



Sheldon Film Theatre

Filmmakers Julia Reichert and James Klein. Together, they have made such films as *Seeing Reds* and *Union Maids*.

Reichert's films depict 'the living reality'

By Eric Peterson

For 15 years, Julia Reichert and James Klein have made strong documentaries about the effect of social movements upon individual lives.

Growing Up Female, made and distributed in 1970 and *Men's Lives*, co-produced with Josh Hanig and Will Roberts in 1974, helped educate many Americans about repressive sexual roles. *Union Maids*, about three women labor organizers, was made from 1974 to 1976; and *Seeing Red*, a look at what involvement with the American Communist Party meant for the millions of Americans who were members from the 1930s to 1950s, was a six-year project now in its first release. Reichert was in Lincoln last week as part of a Sheldon Film Theatre film/video showcase.

"I think we were interested in presenting people with the living reality of what it meant to be a Communist in this country," Reichert says of *Seeing Red*. "Our real interest was the people and their life stories — which was more powerful than the actual history . . . We wanted to reveal something of the radical response to the world."

Seeing Red fills out the picture of labor organizing and social commitment in *Union Maids*, and is a much more complex exploration of political involvement.

"I think of *Union Maids* as a kind of rah-rah film. It's very straight ahead, it goes forward like a locomotive almost. It just takes off and goes and you feel great by the end and you're cheering at the end and they're wonderful, you're right with them and you're in love with them and that's it.

"Now, *Seeing Red* has its crisis that people go through, it has a lot of pain in it; they had to go through rough periods of disillusionment. There was a lack of questioning (among American Communists). Maybe there was a fanaticism. It's a much more complex film, and in a way by the end of it I think it's a little less satisfying. You don't feel so cheerful about it. And that's OK — I don't think it answers all the questions that it raises."

This dissatisfaction is surely related to the ambiguous issues of Leftism in the 1930s and 1940s rather than the artistic excellence of *Seeing Red*, which is powerful in its technique and in its (somewhat troubled) train of thought.

Reichert said the Communist Party U.S.A. was extremely important as a labor organizing and grass roots movement.

"All the women in *Union Maids*, we didn't know that at the time, but they all had been members of the Communist Party at the time they were doing

that work. It's what shaped their work. It's a little misleading, I think, that those three women kind of individually, on their own, were brave enough to stand up to the boss, say 'Let's turn off the machines and call the strike.' While these three were very courageous women, they were all members of the Communist Party, which helped educate them, give them ideas about tactics, advise them."

Reichert noted that while the Socialist Party, which had shrunk in size by the 1930s, concentrated on elections and putting out a newspaper, the Communist Party was instrumental in forming the C.I.O. and other grass roots activity. "The C.P. was the main game in town for most of those people . . . It led strikes, picket lines, demonstrations at the welfare office."

Finding the meaning of this movement for its rank and file was Reichert's and Klein's purpose.

"We wanted you to meet these people and kind of

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see the world through their eyes. They were a lot of ordinary people — they did extraordinary things. They were maybe a little more courageous, a little more daring than the person who worked next to them in the factory."

Reichert said that of 400 people interviewed for the film, most of them former rather than present members of the Communist Party, nearly all still consider themselves Leftists. She said the myth of burnt-out radicals who go through a phase in their rash youth, then put on suits and ties and become Republicans (*The Big Chill* is a Hollywood portrayal of the myth), has little to do with the gray-haired former or present Communists who are active at anti-nuclear and Central American demonstrations.

A fascinating shot in *Seeing Red* shows riot-helmeted, mounted police charging demonstrators

just as they are shown attacking strikers in the 1930s.

"Cops are still using those long nightsticks and still charging into the crowds. People are still being carried away hurt from the scene . . . It's not so different. People with radical ideas are still there and they're still influencing our democratic society, trying to make it more democratic. These people (former Communists) are a very important part of that legacy."

Seeing Red brings the filmmaker — particularly Reichert, who does a lot of on-camera interviewing — out into the open. "Most filmmakers don't let you in on their end of the relationship. I really object to that. Let people know the filmmaker's in on it, too." A particularly sensitive sequence near the start shows Reichert on the phone to a potential interviewee who in the end decides not to risk the adverse publicity his involvement might bring.

Reichert says that *Seeing Red* emulates *The Word Is Out*, a documentary on the coming out experiences of gay men and women made by the Mariposa Film Group and Peter Adair, "in terms of that real intimate, intense personal interviewing style." Reichert said being gay or Communist were both absolutely taboo involvements in American society, so one task of her film was to defuse the prejudices and resistance of viewers, and reveal "the character of the individual because that's important . . . People say, 'Well, they're gay — they're bad.' It's the same thing with Communists."

Reichert says that Adair is someone she admired from her days in Antioch College in Ohio, where he went to school and where she became politically aware and involved.

Some reviewers — one from the *Progressive*, ironically enough — have called *Seeing Red* a naive and uncritical look at a regimented and undemocratic movement, despite considerable exploration of this same blind devotion in the last part of the film.

"I think when you say it's as if they don't see parts of it, that's actually true — I don't think they do see parts of the film because of preconceived ideas. Regimentation, lack of democracy, following the Soviet Union . . . I think it's real clear that's what caused that whole movement to collapse."

In spite of the secrecy and stifled thought which Communist involvement often necessitated, rank and file Communists are still limited heroes for Reichert, people who committed their lives to effective popular organizing. She quotes Pete Seeger's line from the film — "Don't mourn for a fighter who made a mistake and lost but mourn for suckers who never bothered putting up a fight."