

An Older Couple's Quest for Fertility

'Baby It's You' airs tonight on KQED

By Sylvia Rubin
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The camera is rolling when filmmaker Anne Makepeace and her husband, Peter Behrens, hear the news that their first round of fertility procedures has failed.

It is an emotional moment, but not nearly as raw as the scene that follows in "Baby It's You," Makepeace's documentary about infertility and family, filmed over a 15-month period.

Sitting on a park bench, the couple hash out their future. She wants to keep trying. He dismisses her optimism as "faith healer b—." She blames his pessimism for ruining everything. He won't look at her.

"Peter didn't want to be exposed at that moment," Makepeace says. "But I insisted that we film that conversation. He was very angry about that. I think it was a bit of a betrayal on my part. I still feel queasy about it."

It was honest, Makepeace says, "but I wouldn't put any of my family through this again."

"Baby It's You," part of public television's "POV" independent film series, will be shown at 10 tonight on KQED (Channel 9).

Makepeace, a longtime independent filmmaker and former Bay Area resident, is 50. Behrens, 42, is a novelist and screenwriter. The couple, who live in Santa Barbara, have been married 10 years.

John Carman is on vacation.

TELEVISION

A nightmarish encounter with a back-alley abortionist in the mid-'60s left Makepeace with a terror of pregnancy, says the filmmaker. "I couldn't stand being around babies."

When the documentary begins, she is 47 and on a quest to conquer her fears. But she explores more than infertility as she interviews her unconventional family.

She turns the camera on her two single brothers. Doug, a wannabe polygamist in Utah, longs for multiple wives. Roger, a reclusive Appalachian mountain man, lives with a herd of goats.

Behrens has two sisters. Anne is a lesbian and co-parent to her lover's sperm-bank baby in Montreal; Mary, an artist who recently had an abortion, seems haunted by the decision.

During the hourlong film, lives begin, end and change. By the fade-out, everyone has experienced a profound shift in their circumstances.

"I felt closer to everybody after the interviews, some of my fears lifted, and having a family shifted into focus for me in a much more important way," says Makepeace, who shot 100 hours of film and spent a year editing it down to one.

Makepeace, a director, producer and writer, is perhaps best known for her screenplays for the award-winning "Thousand Pieces of Gold" and "Ishi, the last Yahi."

For all the intimacy in her new film — Makepeace's backside ex-

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posed as Behrens gives her hormone shots; Makepeace on a gurney, legs in stirrups — she never reveals her exact age. "I was worried about putting some people off because I was starting this at such a late age," she says.

At 47, the chances for conception were very poor to begin with and got worse after fallopian tube scarring was discovered. Adoption is discussed, then dismissed.

"I was ambivalent about adoption, but Peter was adamantly against it," Makepeace says. "A lot of the impulse for Peter of wanting a child was to connect back to his family. I did not want to turn this into a huge battle that we might not survive."

If there were battles, they were conducted off-camera. Behrens is portrayed as a loyal and loving spouse. Early on, he becomes emotional about having a baby. "I'm the weepy one," he says when he ponders the possibilities.

Some questions go unanswered.

Makepeace makes no mention of the cost of the procedures or the side effects of the infertility hormones, deciding instead to move ahead with the emotional story. "Every time I included some of that stuff, it began to feel like an educational film," she says.

For the record, the couple's insurance through the Writers Guild paid for everything, Makepeace says. As for side effects, they were minimal. "I felt woozy, spacey and unfocused."

It was Behrens' idea to do the documentary in the first place, and yet it is he who wanted to give up early. "That surprised me," says Makepeace. "Watching me go through surgery was really hard on Peter; it took a lot out of him. But I also saw what an imaginative, supportive man he really is."

Underneath all the anger, frustration, sadness and grief, Makepeace says, the movie is about the wild, weird ways in which people create families.

"Every one of my movies is about claiming the life you have and the richness that is already there. This is really a film about family love."

Anne Makepeace, with husband Peter Behrens, filmed the documentary "Baby It's You" over a 15-month period. It airs at 10 tonight on KQED (Channel 9).

