overcome the feeling there is some-

thing wrong with you because you are alone.

"Thank God, my inner resources didn't close me down. But they didn't make it easier either. A good part of my adult life has been spent becoming comfortable with independence and finding ways of over-

coming the anxiety that one can easily fall into when you are alone." Part of Rothschild's skill as a film maker comes from her ability to probe and ask disquieting questions. She's as tough on herself as she is on her subjects.

One of the qualities that attracted Rothschild to making a movie about photographer Van Dyke, whom she had known for 10 years, "as an administrator rather than as a film maker" was his ambivalence.

"Willard is a man who's not entirely satisfied with his life and career," she said. "I admired his willingness to articulate his feelings particularly because he is a person that most of us consider a success."

"The truth is that the majority of people have mixed feelings about their lives," Rothschild said, "and that's not a negative thing. I think it's poignant. There is a lesson to be learned in Willard's story because some of us right now are at the crossroads where we still can perhaps make certain choices."

"It was more common for people from Willard's generation to make decisions without thinking that it would mean their careers were at stake. People now have more information to work with. God knows if we are going to make a better go of it than they did, let's talk when we are 70 and see."

Rothschild began making her documentary on Van Dyke in May, 1977, while she also was teaching a production course in film making at New York University. Over a three-year period she shot 50,000 feet of film—25 hours. In addition, she had 30 hours of oral history be-

comes Van Dyke's own documentaries, all of which was eventually cut into a 59-minute film by editor Julie Sloan.

Like Van Dyke, Rothschild began her career as a still photographer. She did her undergraduate work in graphic design and still photogra-

MOVIE REVIEW VAN DYKE: FOCUSING ON THE CAMERA

By SHEILA BENSON,
Times Film Critic

Bless the documentary form. How effortlessly it broadens our knowledge of the world or lets us see in the round men and women whose names might only be impersonal landmarks in the history of a period.

"Conversations With Willard

Van Dyke" (tonight only at the Nuart Theater) ranges over a variety of fields with photography as its central axis and an urbane and fascinating central subject.

Willard Van Dyke's name is known best to some as director of the film department of the New York Museum of Modern Art, a film library that became a true film department under his aggressive leadership beginning in 1965.

"Artists can never be afraid of a fight," says Van Dyke's colleague, Donald Ritchie, his cigarette holder clamped firmly between his teeth. "And Willard never, never avoided a fight."

To others, Van Dyke, 75, is a doc-

umentarian, co-photographer for Pare Lorentz on "The River," and with Ralph Steiner on the witty and penetrating film, "The City," whose famous lunchtime montage is excerpted here.

In the late 1970s, a third facet appeared, when Van Dyke's photographs of the '30s were mounted in an extensive New York gallery show and the field he had turned away from began to pull him again.

The man who emerges from Amalie Rothschild's hourlong, loving portrait reflects the many facets of his career. Van Dyke now believes he left still photography, his first love, to avoid collision or com-

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OVER

VAN DYKE: FOCUSING ON PHOTOGRAPHY

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petition with his closest friend and mentor, Edward Weston. We see the two men in interesting juxtaposition in an excerpt from "The Photographer," Van Dyke's 1947 film on Weston. Weston fusses endlessly to catch one of his roiling, anatomical seascapes, while behind him, Van Dyke's motion picture camera catches both.

Like so many artists of conscience of the '30s, Van Dyke gravitated to social documentary, hoping that it

might change the world in the way he saw that still photographs never would. "Because poetry is the distillation of ideas," he says, and because at that time film makers had an interest in all art forms, the best of these landmark documentaries had a poetic spine. Pare Lorentz's hypnotic, rolling narration for "The River" was a Pulitzer nominee for poetry.

Van Dyke's dreamlike documentary, "Valley Town," is less well known but may be even more daring. In it, Marc Blitzstein's songs form the interior thoughts of the unemployed valley dwellers, as Van Dyke's compassionate camera searches their faces. Made in 1940, just as a nation was gearing up for war production, "Valley Town" got no distribution.

"It was out of step with its time—I won't say ahead," Van Dyke says gallantly, "just out of step."

Just what was ahead may be easier for later generations to judge. The excerpt we see is haunting. ("Valley Town," rarely shown and unavailable at the Van Dyke press screening, will screen following the Van Dyke film and before Anne Hershey's short film on 92-year-old photographer Imogene Cunningham.)

Van Dyke is perhaps most eloquent over the disillusionment he and many others later felt with the compromised state of documentary film making during wartime. "It got so I dreaded going into another perfect American small town, visiting perfect citizens 100% behind the war effort." And after the war, no word of protest was wanted, anything not "chauvinistically patriotic" was suspect. For a while, Van Dyke shot films for Walter Cronkite's "Twentieth Century" program, but found that the films not only had no bite but also were distortions of what he had seen.

A stint doing Lowell Thomas adventure films was worse, as the film maker's job came down to inserting the world traveler into footage already shot around him. The Museum of Modern Art job came just in time to rescue Van Dyke, and his mandatory retirement after 65 still angers him.

Now Van Dyke has gone back to still photography and is experimenting again, with 8x10 color Polaroid film. Rothschild's film ends on this positive note, as the photographer has won grants to go to Ireland to continue his work.

FILM MAKER

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Wilson" (1969), is about the artist who became independent at age 60 after the breakup of her 40-year marriage.

In 1971 while making "It Happens to Us," a documentary plea for legalized abortion, Rothschild helped co-found New Day Films along with Julia Reichert, Jim Klein and Liane Brandon. New Day became the first successful non-theatrical self-distribution cooperative formed. In 1974 Rothschild explored the relationship between her mother, her grandmother and herself in the 47-minute autobiographical documentary, "Nana, Mom and Me."

"Whereas 'Nana, Mom and Me' was a search for understanding my roots in my own family," Rothschild said, "'Conversations' is a seeking of my film-making roots. I consider myself a member of a second generation of social documentary film makers in this country and Willard is certainly one of the grand old men of the first generation.

"Stylistically, early documentary film making resembles fiction," she said. "The film makers had a theatrical audience and their films were taken seriously the same way that Hollywood films were. I'm really sorry that documentary has come to mean boring TV. Television has really changed the genre into something that is associated mostly with news and reporting.

"I think it's too bad that the only documentaries which the public now associates with entertainment and "the movies" are the music films like 'Woodstock.' Take a film like 'Harlan County, USA.' It's an enormously important and powerful film, which even won an Academy Award. But even though it played theatrically and did respectable box office for a film 'of its kind,' still, it didn't make any real money.

"I think documentary has enormous potential. Yet, it seems to be viewed as the ugly stepchild of the film industry because it doesn't have the commercial success attached to feature films. It's difficult to get widespread theatrical distribution and since there is generally not much money to be made back, it's hard to find backers, and the commercial film people certainly don't take us seriously.

"What becomes increasingly difficult is getting the energy to initiate the next project," she said. "I spend 80% of my time doing things I don't want to do, like raising money."

Rothschild's next film will be a documentary on the politics of real-estate development, which comes from her own experiences in New York City rewriting the zoning for her neighborhood and helping save her building from being torn down.

"Oh, how I long to arrive at the stage when it gets easier but that doesn't seem to be the case," she said. "It doesn't matter how good your film is or what honors you receive. Every time you start another project you have to go through the same gobbledygook all over to convince somebody to give you the money.

"Making documentaries is really living out the myth of Sisyphus."