

REVIEW BY TULIS McCALL
May 7, 2007

ABSOLUTELY SAFE -
written and directed by Carol Ciancutti Leyva

Stop me if you've heard this one. A woman goes into a dance club and sits at the bar. A man comes over to her, looks at her breasts and asked "Wanna dance?" She says "I'm sorry, but they don't talk."

Maybe that's what this excellent movie should be subtitled:
They don't talk.

Because if breasts did talk they would be screaming at the millions of women who have bought the drug companies' and plastic surgeons' yarn that breast implants are not only a good idea, but also are safe and will, like true love and plutonium, last forever.

The story goes like this: Breast implants are a good idea because perky looking breasts are a good way to measure the worth of a woman-I-mean-girl. Implants are safe because, hold on here, it's coming to me. Oh, right. I'll quote Dr. Franklin Rose, a surgeon. "Honey, I don't know how many times we can rehash the same old thing. I mean, it's safe." Finally, implants are safe because they last forever. Now this part is almost true. Although 50% will rupture within 10 years, all of them release silicone into the body. Silicone contains platinum, which is a heavy metal, and as such is pretty darn stubborn leaving a person's body once it has settled in and set up housekeeping.

So implants are a good idea if you want to look like a girl.

They are safe because they are.
They, or some part of them, do last forever.

If breasts had lips instead of nipples they would be yelling "WHAT are you THINKING?!!" And after seeing this movie, you may be shouting this as well.

Absolutely Safe is a documentary and a love story. The documentary follows of four people: one woman having implants put in, one having them taken out, and their respective surgeons. Denée is in her 20's and has wanted implants since she was 14. Wendi had her implants put in 15 years ago. Denée's surgeon is Dr. Franklin Rose. Dr. Rose estimates he has done 4,000 breast augmentation surgeries. Wendi was turned down by 5 surgeons before she found one who would remove her silicone implants and not replace them with saline implants. Her surgeon is Dr. Edward Melmed, who began doing breast augmentation in 1975. In 1992 he stopped putting them in and began taking them out.

The love story introduces us to Audrey Ciancutti, the filmmaker's mother who received implants in 1972 after a mastectomy. It's the medical profession's package deal: mastectomy, radiation and implants. Most women are too ill and overwhelmed to argue, even though a body recovering from a mastectomy and radiation is in no shape to accommodate anything stronger than a gentle touch.

Ms. Ciancutti is a quiet but intense woman who was told that there would be no negative side effects from her implants, and they would last for the rest of her life. Her implants subsequently ruptured three times, requiring three more surgeries to replace and finally remove them. As a result of the ruptures silicone has been dancing around in Ciancutti's body for three decades resulting in chronic fatigue syndrome and rheumatoid arthritis.

With Leyva as our guide we witness both surgeries, as well as post surgery reactions, hear little girls talk about ideas of beauty, meet women who are happy with their implants, eavesdrop on FDA hearings. We listen to evidence and opinions on both sides of this issue. It is because of her skill that we can endure the final intimate portraits of women who are both victims and survivors of breast implants. In weaving these journeys together, Leyva has opened up something like an infinity display. She sets mirrors around the facts and stories. Step into the reflection of one, and your reflection in the other has no end.

So it is with Breast implants - and who would have think it?

Ms. Ciancutti is matter-of-fact when she says that in 1972, "We trusted the hospital and the medical profession that if it was something that was going to harm my health they certainly would not put it in my body."

Some of this simplicity may have rubbed off on her daughter who gracefully moves from living room to FDA hearings to operating room to waiting room to consulting room, and in each location she asks the same question: "Why?"

Denée tells Leyva that she wants implants put in so that she will feel more like a woman. Wendi wants hers extracted for the same reason. There is a demand for this, Dr. Rose tells Leyva. A lot of people say so. Dr. Melmed's answer? "Men like big breasts and girls like to have them."

Yes. He said girls. Even Dr. Melmed who is one of the few surgeons speaking out against implants - even he calls women girls. A little startling, but it shows how loopy we still are in this country when it comes down to male vs. females. Which is another reason this film is important. As Melmed also says - "If this were the case on any surgery involving men, do you think they would put up with it?" And this is the larger issue that is opened in this film. The women vs. men thing.

You know, if you think about it you'd be hard pressed to come up with another body part whose only purpose is to give. Breasts give nourishment and are soft to the touch. They never take, or judge or withhold. They don't grab, push or misinterpret. They are more or less perfect, every one, even though they in an amazing variety of sizes and shapes. They are so perfect that men want to touch them pretty much all the time. Now, we can't have men grabbing women like that in public, so we cover our breasts up. We western women are not so backward, however, that we wear burkhas to cover up everything. We just wear burkhas on our breasts.

So on the one hand, we cover ourselves up to protect ourselves from wandering male eyes and hands. And on the other hand, we snip and tuck and implant plastic into our breasts so that men will want to do in private what we stop them from doing in public. We are trophies with legs.

Here's my theory: After world War II, when this country was bursting with energy and a need to aim it almost anywhere, it was decided that breasts were something that men liked that could be improved, in much the same way that cars were improved. Get the women out of the factories where they produced and get them home where they could produce what God intended. And why wouldn't women want to improve what they had?

Call me crazy but consider this: Playboy Magazine began in 1953. In the 1950s, polyvinyl sponges began to be implanted into the breasts for breast augmentation. The first silicon breast implants were developed in 1961.

And once the horse was let out of the barn on the idea of implants, it followed that a woman who had endured a mastectomy would of course want to be restored. And once the idea of restoration became accepted, the cycle of using these little packages of magic for improvement began once again. Round and round we go. Where she stops no one knows.

Leyva presents the evidence in a straightforward manner - kind of like what CBS did to McCarthy. They just ran the facts. And as you watch this film with your little brain calculating away, you will watch these facts add up to something along the lines of a nuclear meltdown that's been going on for, oh roughly 40 years. The answer to, "Why?" is disturbing and simple: money. If you get nothing else from this film you will get that this is a profit making business.

Watch this film with a friend. This way you are more apt to call your Senator or Representative, and ask if they have seen this film. And when they say no, you pick up your cue from Leyva, and ask "Why?"

FACTS:

The 17 studies, including Mayo Clinic and Harvard, that have been conducted on breast implants were all funded by Dow Corning - the leading manufacturer of implants for many years and manufacturers of Agent Orange as I recall. These are the same 17 tests that are referred to over and over again by proponents of implants. If you don't believe me, just Google breast implants.

Since 1992, the FDA has never received long term study information on the safety of implants and has approved them twice, the second time as an over ruling of their own committee recommendations. Prior to that they were approved "with restrictions", and without the restrictions - you guessed it - more money!

Silicone doesn't leak into the body just because of ruptured implants - it leaks period. Dow Corning told their sales reps to wash the sample implants before showing them to a physician. Wash them just before, because the seepage only took 24 hours to be to be apparent to the touch. This of course means that once inside a woman, the same clock was ticking.

In 2005 1.3 billion dollars weres spent on breast implants.

If you go to the FDA website

<http://www.fda.gov/cdrh/breastimplants/qa2006.html#10>

you will see a question:

17. Where/how can I find the adverse event reports for silicone gel-filled breast implants?

Individual reports are on FDA's MedWatch website (www.fda.gov/medwatch). To access these reports, follow the links for: "Medical Device Reporting," "Access to FDA Safety Data," and "Manufacturer and User Facility Device Experience Database (MAUDE)."

There is no listing for breast implants. Try it.