The night is lit by a full moon. A woman drives through the quiet city, whispering as she arrives at the apartment where another woman, heavily pregnant, is smiling as she walks around her dimly lit home. La Juana is in labor, and her midwife has arrived to support her as she gives birth. Sometime later, almost before we expect it, her baby gently slips out as she squats in a tub of water.

From these opening moments, the documentary *The Business of Being Born* represents a break from the view of childbirth America usually sees – and has come to accept as normal. As an early review of the film at Salon.com noted, the film “includes very little of the screaming, gnashing, clenching horror that is the hallmark of most TLC-style obstetri-drama.” Instead, the film features a series of women - including, famously, Ricki Lake, who dreamt up and executive produced the film after the home birth of her second son - giving birth with “surprising serenity,” on their own terms and under their own steam.

The impact of *The Business of Being Born* has been palpable. Despite a documentary market largely driven by DVD rental and sales, the film achieved an impressively wide theatrical release in 8 cities across the US, including an extended run in New York and a period as the highest grossing documentary per screen in the country. Through these and over 300 private and grassroots screenings, the film has raised thousands of dollars for non-profits dedicated to improving maternity care. It has also garnered interest overseas, with screenings as far afield as Canada, Australia, Scotland and Malta.

In February 2008, the film became available “to pregnant women everywhere” via Netflix – on release 65,000 people had placed it in their queue, while around 5000 watched it online in its first week alone.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the film was welcomed positively by reviewers across the board, with comments ranging from the bemused – “moving (and surprisingly ungross)” (Slate) – to “passionate” and “unblinking” (New York Times) or “an absorbing, thought-provoking inquiry into what modern birth has become and how to make it better” (Village Voice).

“I think the reviews were probably more positive than I expected overall,” says Abby Epstein, the film’s director. She found that critics were moved by the film and “forgave whatever imbalance they thought it had because they thought the message was so important.” This imbalance lay, some felt, in the film’s critique of conventional hospital births. The film underscores the important work of obstetricians in the high risk, surgical situations for which they are trained, but points out that these do not apply to most normal births. “We never hid that the film has a very strong view point,” responds Epstein. “And we also acknowledge the need for it to be one-sided.
to counterbalance most of the information that’s going out there.”

“We’re not anti-hospital, we’re not anti-physician”, Epstein points out, “we understand that there’s definitely a role for modern medicine and we appreciate it.” As if to demonstrate this, the film closes with Epstein’s own birth by cesarean section following a home birth transfer. Her son, Matteo, was born prematurely after suffering a growth restriction which was diagnosed after birth. Footage of Epstein’s labor at home shows her midwife, Cara Muhlhahn (who also attends the movie’s other home births) calmly assessing the situation and recommending Epstein move to a hospital. The transfer and cesarean section happen in a timely way and both mother and baby emerge safe and healthy. Her birth has, unexpectedly, become a flash point in discussions of the film within medical circles as well as in the midwife-centered birth community. While for the most part, midwives, doulas and other birth professionals are, she says, “just so unbelievably appreciative” of the film, some have been concerned that it ends with a potentially negative image.

Yet, Epstein reports that the response from women has been gratitude that she put her own birth in the film. “It’s really great that you showed this home birth transfer - it’s actually made me feel so much more comfortable about having a home birth.’ That’s been the response,” she says. Among a series of beautiful, peaceful home births, the film’s audience sees one in which the unexpected occurs and mother and baby get exactly the calm, competent and timely care they need.

This is especially important since, anecdotally, women tend to feel that they have to give birth in a hospital in case something goes wrong. Instead, the film shows women that transfers from a home birth or birth center, when needed, are safe and effective for both mother and baby – a far cry from the panicked, risky emergency situations that we might otherwise imagine.

The film’s message of demystifying and taking the panic out of normal birth has already started having a huge impact on women who see it. “Ricki has a lot of celebrities calling her who want to have a homebirth,” says Epstein. Lake is also working on plans to open new birth centers in both LA and Manhattan, while midwives and others in the birthing community have seen an upsurge in queries about natural and out-of-hospital birth. And it may even be having an impact on how birth takes place inside hospitals - following one screening, says Epstein, a Labor and Delivery nurse told her that the film had changed her life, telling her: “It completely changed my entire perspective on what I’m doing.”
Perhaps most significantly, after screenings pregnant women are saying that they want to change their plans. In fact, says Epstein, childbirth educators using the film in their classes for expectant parents have reported a huge direct impact: “They said literally 30% of the women changed their birth plan! Isn’t that incredible?”

Lake and Epstein have built on the film’s success with a book, *Your Best Birth* (2009), and accompanying website, [www.mybestbirth.com](http://www.mybestbirth.com). “It’s a practical guide to childbirth that’s really going to help women discover natural options and take back the birth experience”, says Epstein. After all, she points out: “it only takes a little bit of information to open the door.”

For more information, to buy a DVD copy or for 24-hour online rental of *The Business of Being Born*, visit [www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com](http://www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com).

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