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SETTING  
THE  
RECORD  
STRAIGHT  
ABOUT  
POV AND  
HOT DOCS

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CIFC News  
Witness — More Than Lip Service  
Cinema Canada — A Look Back  
Special Festival Feature

The debut issue of *POV*,  
September 1990.

**IN 2003**, when the Canadian Independent Film Caucus renamed itself the Documentary Organization of Canada, it distributed to its members a 30-page publication entitled *Celebrating Twenty Years of Independent Film*, tracing its history and listing its accomplishments. From my point of view, it contained two salient errors of fact: one, it claimed the first issue of *POV* was published in 1992; and two, that “Paul Jay stepped forward with the idea of starting an annual documentary film festival...[and] presented the idea to Debbie Nightingale.”

In 1988, I was the last Toronto reporter for *Cinema Canada*, which folded at the end of 1989. In 18 months I wrote dozens of news items, mostly inconsequential *Playback*-style hits about the industry. One longer piece, however, was on the sixth anniversary of the Canadian Independent Film Caucus, outlining its brief history and accomplishments. I interviewed its founding members, including Rudy Buttignol, who was responsible for putting it together with John Walker, Peter Raymont and others in 1983 to lobby the newly created Telefilm Canada on behalf of independent,

point-of-view documentary filmmakers. The article was the first written history of the Caucus (*Cinema Canada*, October 1989).

Early in 1990, the Caucus received a substantial federal grant to establish proper offices in Toronto. It was going through a period of rapid expansion, and Buttignol was stepping down after seven years at the helm. I applied for the position listed as “executive coordinator,” and in early April met with a very large and formidable hiring committee. At the head of the committee was an intense filmmaker dressed in black with a rather intimidating manner. This turned out to be Paul Jay, who had replaced Buttignol at the head of the Caucus. I was hired, but it quickly became obvious to me that Jay was looking for a compliant assistant to do his bidding, not the position I had in mind nor was it in the job description. Jay, someone who sought to impress others with the sheer force of his personality, had ambitious plans for the Caucus and was looking for ways to enhance its revenue.

In July, Geoff Bowie, who was the head of the Caucus newsletter committee, called a meeting at the offices of Stornoway Productions, a Toronto-based documentary production company. I was in attendance, along with Bowie, Martha Fusca, a Caucus member who was then with Stornoway, Gary Nichols, who was in charge of the entertainment committee, and one or two other members. We kicked around the idea of creating a proper magazine out of the existing Caucus newsletter, and I came up with *Point of View*, which Fusca shortened to *POV*. At that meeting, *POV* was founded and I was assigned the task of editing the first issue, which made its debut at the 1990 Toronto Festival of Festivals. However, what Jay wanted was not a film magazine but higher profile ways of increasing revenue and accessing government grants. Barbara Barde was doing a fabulous job of fundraising at Toronto Women in Film and Television (TWIFT, now WIFT-Toronto), which had launched an annual awards show (now the Crystal Awards), and he was envious.

In 1987, I had watched the staid Grierson Documentary Seminar and Festival self-destruct during its infamous Toronto appearance at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) theatre. The discussions following the screenings were reduced to heated and unpleasant screaming matches as the politically committed among the audience turned on one another. The Seminar, which had been held annually since 1975 in such tranquil locations as Niagara-on-the-Lake and Geneva Park, a convention centre on Lake Simcoe, was

owned and operated by an organization of high-school teachers known as the Ontario Film Association (OFA).

To explore the possibility of the Caucus taking over the running of the Seminar, I arranged a meeting with the OFA, and Gary Nichols and I met with two of its representatives in August at the Caucus’s office. It quickly became obvious that the OFA had no intention of giving up the Grierson name and made it very clear to us that it would continue with the Seminar. But I suspected otherwise. The debacle in 1987 at the ROM had been a real shock, one from which it would never recover and, indeed, the OFA folded the Seminar shortly after our meeting. At an executive meeting of the Caucus in October, I recommended to Jay and the other board members two viable means of raising additional revenue: one, to continue with *POV* as a means of attracting advertising revenue and grants through the publishing programs at the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council; and two, relaunch the documentary film festival under a new name, my suggestion being The Brittain Documentary Film Festival. Less than a month later, my contract with the Caucus was abruptly terminated.

The idea of relaunching the documentary festival was a good one and worth pursuing, however. Over a period of 10 months in 1991, I arranged a series of meetings with interested parties such as the NFB, the Ontario Film Development Corporation, the Ontario Arts Council and the Ministry of Culture and Communications. In January 1992, at the Toronto offices of the NFB, I arranged a meeting with Dennis Murphy, representing the Board, Barbara Barde from TWIFT and Debbie Nightingale, representing the Caucus. There was general agreement that a documentary festival was desirable and doable, but it became evident that it wasn’t going to happen with the players at the table. TWIFT had a good thing going with its awards show, and historically the NFB and the Caucus could not play ball together. After that meeting, I turned to Nightingale and told her I was going to give the idea a pass but the Caucus could run with it, if it wanted to.

The NFB tried to reprise the spirit of the Grierson Seminar with something it called “What’s Up Doc?,” which took place at the Toronto headquarters of the Board, but it never caught on and was abandoned after two attempts. In 1994, the Caucus launched Hot Docs.

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