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# MARLO THOMAS AS FORMER MENTAL-HOSPITAL PATIENT

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

''NOBODY'S CHILD,'' the television movie on CBS Sunday evening at 9, gives Marlo Thomas the type of true-story role that not only allows but also demands a bravura performance. Miss Thomas delivers impressively. She portrays Marie Balter, an extraordinary woman who, after spending 20 years in a Massachusetts mental institution, went to college and, in the mid-1970's, earned an M.A. from Harvard University and founded the Balter Institute, a center for psychiatric treatment and counseling.

It is a story very much worth telling, and the script by Mary Gallagher and Ara Watson tells it well. But there is a technical hitch. As the viewer is informed that this is a true story, it is immediately obvious that there has to be a happy, upbeat ending or television would not be interested in the first place. This reasonable assumption immediately creates a ''distancing effect.'' No matter what happens to the dramatized character, we know she will survive. That leaves us free to concentrate on the effectiveness of the performance, which may or may not be what Miss Thomas had in mind.

The film - made by Joseph Feury Productions in association with the Gaylord Production Company - begins in 1959 as Marie, about 30 years old, is being turned away from home by her mother. Desperate, she runs back to a nearby mental institution where, somebody notes, she practically grew up. Through a series of brief, sometimes almost subliminal flashbacks - the editing by Alan Heim (''All That Jazz'') is superb -we learn that Marie's real mother had mental problems and that her adoptive parents, Italian immigrants, were also disturbed, the wife being pathologically jealous of the girl. Marie had attempted suicide several times. She is diagnosed as an acute schizophrenic and given huge doses of drugs that reduce her to little more than a twisted vegetable.

One doctor, however, has doubts, especially when she hears Marie quoting from Dickens's ''Oliver Twist.'' She and a sympathetic nurse keep pushing to get Marie into a different treatment program, and finally succeed. The slow and harrowing process of rehabilitation begins, helped by a handful of incredibly supportive people, especially a man named Joe, who will eventually marry Marie. In fact, the nature of Marie's illness is never disclosed except for being labeled ''an anxiety disorder,'' which gradually is controlled with unspecified drugs.

Directed by Lee Grant, ''Nobody's Child'' is billed as ''A Lee Grant Film,'' just as, say, ''The Money Pit'' is called ''A Richard Benjamin Film.'' This is the latest wrinkle in credits jockeying. In any event, Miss Grant has put together an unusually absorbing film with the considerable support of other proven talents. The photography director is Sven Nykvist, the veteran of Ingmar Bergman films, and he has vividly captured Marie's terror in seemingly ordinary images. And, as noted, Mr. Heim's editing contributes greatly to giving the production a visual sophistication rare in a television movie.

Pulling out all the stops, Miss Thomas offers the kind of performance that awards are made for. Concentrating with a tension that sometimes leaves her face in muscular knots, she goes from being terrified and hysterical to being disarmingly shy and fiercely determined. It is a harrowing, totally dedicated portrait. And Miss Thomas also gets outstanding support, from Ray Baker as Joe, Caroline Kava as the sensitive doctor, Anna Maria Horsford as the helpful nurse, and Kathy Baker, Jackson Davies and Blanche Baker as devoted friends.

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