Filmed Over Six Years, That Way Madness Lies Looks at a Family Upended by Mental Illness

Portland-raised Sandra Luckow's new documentary is a deeply personal look into the life of her brother, who developed paranoid schizophrenia as an adult

By Walker MacMurdo |

One devastating moment in Sandra Luckow's new documentary, *That Way Madness Lies*, takes place in a Clackamas County post office.

Sandra's brother Duanne is deep in debt. He has just sold a rare car part to a collector in Australia, and he's received a check for $1,500. Behind the camera, Sandra asks the soft-spoken but excited Duanne what he's going to do with the money. He calmly explains to her that he's going to send it to Nigeria. "Then, I will have $10.5 million deposited in my Key Bank account," he says.

Before 2010, Duanne was a machinist who ran a successful fabrication business and restored classic cars at his home in Clackamas. Then, at 46, he developed late-onset paranoid schizophrenia. Luckow's new film tells the story of Duanne's illness through interviews with Duanne, his friends and Luckow's elderly parents, primarily between 2010 and 2016, when her family lived in Clackamas County and Portland. The film, which premieres this week at NW Film Center, is constructed from more than 80 hours of Sandra's filmed interviews and Duanne's own personal cellphone videos.

Duanne was a filmmaker and photographer during and after high school. A lifelong bachelor, his relationships with women have been troubled from an early age. "He never dated girls, and it seemed he was only able to be near girls by taking pictures of them," Luckow explains in the film. Luckow, a career documentarian, producer and director coach who went to high school in Clackamas County and currently teaches film at Yale, tells us she was inspired by her brother to become a filmmaker.

Duanne's illness becomes a prominent part of his and his family's life in January 2010. He suddenly becomes obsessed with a New Agey YouTube blogger named Jessica Schab, whose videos include "The Illuminati's Plan for the Starseeds" and "The Hollow Earth & Its Core." Duanne attempts to travel to Canada to marry her. He makes the journey without money or ID, blowing a border checkpoint in the process. For the first year of his illness, he begins acting increasingly paranoid and erratic, which culminates in a video he shoots at the top of Multnomah Falls, proclaiming his devotion to Schab. Duanne is involuntarily committed to Oregon State Hospital for six months after a court finds he is an imminent danger to himself.

Much of *That Way Madness Lies* follows Sandra and her parents' efforts to handle the fallout from Duanne's committal and the bill for over $115,000 he receives from the state. The Luckows become ever more entangled in the arcane legal framework of Duanne's financial affairs and care, while his behavior grows increasingly self-

sabotaging. After he begins threatening Sandra—and, later, the police—with violence, Duanne moves from transitional housing to bouncing between homelessness, jail and psychiatric facilities.

Luckow argues that mentally ill people are failed by a legal system that treats them as rational actors even when their behavior is plainly irrational and self-destructive. Through stoic court visits and tearful conversations with Luckow's mother attempting to maintain her composure as her son loses his agency, we see systemic problems through the personal. Luckow can't stop Duanne from harming himself, and neither can he.

Despite consisting almost entirely of interviews and conversations, *That Way Madness Lies*is compelling film, progressing with slow, constant pressure. Duanne's self-shot videos, taken both while in the throes of psychotic episodes as he screams over a blood-smeared Bible and in the lucid aftermath as he calmly expresses his frustration with homelessness, are a rare glimpse into the horror of schizophrenia from a first-person viewpoint. The result is intimate but expansive, speaking empathetically to problems faced by thousands of American families.

"Look at what your brother had: He had a life, he had loving parents, he had a house, he had a thriving business, he was very, very skilled," journalist and mental health advocate Pete Earley explains in an interview with Luckow. "All of that is gone now, and you tried to stop it. You couldn't. Why? Because we believe he has a right to throw it all away, even though he's not thinking clearly."

Critic's Rating: 4/4 stars.

Madness And Family: On Sandra Luckow's Moving Documentary

Written by RIYA MIRCHANDANEY
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Barnard film professor Sandra Luckow recently released a new documentary, That Way Madness Lies*…, which was seven years in the making. Staff writer Riya Mirchandaney went to check it out.*

"It is essentially the destruction of my family," remarked Professor Sandra Luckow, by way of introducing her documentary "That Way Madness Lies…" Luckow's comment was striking in its accuracy, for while the documentary was disguised as a story about her brother Duanne's struggle with paranoid schizophrenia and the myriad of ways in which the systems in power failed him, the systems—that is, law and medicine—were only a backdrop for the story at the film's core, a story of a resilient, desperate family drowning within itself, trying to cope with the series of traumas that hit them, without the luxury of being able to ask why any of this was happening.

The film begins with Luckow painstakingly calling the Oregon State Hospital, where her brother was involuntarily committed after being arrested. It is exhausting to watch her try to get an ounce of information about her brother, as the hospital administration repeatedly refuses to admit that he has even been committed, hiding behind a veil of "confidentiality."

Luckow then gives a brief narration her family's story, before anyone began to worry about Duanne (he is in his forties at the beginning of the film—an atypical age, as schizophrenia is usually diagnosed in one's late teens or twenties). This is a family with quirks they take pride in: Luckow's mother created miniatures inspired by her wealthy Mexican childhood, Luckow's father once built his own gyrocopter, Luckow herself performed as a ventriloquist, and Duanne created short films with wild stunts, emblematic of James Bond movies.

But the quaint idealism that shrouds her past is harshly interrupted by the story of the present: Duanne, Luckow is beginning to realize, is not okay. Duanne becomes obsessed with a psychic crystal child on the internet called "Jessica Mystic," believing that she is speaking only to him. Without any money or identification, he drives to Canada to find her, and when he reaches the border, he speeds through and is arrested and detained for six hours. Later, worried sick, Luckow calls the police.

Although the film is directed by Luckow, some of the most haunting scenes are actually shot by her brother Duanne, whose perspective represents a rare and powerful glimpse of the firsthand experience of mental illness. We watch through Duanne's eyes as the police ask, in a bored, uninvested way, why he is filming, if he is at risk of hurting himself or others, if he has thought about seeking professional help. Duanne responds that he has not considered seeking help, because he does not believe he needs it.

They take Duanne to the hospital and he is released after five days because he refused to take any medication, proclaiming his beliefs in a "medical conspiracy against America." Duanne's life quickly spirals and he falls into financial trouble, Farmers' insurance gets a restraining order against him, he stops paying his bills, he moves to a tent in his backyard and talks about getting off the grid.

In one scene, employees from PG&E are frustrated at his attempts to get around paying for electricity, and Duanne is yelling at them. One employee asks, condescendingly, "Are you taking any medication?" Duanne says that he is not, to which the man responds, "Should you be?"

When Duanne gets some money from selling a compass, his sister asks what he is going to do with it, and he says bluntly, "I'm going to invest it into paying some taxes in Nigeria." The joke of Nigerian email scams is suddenly a real threat to a man's livelihood, and we find out that Duanne has been emailing with the scammers for months. He is determined to go through with this deal, and his family's insistence that it is a bad decision only pushes him further away.

The film details the rest of the family's destruction: Luckow's father's dementia worsens, Luckow's mother suffers a fall and is put on life support, Luckow and others begin to fear that Duanne's illness will lead to him harming others. When an unidentified shooter terrorizes shoppers at the Clackamas Town Center, Luckow wonders if it is her brother.

At one point, Luckow calls the mental health crisis line, remarking dryly, “I should have it on speed dial.”

When their mom dies, Duanne doesn’t believe his family when they tell him, thinking they are trying to trick him into coming to the hospital. Duanne then sends Luckow threatening messages on Facebook. One of them includes the sentence, “You sure want to go out with a bang, huh?”

There is much more that goes wrong. Duanne ends up homeless, spray-paints bomb threats on the facade of the house he used to live in, gets impulsively married to a manipulative older woman, moves to Seattle, is arrested after harassing a woman, and is force-medicated at Western State Hospital. He is eventually released to the home of a woman who is willing to host him, a woman he refers to as his “fiancee.”

After all of this, after trying to advocate for him and trying to get him the help he needs, Luckow realizes that she can no longer be her brother’s keeper. He does not want her in his life. She moves back to New York, and mails Duanne some keepsakes, the ashes of both their dead parents, and a letter reminding him that she will always be his sister. It is touching but feels clearly forced: Luckow acknowledges this in the discussion after the screening, saying that the end of the movie is not really the end of her story, but, after all, the movie did have to end somehow. She mentions that her first time speaking to Duanne since he was released from the hospital will be this coming Thursday.

The two other panelists, along with Luckow, were Dr. Lloyd Sederer, Chief Medical Officer at the New York State Office of Mental Health, and Dr. Kim Hopper, professor at the Mailman School of Public Health.

The most interesting discussion centered around diagnosis and stigma. On the point of Duanne refusing to take medication, Dr. Hopper resisted the notion that mental illness is what prevents the mentally ill from taking medication, arguing that anyone who becomes mentally ill grows up in a society that stigmatizes mental illness. In order to receive help, you have to admit that you need it, and you have to admit that you are mentally ill, which brings with it a slew of associations, none of which are positive. Of course people would refuse medication. Dr. Sederer remarked plainly that he believes “diagnosis is highly overrated,” also noting that clinicians don’t get paid if they don’t diagnose, which perhaps is a flaw in the system.

The strange part is that medications are not diagnosis-specific, but symptom-specific. There are antipsychotics like clozapine that are used as treatment for schizophrenia, but they really only target hallucinations, which, sure, is a symptom of schizophrenia, but not only schizophrenia, and not all of schizophrenia. I wonder if there really is a practical use to handing out diagnoses that tack onto individuals, that allow us to dehumanize people by referring to them as “schizophrenics,” as if their mental illness subsumes their identity.

Although ripe with insight about our mental health system, the film was at its heart a personal and family tragedy, one that I believe everyone should see.

Luckow said, “We see a life that had been fully realized, and then he lost everything.”

Film Professor Sandra Luckow Wants To Change Our Minds About Mental Health

AARUSHI JAIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

FEATURES

By Peyton Alie

"I had a very tough day yesterday," adjunct assistant professor Sandra Luckow confesses. Yesterday, she explains, was her older brother Duanne's 54th birthday.

"He is sitting in a jail because he is mentally ill," Luckow says bluntly.

Luckow, who teaches filmmaking at both Columbia and Yale, has made Duanne's struggle with schizophrenia the focus of her work over the past seven years, culminating in the release of her documentary, *That Way Madness Lies*, this year.

"I think this is his eleventh arrest in the course of seven years," she says. "He's been sitting there in jail for a month." Duanne was arrested after returning to his former home in violation of the protective order the new owners have against him, despite the fact that he does not understand that the house no longer belongs to him.

Luckow wonders out loud if Duanne will be sent again to the Oregon State Hospital's "treat until fit," or "aid and assist," program, which aims to treat patients until they're legally competent to stand trial for crimes they've committed, according to the State of Oregon's website.

"But he's committed a crime because he's mentally ill," Luckow points out. "And then if they cannot make him competent to stand trial, they release him to the streets because you cannot try someone [who is] incompetent." In such an outcome, Luckow says, Duanne would likely be homeless, as he has been before.

That sort of structural quagmire is what Luckow aims to bring to light and resolve through her work.

Luckow grew up in Oregon as part of a family with quirks right out of a Wes Anderson film. Her father spent hours refurbishing old cars and building his own gyrocopter, while her mother created detailed miniature dollhouses and figures based on her wealthy Mexican upbringing. Luckow herself performed as a professional ventriloquist, and Duanne loved restoring classic cars along with their dad and making James Bond-esque amateur action films.

Despite her current career as a filmmaker, Luckow wasn't at all involved in Duanne's films as a child. Instead, she looked up to Hollywood actresses such as Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis, who portrayed characters whom she admired for their strength. However, at around age 15, she read I*'m Dancing As Fast As I*Can, a memoir by Barnard alumna and Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Barbara Gordon,

and was fascinated by Gordon's profession. A few years later, Luckow became one of the first students from her high school to be accepted to Yale. When people asked her what her future plans were, she said that she wanted to study documentary filmmaking because she thought it "sounded much more academic and much more scholarly" than acting—her true ambition.

Yale, however, did not offer a film major at the time, so Luckow majored in American studies and took the film courses that Yale did offer. She was particularly inspired by Annette Insdorf, one of her film professors. Insdorf now teaches at Columbia, and she and Luckow are colleagues.

of the human spirit" on film. "Working with Sandra Luckow is joyful," she says.

As a senior at Yale, Luckow successfully petitioned to make a film in lieu of writing a senior essay as her capstone project, which was unheard of at the time. The result was a documentary centered on a childhood friend who was a figure skater about to enter her first national skating competition. Luckow's work won Yale's Louis Sudler Prize in the Performing and Creative Arts. Eight years later, that same figure skater, Tonya Harding, became infamous as the Olympic figure skater who hired a man to attack her rival Nancy Kerrigan, hoping to break Kerrigan's leg and eliminate her from the competition. This sparked more interest in Luckow's student film.

The upcoming movie *I, Tonya,* which will be released on December 7, based its portrayal of Harding's mother on interviews with her from Luckow's film and uses Luckow's footage of Harding in its credits.

"I think the reason why my movie did so well in some ways after the scandal is because it was really the only unfettered look at her family, her skating," Luckow says. "I was making the film without an agenda of trying to push who I wanted her to be or what purpose in the story I wanted [her] to serve."

Luckow's latest and perhaps most significant project is *That Way Madness Lies*, which follows Duanne, diagnosed with schizophrenia at 46 years old with no prior history of mental illness. In 2010, Luckow's family noticed that Duanne was increasingly preoccupied with conspiracy theories and obsessed with New Age YouTube blogger Jessica Schab. He drove to Canada to meet this "crystal child," but brought no money or identification, convinced that his "psychic guides would safely deliver him," Luckow explains in the film.

Duanne was sent to Oregon State Hospital for what he and his family both thought would be "a blip in what was otherwise a pretty smooth life," according to his sister. Instead, Duanne ended up spending six months in the hospital—the maximum time available to him—and then moved into transitional housing.

Since then, Duanne has shuffled between incarceration, hospitalization, and homelessness. As the film shows, he has enormous medical bills, but sells car parts to send money to Nigerian prince scams and supposed Russian women on the Internet—projects that he ardently defends even as Luckow tries to reason with him.

Central to *That Way Madness Lies* is Duanne's own footage, filmed on his iPhone, which he asked Luckow to use. Over the course of a year, he recorded videos reflecting his growing paranoia in the year leading up to his diagnosis and hospitalization. Through this footage, That Way Madness Lies provides a rare first-person account of schizophrenia.

"I'd never seen anything like it before. I didn't even really know what I had or how it could be of use in any way," Luckow says of Duanne's footage. She tells me that when she showed the scene of Duanne at Multnomah Falls to a psychiatrist at the Yale School of Medicine, the doctor's eyes welled up.

"He said, 'Listen, you have to understand, I've spent 25 years of my professional life working with schizophrenics every day and yet I have never had the opportunity, never had the insight, to be able to see psychosis like this, as it is happening,'" Luckow recalls. The psychiatrist explained that typically, a patient has already received some treatment or made beginning steps toward recovery before he encounters them. "And he said to me, 'I mandate you to continue shooting,'" Luckow says.

Watching *That Way Madness Lies*, I was astounded by Luckow's determination to do just that. She suffered the loss of both of her parents—her mother in a sudden accident, her father after a battle with dementia—over the course of making the film, which are also documented by it. As she grieved, Luckow had to take on increasing responsibility for her brother's wellbeing, even as he sent her graphic threats over Facebook, paranoid and convinced that she was plotting against him. I ask Luckow how, in the midst of such personal tragedy, she could stay focused enough to not only advocate for Duanne, but also to complete the film.

"I look back on the past seven years and to be honest with you, I feel that I was in complete and utter survival [and] work mode," she tells me. "It's only in the screenings that I'm reliving and experiencing, sometimes for the first time, the emotional level of what happened."

Luckow tells me that filming the difficult parts of her life for the documentary got her through this period. "There were times when I was really feeling very, very sorry for myself and thought, 'Okay, this is really terrible for me, but this is really good for the movie.'"

In some ways, Duanne's case is exceptional—according to the Mayo Clinic, schizophrenia in men generally appears in the early- to mid-20s and it's rare for adults over 45 to be diagnosed with it. Yet Luckow says that her film has resonated deeply with audiences. She tells me that the question-and-answer sessions at screenings have been mostly comprised of people sharing their own similar stories.

"What has been astounding has been for me to realize that my story is not unique at all. It is frighteningly commonplace," Luckow says. "The only difference is that I have it recorded."

Luckow has become a fierce advocate for mental health care reform through her filmmaking. "We need to get mental health policy out of the judicial system," she asserts with passion. "I think that we need to strongly advocate for getting mental health back into the medical profession in terms of determining policy."

Luckow has fervent hope that *That Way Madness Lies* will inspire changes in how mental health is treated and she is determined to have the film shown where it can make a direct impact on policy and medical protocol.

"My dream for this film is to get it shown on Capitol Hill, to get it shown to every member of the government who is on a subcommittee that determines policy. I think that it should be shown in law schools so that people can see, and in medical schools," she says adamantly.

Sammy Applebaum, a Columbia sophomore, has been interning for Luckow since March. Applebaum took one of Luckow's summer courses at Yale as a high school student. After arriving at Columbia, he reconnected with the professor and began working with her after talking to her about his ideas for fundraising for *That Way Madness Lies*.

"What I really love about Sandra's work is that she really makes what she believes in. For her, the most important thing is having a message that is important to her and her life," Applebaum tells me. "It's really about how can I use my experiences and my talent as a filmmaker to actually change the world, and she's absolutely doing that."

A couple hours after our interview, Luckow texts me, writing that she thought more about Duanne's childhood films after I asked her about them.

"I tell stories based on actual events or authentic realities," Luckow writes. "Duanne always made films that played into his fantasies. I don't know what that means. But it is an observation."