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Film Society of Lincoln Center

Nathaniel Kahn, left, in a still from his documentary about his father, the architect Louis I. Kahn, who left three families when he died in 1974.

FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

Son of a Celebrated Father Traces His Elusive Past

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN

There is a built-in poignancy to any story of a son searching for clues to the identity of a father he barely knew. But in the case of Nathaniel Kahn, the illegitimate son of the great architect Louis I. Kahn, who died in 1974, that poignancy has an extra twinge, since this mostly absent father strove so diligently to remain a man of mystery.

When Kahn collapsed and died of a heart attack in the men's room at Pennsylvania Station, he had been deemed by some to be the greatest living American architect, but his body remained unidentified for two days. At his death he was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt.

Nathaniel Kahn was 11 at the time, and the personal documentary he has made, "My Architect," which the New Directors/New Films festival is showing tonight at Alice Tully Hall and tomorrow at the Gramercy

Theater, is a record of his quest to put together the pieces of his father's compartmentalized life. Kahn, it turned out, juggled three families for many years, one official and two not. He was so secretive about his triple life that many of his colleagues didn't even know he was married.

Kahn's official family consisted of his wife, Esther, and a daughter, Sue Ann. Nathaniel discovered that his father also had another daughter, Alexandra, by Anne Tyng, an architectural colleague. Nathaniel's mother, Harriet Pattison, a landscape architect, succeeded Ms. Tyng as Kahn's extramarital partner. When Kahn died, his wife tried to prevent the two other women from attending the funeral, but they went anyway and sat in the back.

As Nathaniel recalls his occasional encounters with his father, the architect's comings and goings from one

family to another had the feel of a cloak-and-dagger operation. At the conclusions of these brief meetings — the memories of which Nathaniel clings to with a boyish pathos — Kahn would vanish like a phantom into the night.

The son's quest involves interviewing the other women and their children and arranging a meeting of the children to compare notes. Of the women in Kahn's life, only Esther, who died in 1996, does not appear, except in a videotaped interview from earlier times. The son's search is one of three strands of a story that the movie weaves into a meticulously structured portrait of a complicated man who remains elusive even after key elements of the puzzle have been pieced together.

The two other strands are a biography of Kahn and a survey of his buildings, which include an addition to the Yale Art Gallery (his first major work, in 1953); the Salk Institute, overlooking the Pacific in La Jolla; the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth; and his grandest achievement, the capital of Bangladesh in Dacca. That sprawling government complex, begun in the 1960's, wasn't completed until 1983. It is suggested that one reason Kahn never completed a major building in Philadelphia, his home city, was the anti-Semitism of its upper-crust society.

The picture of Kahn that emerges is of a dreamer, an eccentric workaholic and a late bloomer who traveled continually and was always in debt. Born in Estonia in 1901, he moved to Philadelphia at 5. Physically unprepossessing, he stood only 5 feet 6 inches. As a small boy he was caught in a gas fire that left his face disfigured. It is speculated that the grainy surfaces of his buildings were reflections of his scarred face.

Kahn's style didn't begin to take shape until the 1950's, when he traveled to Rome and became fascinated with the city's ruins. The weighty geometric style that emerged, which involved enormous concrete blocks and evoked the purposeful solidity of heavy industry, looked way beyond the sleek steel-and-glass minimalism of other modernists to aspire to a timeless monumentality.

In its formality and dispassion, the son's movie oddly mirrors the father's architecture. The creation of something meant for the ages, be it a building or a film, isn't an endeavor to be undertaken lightly.