

Movie Review

“EXPOSED”



I have little idea how healthy people will respond to *Exposed*, <http://www.exposed.at/>, a new documentary about a woman with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities. I responded with, "hey, look, it's my life on the screen," but I also kept thinking about them (you?)--the chemically tolerant folks. Squirming a little, I wondered if the general public would be sympathetic as the woman, named as Katherine, delivered herself up to the camera in painful, private moments--exposed indeed.

Katherine, while attractive and personable, is no air-brushed poster child for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). An avant-garde dancer and performer who often filmed herself, she's not suffering quietly or demurely. After a bad chemical exposure she weeps into the phone with distress and frustration, trying to wring some emotional support out of an apparently unattuned listener. "No, I don't have the flu," she says between clenched teeth, "I have environmental illness." In another particularly raw scene she speaks angrily to the camera while washing her hair outside on a cold winter day. She is away from home and going to such lengths in order to avoid breathing in the synthetic chemical fragrances in a friend's bathroom.

In addition to allowing us a window into her daily life, Katherine offers a social commentary--particularly addressing the widespread denial of MCS as a real disease. The filmmaker, Heidrun Holzfeind, does not establish much of a separate directorial perspective distinguishable from this critique. Between shots of Katherine, Holzfeind does intersperse, for effect, segments of 1950's-era marketing footage from the chemical industry, as well as shorter snippets of modern advertising and political speech. Also presented is some disturbing science supporting the reality of chemical dangers. It's clear the director is on Katherine's side, but Holzfeind allows her to be the one to draw the more subjective conclusions.

I didn't find much with which to quibble in Katherine's analysis, although it took the form of off-the-

cuff, often biting remarks rather than closely-reasoned or factually-documented

arguments. Again I didn't know how it would play with the uninitiated. She rhetorically kicks mainstream doctors to the curb. She identifies industry's cynical, profit-driven opposition to recognition of chemical harms. And she indicts "chemical culture" for such faults as an emphasis on the quick fix and a need to control--in contrast with her own hard-won belief in the need to be patient and allow her body to heal itself.

In one of her moments of reflection, Katherine talks about needing to set aside what she knows in order to interact socially in a normal fashion. Unsure of her meaning, I guessed that she was talking either about pretending to be healthy and happy, or about tacitly accepting generally-shared assumptions that no longer fit her experience--for example, that we live in a benign environment. She certainly doesn't seem to be suppressing much in *Exposed*; she's practically screaming out her truth. While I worried about the P.R. impact on the one hand, on the other I felt vicariously thrilled by her lack of apology and aggressive assertion of her reality in the face of its denial in so many quarters.

I, for one, would rather see someone being genuine, engaged, and angry than someone silencing herself, in order to fit in, at the expense of her health. Yes, I'm sure there are more enlightened options and I'm also sure that Katherine--and a certain slightly abrasive blogger--are working toward manifesting them. In the meantime, I hope as many members of the well populace as possible will see this film. And I hope they respond with compassion to the story of a real, struggling person rather than waiting for diplomatic coaxing before taking to heart her crucial messages.

The Masked Avenger

<http://multiplechemicalsensitivities.blogspot.com/>