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The Business of Being Born

(Docu) An Ample/Barranca production. Produced by Abby Epstein, Amy Slotnick, Paulo Netto. Executive producer, Ricki Lake. Directed by Abby Epstein.

With: Ricki Lake, Cara Muhlhahn, Dr. Michel Odent, Dr. Marsden Wagner, Elan Vital McAllister, Dr. Michael Brodman.

By [RONNIE SCHEIB](#)

Highly informative expose "The Business of Being Born" makes a strong case for natural childbirth and an even stronger case for having a baby anywhere besides a U.S. hospital. Directed by Abby Epstein and exec produced by Ricki Lake, who appears on camera throughout (even giving birth nude in her bathtub), docu seems best suited to cable: Lake's informal, Oprah-like concern invites the intimacy of home viewing. But the chick-chat approach in no way undermines the gravity of the problems the docu addresses, and "Business" could conceivably get rerouted to theatrical venues in the wake of Michael Moore's soon-to-be-released health care-themed "Sicko."

The statistics are sobering: Though the United States spends almost twice as much as any other nation on delivering babies, the rate of infant mortality is the second worst in the developed world. Docu cites several causes, particularly the absence of midwives from most hospitals, and a cycle of methods that seeks to impose artificial time constraints on a natural process, with an eye toward the bottom line.

Helmer Epstein approaches her subject from a dual perspective: She visits with midwives and their patients as they go through the various stages of home birth, and she lays out a fairly terrifying history, complete with archival photographs and footage, tracing the practices of hospital births.

The graphically documented home births are shown as supportive, quite painful yet infinitely rewarding. Any claim the docu may have to objectivity is limited not only by Lake being shown giving birth (the event which inspired her to help make the film), but also by Epstein herself becoming pregnant midway through the pic, unexpectedly providing the docu's most suspenseful moments.

In contrast, cartoony diagrams and sped-up montages illustrate the drug-induced assembly line of hospital delivery. Pic argues that the unnecessary medical interferences, the increase in Cesarean births for the sake of "convenience" and trendiness ("too push to push") all conspire to institute a mechanical regimen that, in some cases, is inimical to the health of mother and baby. A brief history of prior birthing practices does nothing to instill confidence in the medical establishment's method du jour.

Interspersed throughout, a wide range of talking heads, midwives, doctors, administrators and theorists support the pic's point of view. One might wish a somewhat whimsical French OB/GYN did not refer to the body's release of hormones during natural childbirth, ensuring the mother's bond with her newborn, as a "love cocktail," but the scientific point is well taken nonetheless.

Tech credits are adequate, the inhouse informality of the film heightened by the fact that lenser Paulo Netto did double duty as the expectant father of Epstein's child.

Camera (color, DV), Paulo Netto; editor, Madeleine Gavin; sound, Matthew Israel. Reviewed on DVD, New York, May 8, 2007. (In Tribeca Film Festival -- Discovery.) Running time: 87 MIN.

Read the full article at:

<http://www.variety.com/story.asp?l=story&r=VE1117933841&c=31>