

"The way I look at it is this: in Canada,

how many women or people of colour do we have really actively engaged in the film industry? What kind of money are they making? Who is in decision areas anywhere?" The speaker is Claire Prieto. A dynamic and articulate black woman, this veteran Toronto-based filmmaker has reshaped her own career in order to be the program producer for New Initiatives in Film (NIF). A special project of the NFB's acclaimed feminist unit, Studio D, NIF was designed to create opportunities for women of colour to make films that reflect their own concerns – and those of their communities.

One can sense the passion of her commitment to NIF as Prieto describes the conditions that people of colour encounter in this country's media-based industries. Although some progress has been made in the past few years, there are precious few Aboriginals or visibly non-white women working in film and television in Canada. "As an initiative of the Studio D and the NFB, NIF recognizes that there is a problem," Prieto points out. "We have to try to shift the balance."

Issues of balance and representation have been of vital concern to the NFB since its inception in 1939. The New Initiatives in Film Report for 1993-94 makes the statement that since the Board's creation, "the NFB's ability to interpret Canada to all Canadians has greatly diminished. While the work force of all full-time, temporary and freelance employees at the NFB remained essentially white and male, the general population became increasingly diverse. In 1991, people of colour and Aboriginal people comprised 12.1 per cent of the total work force and 13.2 per cent of the general population. Women accounted for 50.6 per cent of the general population and participated in the work force to a total of 46 per cent."

It was the latter fact, that women comprised the majority of Canada's peoples and were still being denied a true voice in the media, which caused the Board to create Studio D in 1974. The success of Studio D has been phenomenal. In just two decades, Studio D has been responsible for a multitude of award-winning films ranging from Bonnie Sherr Klein's controversial look at women and pornography, *Not a Love Story*, to Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman's docu-drama on lesbian lives, *Forbidden Love*, to such prestigious Oscar recipients as Terri Nash's anti-nuclear "propaganda," *If You Love This Planet*, and Beverly Shaffer's moving *I'll Find a Way*.

Claire Prieto has contributed two films to the NFB. For Studio D she made *Older, Stronger, Wiser*, "a real eye-opener," according to the *Montreal Gazette*, which looked at the lives of five black women in Canada while, for the NFB's Atlantic Centre, she co-directed with Sylvia Hamilton *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, a film which gave "an extraordinary sense of the courage and contribution made by black women in Nova Scotia" (*Canadian Press*). Although her films, and those of such First Nations filmmakers as Alanis Obomsawin and Carol Geddes, received praise, and "Studio D had been successful in its original mandate, there was," according to Prieto, "a need to respond and address issues of equity around race and rep-

resentation. Within the women's movement, there are women of colour...[who are] positioning themselves to become more powerful within that sphere."

Studio D established the New Initiatives in Film program in 1990. Its mandate was clear: to support and encourage women of colour and Aboriginal women to become active working members of the Canadian film and television industry. An advisory board in consultation with women across Canada worked with Studio D's executive director Ginny Stikeman, program consultant Signe Johansson, and Sylvia Hamilton to determine NIF's objectives. A Professional Development Internship Program, annual workshops, a resource directory, special event screenings, and a communications network have all been created since that time.

New Initiatives Hit the Film Board



Black Mother, Black Daughter

NIF's first intern, Mina Shum, who has garnered praise for her autobiographical short *Me, Mom and Mona* and feature *Double Happiness*, is now working on a script for a second full-length drama. NIF is supporting Shum's new film in the critical script-development stage; they also helped on the post production for the award winning *Me, Mom and Mona*. The other three interns for this year, Premika Ratnam, Midi Onodera and Merhemaz Lentin, are all rising young artists who can benefit from NIF's organizational and financial backing at this juncture in their careers.

Ratnam, who was born and educated in India, is currently working on *Roll Over Mahatma: Democracy is MTV and Coca Cola*, a one-hour documentary that explores the impact of Western programming in her native land. Lentin and Onodera are developing a feature, *Deadlove*, a dark comedy loosely based on the Jesus-in-Japan legend. Onodera is an independent filmmaker best known for her provocative *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)*, while Lentin, her producer, is a recent graduate of the Canadian Film Centre.

Claire Prieto is realistic about NIF and its potential effect on the Canadian media. The program itself is up for evaluation in March, 1996, which may prove to be enough time for the initial stages of this project to be assessed. Prieto observes, "NIF is only a stop gap, a beginning way to get people on track. My big wish is to see some real commitments – money, time, dollars, percentages – and some real goals, some equity so far as people of colour and Aboriginal people are concerned" ●