

LOOK!

Guest editor Brenda Jones

Please have mercy on the mothers

THE OTHER day I sat in a Soho viewing theatre with Dr Laing, the famous psychiatrist, Dr F. Leboyer, the famous obstetrician and assorted mothers and babies, and watched a film called "Birth." Dr Leboyer and the mothers were there because of their experience in childbirth, Dr Laing because the film was made with his blessing and his commentary, and me, because I am expecting my first baby.

The film's producer, Helen Brew, a New Zealander with five children and 27 years' experience of parents' groups, was concerned to show how the Western way of birth—by which she means hospital—has dehumanised the natural process. In unsparring colour and sound she shows scenes of hospital birth intercut with the comments of mothers who have been alienated by the technology of modern obstetrics. Then, lest we become so depressed that we stop breeding altogether, she also shows us couples for whom the experience is a shared joy.

Unnerving as some of the film is, the most unnerving part for me was sitting next to Dr Leboyer. I am told that Dr

Laing finds the film so moving that it always reduces him to tears. Dr Leboyer is made of sterner stuff. He kept digging me in the ribs and delivering a cryptic commentary. "This is rubbish," he hissed, "You must not do this. This is wrong."

My first reactions to the film were professional. It doesn't make any points I haven't heard before but, being a film, it makes them very vividly. *How awful*, one thinks, repelled by the instruments and white coats, the screaming babies. But it gives no facts to chew on.

That lady who complains so articulately that her doctor wanted to induce her when she was quite happy to wait indefinitely—didn't her doctor explain to her the very real dangers of placental disfunction? Didn't he tell her that after a certain point the supply of oxygen to the baby is threatened, that after 42 weeks the perinatal mortality rate rises, that even where the baby survives, the risk of brain damage is higher? It seems not.

When Dr Laing says wistfully, in the role of foetus, that he would like to be born under the stars, I was unmoved. Natural

childbirth with the backup of modern obstetrics is one thing. Natural childbirth under the stars can end in days of agonising labour and dead babies.

I found that the film had emotionally convinced me that hospital was a hostile place into which I would vanish to be filled with drugs, tubes and needles, my baby snatched from me, a mere plaything in the hands of the men in white coats. Now, I know it's not as bad as that. It is just that the obstetricians err on the side of physical safety, while Leboyer and Laing are standing up for our soul. The problem is that the obstetricians have a trump card—they can prove their case with facts, while the others, despite the emotional force of their case, can't.

Dr Leboyer has a sublime disregard for facts, as I found over tea with him in Brown's Hotel in London. The supreme argument for him is the smile on the face of a Leboyer-delivered baby, and when other obstetricians meet the same smile, he says, they are convinced too. He was, delighted that Dr Laing, a psychiatrist, was pleading the baby's cause, but he found the

film too negative. He thought pregnant women would be frightened by it, and medical men—honest chaps, if misguided—antagonised.

But, whatever its practicality, Leboyer's emphasis on the dignity of the baby as a sentient human being appeals very deeply to me. This dignity is the root of Laing's thesis and Mrs Brew's film.

What disturbed me about their presentation of the case is that by attacking the established system so strongly, they risk destroying the confidence of the pregnant woman. And whatever theories come in, a woman having a baby still has to go through the system on her own. If she feels she is up against them, it does her self-confidence no good at all. So it seems to me that the fundamental issue is not forceps or not, Leboyer or not, but a deep gulf in communication between expectant mothers and the medical profession.

Peter Curzen, Professor of Obstetrics at the Westminster Medical School agreed with me. Gone, he says, is the compliant patient and the paternalistic doctor. In their place stand



A truly happy event—from the film "Birth"

women with knowledge of their own needs, and professionals who must adapt, not only to explaining themselves but to allowing women a say in their own management.

As for the individual practices questioned in the film, it seems that obstetrics is moving on. He assured me that stirrups are no longer used in normal labour, that—by request of his patients—pubic hair is no longer shaved except in the immediate area of the perineum where it might impede stitches, that a recent enquiry by the DHSS into the incidence of induction in labour was satisfied that it was rarely used for other than purely medical reasons—though Professor Curzen would like to point out that some mothers ask for induction for their own convenience, a course they are gently dissuaded from. Not everyone is a natural childbirth addict.

I felt reassured, so do not write in to tell me that I allowed medical wool to be pulled over my eyes. It seems to me that peace of mind is the essential ingredient in happy childbirth. Personally, I became very confused by the sound of over-informed armies clashing on the plain of childbirth. I would rather go somewhere quiet and watch the flowers grow. I am happy to say that Dr Leboyer, for one, agrees with me.

"Be happy," he said. "Forget all about it. Go for walks. Sit in the sun. And for a little time each day, sit quietly somewhere on your own and concentrate on the baby." It was what I was doing anyway, but it was the most palatable advice I'd heard all week.

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