

# Trouble in Paradise or Testing the Limits at

BY SUN-KYUNG YI

**N**EW INITIATIVES in Film (NIF) is a five-year program created specifically to give Aboriginal women and women of colour an opportunity to work in the film community by providing workshops, annual film seminars (known as the Summer or Fall Institute), internships and scholarships.

Studio D's former executive producer Rina Fraticelli and Black Nova Scotian filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton designed NIF in 1990 with a strong conviction that minority women needed and deserved the "independence and authority" over their own creativity.

Filmmaker and producer Kathleen Shannon founded Studio D in 1974 with a similar mandate: to increase employment for women in the film industry by offering training opportunities and bringing women's perspectives to social issues in a world largely controlled by (white) men. NIF shares these goals, only this time, it's women of colour fighting the battles of racism as well as sexism.

Given Canada's charged political climate and multi-racial demography, NIF seems timely. But it can be argued that the program is another example of cultural ghettoization, that instead of including marginalized groups in the mainstream, NIF represents how factionalized and segregated our society has become. Still, it represents one institu-

tion's pro-active response to the historical under-representation of not just women (i.e., white women), but Aboriginal, Latin American, Black and Asian women filmmakers in Canada.

In an ideal world, affirmative action wouldn't be necessary. That's the argument of Claire Prieto, NIF's new program producer. She says she doesn't worry about tokenism because if you're talented enough, you'll move beyond that designated place. Prieto argues that NIF is necessary now because women of colour and Native women aren't starting at the same playing level as white women.

In the past, Studio D has been criticized for being a propaganda tool that caters only to those who conform to its political agenda, and making films in the same predictable form that is becoming known as the "NFB documentary style." Studio D executives have been also accused of having a narrow perspective that prevents them from fully understanding or appreciating women from differing perspectives of race, class or sexual orientation. But the overriding criticism is that Studio D consistently reinforces the notion of women and minorities as victims.

"As far as I was concerned, we had the right to be artists, not just social workers," Fraticelli explains. "I wanted these women filmmakers to challenge the form of filmmaking, as well as the context, and I think other women at the studio had a problem with this."

Renee Du Plessis, a filmmaker who emigrated from South Africa (where she was legally classified as "coloured"), has had her own painful disagreements with Studio D. Du Plessis was NIF's program coordinator from April to December, 1991. She was fired. (The case was later settled out of court. Ironically, her union lawyer belongs to Stikeman, Elliott, a firm in which the father of Studio D's present executive producer, Ginny Stikeman, is a partner.)

During the 1991 Summer Institute, Du Plessis says the studio became a battleground. Women of colour were pitted against the studio's white executives;

entry-level and advanced filmmakers were locked in a power struggle; conflicting feminist views took precedence over filmmaking.

Du Plessis was caught in the middle of essentialist notions of race and colour. Although hired partly because of her visibility, she believes she was not "dark" enough in the eyes of many participants. They felt she was too "light-skinned" and "upper-class" to be empathetic to the needs of visible minorities and lesbians. For the executives of Studio D, Du Plessis was a convenient scapegoat.

"I was accused by the advisory board and Studio D of being inflexible and insensitive to women of colour. I was also accused of contributing to systemic racism," Du Plessis says. "Apparently, I contributed to systemic racism because I didn't let them do what they wanted to do. There wasn't much time, and some of these women (who had never been to Montreal) wanted to go shopping."

Some women in the film community claim that Studio D executives simply weren't prepared for the diversity of feminist ideologies and cultural practices the women of colour brought into the institution.

"Their view of feminism," a filmmaker, who wishes to remain unidentified, states, "is oppression, oppression, oppression. There's no celebration of feminism or acknowledgement of its successes. Studio D hasn't progressed in the last 20 years. They've been making the same damn films that carry the same message: women are victims. At first, white women made them, now they're getting women of colour to make the same thing."

Many women filmmakers interviewed for this article requested anonymity, admitting that Studio D is the "only game in town," for funding their projects.

For her part, studio head Ginny Stikeman says she fully supports NIF's initiatives. "Canadian cinema needs the richness and originality of different perspectives... (but) I have to remind people that we can't do it all. We have to choose. It's not our mandate to exclude women. It's just that we can't include them all" •

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# Studio D