

Katie and Eilish

UK TV documentary : 1992 : dir. Mark Galloway : YTV : c60 min
prod: Mark Galloway : scr: : dir.ph.: Alan Wilson

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Narrator: Julie Christie

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A fine documentary that in less competent hands would have reeked of emotional voyeurism. Katie and Eilish Holton were a pair of Irish Siamese twins (the buzzword now is *conjoined* twins, presumably following complaints from the Siamese) joined at the chest, abdomen and pelvis. That is to say, they shared one body, two arms and two legs, but had separate hearts, lungs and spinal column. By the age of (I'm guessing here) four, both girls were in good health otherwise, and seemed emotionally well-adjusted to their special circumstances.

After extensive consultation with specialist centres around the world, the twins' parents were offered an operation to separate the girls at a London children's hospital. This would entail firstly growing extraneous tissue on the twins that could later be grafted over one full side of each. Each twin would be left with just one arm and leg, and be fitted with prosthetic limbs. The chief area of concern for the surgical team was that the girls shared certain lower abdominal organs, but particularly the liver. How these medical questions were resolved the programme does not explore.

The film records the twins' home life in Ireland, and the anxieties of their parents, faced with the impossible dilemma of whether to consent to an operation with all its attendant risks, or leave their daughters as they were. A Somalian family, whose twin sons underwent a similar operation, is flown to meet them. After much deliberation, the Holton parents consented.

The fantastically complex separation surgery was a success but – to recall a very black joke – not for the patient. Katie died of heart failure four days later. At the time the film was made, the surviving twin, Eilish, was recovering well, physically at least. Who can imagine the extraordinary trauma for her - having shared a single body all her life – at the death of her sister? Or the anguish and self-recrimination of the parents, both of whom came across as sobre and conscientious in weighing the risks and gains for their daughters? They managed to retain their dignity on camera in the face of overwhelming private grief.

It is a deeply moving tale of personal tragedy, refreshingly free of journalistic intrusion and audience manipulation. It points no fingers, spells out for us none of the questions the circumstances self-evidently raise, and (one hopes out of respect) forbade to attend the funeral of the dead twin. Also to be applauded is the absence of heartrending background music, increasingly a feature of such current affairs coverage today. Altogether a commendable exercise in restraint. Obviously it was initially broadcast under some documentary strand such as "**Panorama**", but I saw a repeat showing on UK Horizons eight years later. The series editor was Grant McKee. **Recommended**

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