

Author

An Evening Riddled with Tears and Laughter

There were few dry eyes to be seen among those of local media mavens and the friends and relatives of Tillie Olsen who streamed out of the Sash Mill Cinema and into the warmth of the Cine Cafe last Friday evening.

Yes, the preview screening of *Tell Me A Riddle* was the sort of event that forces handkerchiefs to be passed and noses to be blown unashamedly by hardened film critics and jaded movie buffs alike. Perhaps it was that moving collective experience that helped create the *esprit* of the latest Nancy and Bill Raney encounter session for press and filmmakers.

The Raney's had once again gathered the Santa Cruz area media to view an important new film and meet the people responsible for its creation. The Cine Cafe was filled to overflowing this evening, but that's not surprising. After all the film was based on the celebrated short story by Santa Cruz' beloved Tillie Olsen.

Rick Chatenever wasn't there just to sample the fresh bagels and cream cheese. Lisa Jensen wasn't sashaying about merely to show off her new jacket (\$50 her husband told me, choking on a Triscuit). Donna Blakemore wasn't there simply to regale Harry Stoll.

No indeed. They were there primarily to see Tillie. And see her they did. The small, white-haired lady with the face of a Russian icon was there pressing each and every hand, nodding and smiling her way through the throng of restrained gawkers.

"I wanted to help launch this film. I believe it will help change the American film scene," said Olsen, looking obviously weakened by recent bouts in the hospital and last week's arson of her home in San Francisco. But from somewhere she had mustered the strength to attend this local premiere of *Tell Me A Riddle*, because, as one of her daughters put it, "How many times do you see an American film about real human beings?"

Not only were her vibrant daughters, Julie Olsen-Edwards and Kathie Olsen, in attendance and bubbling with bits of praise and criticism for the film, but such *glitterati* as James Houston, Morton Marcus, Bernice Belton and Bruce Bratton were also holding and paying court to Tillie's book, the film and semi-related topics. (Spying the Kitchen Sisters attacking the lavish buffet, I wrung the admission from Nikki Silva that, while ethnically bound to love it, she actually hates chopped liver.) Throughout the evening, Nancy and Bill were happily emptying their own glasses while keeping those of their guests full.

Growing suspicious when we saw Chatenever and a gang of four deep in discourse on the patio, Lisa and I knocked each other over trying to join the producers of *Tell Me A Riddle* in the midst of an impromptu press conference. Once the microphone of KZSC's Rick Wheeler was turned-off, we all descended on Susan O'Connell and Rachel Lyon with questions about the film's production.

These San Francisco-based ladies, who along with Mindy Affrime make up Godmother Productions, chose *Tell Me A Riddle* for their first feature film after falling in

NEVER HAVE SO MANY BEEN REDUCED TO TEARS BY SO FEW. By the cast, of Tillie Olsen's film, *Tell Me A Riddle*, of course, and not by this giggling assortment of relatives and film producers surrounding the celebrated Santa Cruz author.

PHOTO: R.L. BOOKER



Marlow deVille

love with Olsen's book. They had "no idea it was going to cost a million and a half dollars" two years ago when they first approached Lee Grant about directing the film. But the film star was anxious for the opportunity, since large studios are still reluctant to give women a chance to direct.

With Grant on board, they all met and worked with Tillie for a period of six months, trading ideas and convincing her to give them the rights to "her baby." Filmways agreed to distribute the film, once it was finished, and the Godmothers are now looking at a possible shot at the Cannes Film Festival next year.

I was able to ask the author how she felt about the film, once she had escaped the snares of the *Mercury's* intrepid Murray Frymer.

Feeling that the Lee Grant-directed movie must be gauged separately from the book, Tillie confessed to "having differences with the film. If I'd been making it, I naturally would have done it differently," she admitted.

On the trail of more horse's mouth-type impressions, that Santa Cruz *bon vivant*, Rosemary Bryan and I cooled our heels on the couch with Julie (whose T-shirt proclaimed "I'm Tillie Olsen's second daughter").

Julie confessed to having been "moved and in tears" over the film version of her mother's story. But she flared tenaciously over some of the "damned inaccuracies"

portrayed on the screen.

Coming from a family of Russian Jews, "I grew up a union kid" she said. And the idea of a Russian child wearing shoes during hard revolutionary times definitely ruffled her feathers. Before she rose to collect Tillie she also threatened to invite us to the book-cleaning party the family was having next week to try to salvage manuscripts and books damaged in the fire at the San Francisco house.

Tillie spent a few more moments holding the hands of those around her before she was finally allowed to leave for the evening.

A special thanks to John Craver, manager of the Cine Cafe, for catering to the palates of Santa Cruz filmies.

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