

INDUSTRY

BY CHERYL BINNING

NFB producer Silva Basmajian, winner of this year's Crystal Award for Outstanding Achievement from Women in Film and Television – Toronto, says it's all about the footnotes. After researching, writing and producing over 40 documentaries throughout a 20-year career at the NFB's Ontario Documentary Program, premiering her films at 183 film festivals around the world and winning 38 awards in addition to the honour from WIFT-T, Basmajian maintains that the main ingredient of a successful documentary is the germ of the idea, and she often finds those nuggets in a short but profound annotation at the bottom of an article.

"I look for the footnote. It's the idea glossed over in the main article that is often the most fascinating, where I find that new twist on a subject, where I find my stories," she explains. For example, reading a short note at the bottom of an article on the First World War, Basmajian discovered that over 400,000 women worked in munitions factories during the war. That little footnote was glossed over, not discussed, and yet it had a huge impact on history and on the women's movement. That annotation became *And We Knew How to Dance*, a documentary Basmajian produced that examines the work of women in the war effort. Or take her award-winning and groundbreaking *Feminization of Poverty* series that emerged from a brief statement she read that predicted by 2001 poverty would have a female face. "I immediately asked, 'What's this all about?'" she says and was compelled to explore the topic further.

A historian by training, Basmajian first became involved in documentaries in 1976 when producers TV Ontario and the NFB were looking for a researcher for the film *Fields of Endless Day*. Basmajian just so happened to have done work on black history in Canada and was hired. Once the project had wrapped, she continued as a researcher for the NFB and then began writing, production managing, associate producing and



NFB producer Silva Basmajian

eventually producing. John Spotton, the legendary NFB cinematographer, was one of Basmajian's early mentors. He was a cameraman, a director and an editor who had a gut reaction to a story and was passionate about his craft. "He really believed in the journeyman process. I learned so much about all aspects of filmmaking from him. He told me I had to learn how to edit, to learn to put sequences together. It was all essential training to becoming a producer."

Just as Spotton inspired and guided her career, Basmajian sees her own role as primarily to foster and encourage emerging filmmakers. "My role is to search out and find and then nurture talent so filmmakers can practice their art freely." Basmajian recalls fondly the time she spent during her early years at the NFB running the Program to Assist Filmmakers in the Private Sector, which offered post-production facilities and services for emerging filmmakers. Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema and Jeremy Podeswa were among the new filmmakers the program assisted. That was a very exciting time, she says. "We promoted so much experimentation and creativity." More recently Basmajian has worked with such new filmmakers as Clint Alberta (*Deep Inside Clint Star*), Jeannette Loakman (*Slippery Blisses*) and Kenton Vaughan (*The Devil You Know: Inside the Mind of Todd McFarlane*).

"The selling point of any film is, for me, the filmmaker's passion," says Basmajian. "It is so important that the NFB is here for the next generation of filmmakers. We have to let creativity and innovation happen." Basmajian is, herself, very passionate about women's issues and exploring the roles of women in society from the vantage point of female directors with strong points of view. She produced director Michel Jones's *Kim Campbell Through the Looking Glass*, the only feature-length documentary on Canada's first female prime minister. "I wanted to do a politically searing film on a female politician, not a biography," she explains. "And it had to be directed from a woman's perspective," she adds. "Personal point-of-view docs are so important. Filmmaking is a personal journey and the narrative of a film is a reflection of who the filmmaker is." Basmajian's current projects include *Chovalo*, a look at the 1967 boxing match between Canada's George Chovalo and Muhammad Ali, which will include never-before-seen CBC footage of the fight. She is also working with Mark Pancer and David Hoffert on their first major documentary, *OCD: The War Inside*, exploring obsessive-compulsive disorder.

In looking back over 20 years of filmmaking, her numerous achievements and many awards, Basmajian pauses before summing up her career so far: "I have had the privilege of meeting so many wonderful people through these films. With each documentary, you learn so much about the human spirit and the people, not necessarily the most famous or well known, who take the large steps and who fight the system. I am humbled by the determination of these people. I have learned so much from my subjects and from all the filmmakers I have worked with. I don't take that privilege lightly and I share the WIFT-T Award with all of them."

And as for tomorrow's challenge, Basmajian says it continues to be finding that next idea, discovering the next footnote, uncovering the next story just waiting around the corner.

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