

All-important 'Line' divides life and death

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TELEVISION

■ P.O.V.: THE VANISHING LINE

11 p.m. tonight and 1 a.m. Thursday, **9**; 10 p.m. Thursday, **60**

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Newhouse News Service

FOR doctors, death means failure.

So imagine the dilemma of physician/filmmaker Maren R. Monsen as she explores the "art of dying" in "The Vanishing Line," on PBS's "P.O.V." series.

"The Vanishing Line" is an intensely personal film. Monsen, a fellow at the Stanford University Biomedical Ethics Center and a Woodside resident, struggles, through her dialogue with the camera both visually and verbally, to cope with something she was never taught in medical school: how to help patients cross over.

It also is a lyrical and sometimes surrealistic piece of filmmaking.

Fates step in

For example, Monsen tells the story of the three Greek Fates who determine life and death issues with a piece of string, a line. One handles the life line (long, stretched out as if limitless); the second determines



Physician and filmmaker Maren Monsen confronts fate in "The Vanishing Line."

how long that life line will stretch (and puts a knot in it toward the end); the third, with a pair of scissors, cuts it (and thus ends life). So it is that throughout the hour-long film, three women dressed in Greek attire weave in and out of the live action doing their thing. A soft-focus image frequently depicts a spinning wheel.

The title of the piece reflects Monsen's belief that, because of its modern advances, medicine no longer allows a clear and defining separation of those three fate functions.

It has become an issue of preventing death rather than prolonging life — as the devastating footage of a young man who nearly drowned will attest.

Doctor's pain

"I have spent years learning to do things for people I would never want done to myself," she says in her narration. "And I have begun to realize how much planning people have to do to avoid procedures and people like me."

For a good portion of the film, Monsen links up with Jim Brigham, a Bay Area hospice social worker, as he visits some of his terminally ill patients — and relives his own story of the medical battle waged when his late wife was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Brigham is, in many ways, the soul of this film, helping not only Monsen come to terms with death, but also viewers. "The act of dying, of completing one's life, does not have to be a terrible and horrible thing," he says.

Much is said about quality of life, Monsen notes. But quality of death is just as important — and she accents that with visual and audio footage of a slow IV drip and a breathing machine run amok.

Monsen, who produced, wrote, directed, narrated and starred in "The Vanishing Line," says at the end that she has learned now to sit with patients as death walks in.

"Death is no longer the enemy," she says.

Compelling story

There are more than a few faults in this film in terms of technical ability, storytelling and imagery. But in its long history, "P.O.V." has rarely shown a film with a more interesting viewpoint: that of a doctor coming to terms with death.

Monsen is a graduate of Stanford University and the London International Film School. She attended medical school at the University of Washington and completed her training with a residency in emergency medicine at Stanford University Medical Center.

Her other films include "Highway Ends: Rural Health Care in Crisis" and "Grave Words."