

Susan Mogul Presents:

I Stare at You and Dream on the 1997-98 Southern Circuit

When Susan Mogul chose the title for *I Stare at You and Dream* she turned to a line from the young poet, Alejandra (Alex) Sanchez, whose story is one of four that make up this 1997 film. Alex's phrase, with its hint of confession, and its open door to a world of emotional images, is perfectly suited to Mogul's work. *I Stare at You and Dream* is a film about longing and loss, about the tides of love, sacrifice, anger, and hope that run through the lives of its maker and her friends, and all of us in her audience who stare at the screen and dream. It's a charming diary, deceptively funny but full of mournful undercurrents, that uses a visual language of contrasting images.

The most striking ones are water and fire, which serve as analogs for emotion as a life-giving, healing source, and as a consuming inferno. It's easy to separate the subjects in *I Stare at You and Dream* into fire and water personalities – Ray Aguilar, the man Susan falls for, is a real hot-head; Alex seems ablaze with sexuality, anger and creativity, while Alex's mother, Rosie, and Susan are the conciliatory, go-with-the-flow types. But nothing is quite that schematic. The Ray who can't seem to keep out of a fist fight is also the Ray who tries to win his abusive mother's approval by rebuilding her house after it is destroyed by fire, the tender grandson, and Susan's affectionate companion. Alex, who dresses to kill and marks herself with a tattoo of the Aztec god of fire, writes poetry, and still grieves for the father she never had, while her mother sacrifices herself on the altar of family responsibility. And Susan? Swimmer, storyteller, possessed of a bright and generous voice, and a self deprecating sense of humor...she's the one who's put a continent between herself and her family, the one who abandons herself to a man who can't return her love, the one who, in a moment of misery, pictures her comfortable apartment, and by extension her independent life, as a prison whose shadowy bars echo those that held Ray in San Quentin so long ago.

As I recount them, all these mirrorings and polarities sound like the work of a character-obsessed screenwriter. And in a way, Mogul is a screenwriter, but her craft lies in covering the trajectory of experience rather than fabricating it whole. As a documentarist, she offers us the pleasures of her medium: spontaneity, intimacy, and the spectacle of life unfolding before us. There's a sense of community in her work that's worlds apart from the intense temporary ties that often arise between documentary filmmakers and their sympathetic subjects; that's because what Mogul captures is rooted in shared in history and enduring relationships. Does she tell us the truth (the *whole* truth) about Alex, and Rosie and Ray and herself? Who can say? At the close of her film, Mogul admits she's guilty of wanting people and things to turn out the way she'd like them to turn out, of "trying to make my life like a movie." She has, in fact, made her life into a movie. Luckily for us, it doesn't have a Hollywood ending.

Program Notes by Linda Dubler

The Southern Circuit is a tour through the South of exceptional filmmakers. It is a program of the South Carolina Arts Commission, with support from the Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation and local sponsors.