

P

R

O

F

I

L

E

S

BY INGRID RANDOJA

G A I L V E Y
 H A R V E T H
 S e x u a l
 P o l i t i c s
 S H O W

IN THE TEN YEARS Gail Harvey devoted to becoming a world-renowned stills photographer she spent much of her time on movie sets, absorbing the intricate details of filmmaking. Now at the age of 39, Harvey feels she has something to say and is putting her knowledge and recent training at the Canadian Film Centre to good use, as she makes her feature film directorial debut with *The Shower*, an 83-minute exploration of the contemporary trappings of male/female sexual politics.

Filed, incredibly, over five marathon days and nights, with borrowed equipment, donated film stock, a bare bones production budget of \$18,500 provided by Norstar Entertainment, and boasting a top notch crew and stellar cast, including Brent Carver, Kate Lynch and Janet-Laine Greene (who all agreed to work for a percentage of the film), *The Shower* is a testament to Harvey's tenacity and talent.

A feminine take on a Cassavetes drama, the film focuses on a group of women who have gathered for a surprise baby shower. However, as the female guests arrive (the household males having adjourned to an afternoon football game), the off-screen mother-to-be goes into premature labour, leaving the bored invitees to sip spiked punch and discuss the dearth of available men until the drunken boys return home, thus setting the stage for male/female confrontations, confessions and clumsy acts of copulation—notably while standing under a shower.

Hosting the gathering are Sheila (Kate Lynch) and Pearl (Kay Tremblay), the sister and grandmother to the expectant mother. Sheila is

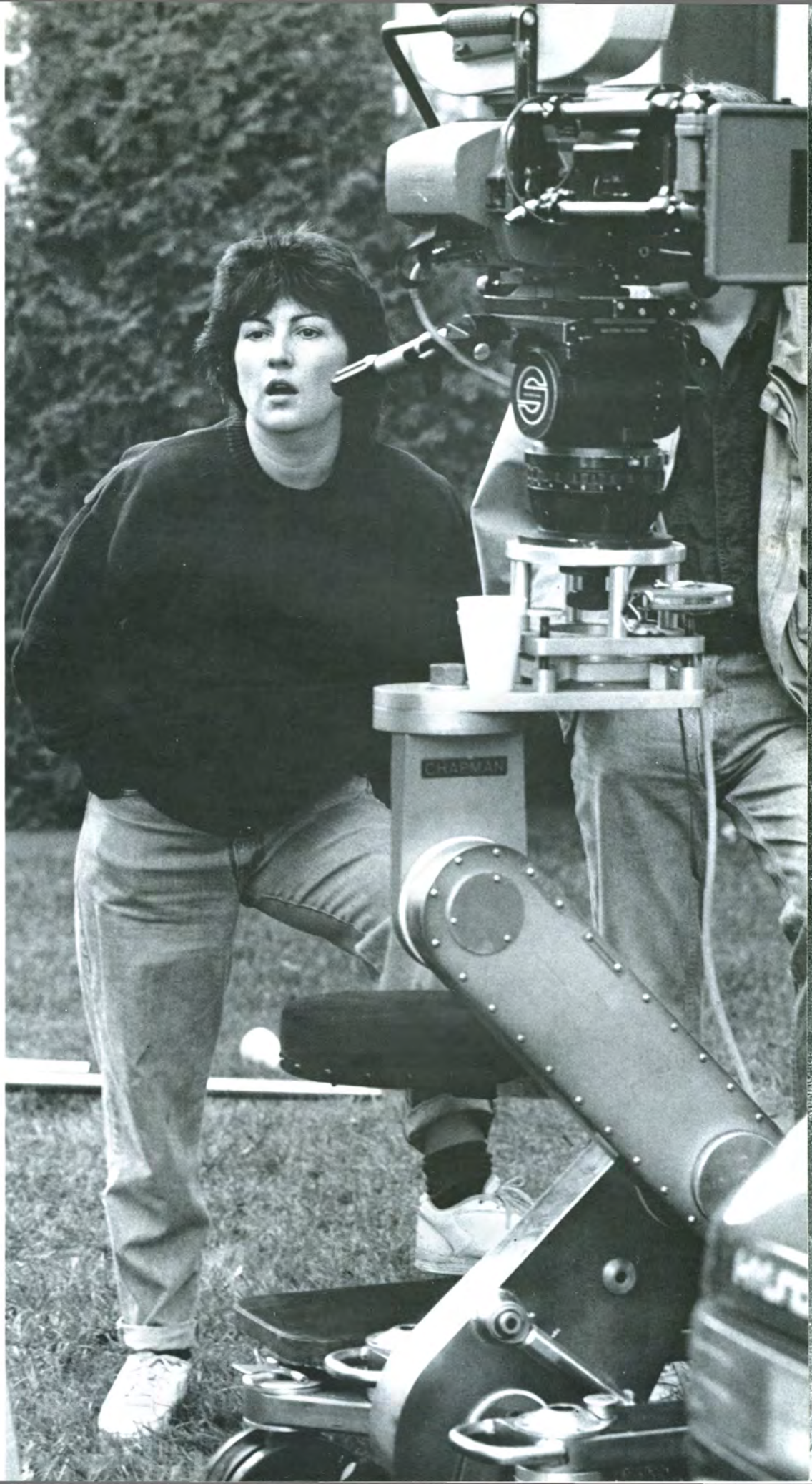
Gail Harvey

a thirtysomething, tightly wound ball of unmarried nerves, fretting over hors d'oeuvres and the awkward meeting between her new boyfriend Kevin (Brent Carver) and his ex-fiancée, Sheila's nemesis, Louise (Janet-Laine Green). Popping up alongside this messy love triangle are Kate (Krista Bridges), an intense, wounded young woman and Annie (Joyce Campion), an aging but hopeful virgin.

"I wanted the film to be a microcosm of every generation of women," says Harvey. Seated in a downtown Toronto diner, Harvey, whose enthusiastic, almost perky demeanour camouflages a powerful artistic confidence and a thrifty dollars and cents business savvy, discusses the film's crucial theme. "I believe women and men have basic biological differences—namely women like to talk about things and men don't—and that seems to be the main complaint most woman have about their husbands or mates. It's that lack of communication that interests me."

The film is based somewhat on an actual event as Harvey had to miss a friend's shower so she could attend a seminar on low-budget filmmaking given by L.A.-based producer, Dov Simens. "Driving home, I realized all the scripts that I had written weren't do-able because realistically they would cost a lot of money. So I thought, okay, let's take this premise of women at a baby shower and see what happens."

The challenge of piecing together this particular ensemble drama/comedy lies in being able to present essentially dysfunctional characters as



both likeable and sympathetic, without justifying their behaviour. Harvey's script, co-written by Richard Beattie (Genie award-winner for *Cold Comfort*) acts as a road map, laying out paths for the actors to follow on their way to creating complex characters.

"The story structure never varied, but we dropped a lot of dialogue and changed some words, depending on if the actors felt comfortable with it. Actors are so very vulnerable and exposed, so having something to latch onto helps them. But if they trust you, and you ask them to go farther, take a risk, then they'll trust you to tell them if it's wrong. I go by my guts, and I know when something doesn't ring true.

"I think that involvement, improvisation from the actors is what makes the film seem real. Shooting it in sequence and with such long shooting

days made us feel like we were those people. When they were supposed to be really screwed up, we were really screwed up. It was just one of those magic things that happens on a film set."

Shot predominately over three days (with two days added to film the ending and reshoots), and entirely in and about a small cottage located on the grounds of the Canadian Film Centre, Harvey and her crew were pressured into being "more organized that we have ever been in our lives" to complete the film.

Though shooting in sequence helped Harvey and her editor, Rik Morden, get a jump on splicing the film together, Harvey remembers

"By subverting a look or the act of lovemaking, I'm finding little ways to turn the formula around."

the difficulties in editing together a work that relies heavily on the glances, gestures and nuances of the skilled actors. "You lose count of how many times you've watched one shot, and in editing a scene you've got to rearrange those shots a hundred times. It's in the editing process you realize an action can carry a weight not originally imagined. One glimpse can change a meaning. We discovered that after the first screening of the film when viewers thought that Kevin was still in love

with Louise. It was understandable because there was a little something, a spark, coming across between Kevin and Louise. So to counteract that, we strengthened up the scenes between Sheila and Kevin."

Post-production was wrapped in February leaving Harvey and co-producer Marlee Novak the arduous task of promotion and marketing. "It's amazing how much it takes to complete a film, and I honestly don't want to produce ever again. It would be a luxury to worry simply about the direction of a film, but there's no question that directing is the smallest portion of all the work you do. That's why David Cronenberg directs commercials, otherwise he's not on a set for two years."

The Shower has been labeled "the miracle" by the Toronto filmmaking community, a tag Harvey is quick to point out exists only because of "the generosity of the entire Canadian film industry. Their help has been just amazing, without the breaks I received from them, I couldn't have made the film." *The Shower* also goes by the title of the first feature film to be released by a Canadian Film Centre graduate. "Will people be looking at the film and judging the Film Centre? I don't know, maybe. People have been waiting with baited breath for directors to start making features out of there, but what people just don't understand is how long it takes to make a film. David Wellington is doing one

now called *I Love a Man in Uniform*, and I think that script is terrific. So it's happening."

Harvey has only positive views on the Centre, comparing it to the film sets she worked on as a photographer. "The reason I worked on film sets for ten years was to be able to watch top directors and actors do their stuff. These people were extremely generous in telling me things and answering my questions. The Centre was the same, not really a school, but a place where a group of filmmakers would come in and talk—a library of living filmmakers—one week it would be Stephen Frears, then Arthur Penn, and they would just answer questions. Some people had problems with it, but I loved it."

With an accomplished first feature under her belt, Harvey is poised to join the illustrious ranks of Patricia Rozema, Anne Wheeler, Deepa Mehta and Gail Singer—women filmmakers who form the solid core of a snowballing Canadian film industry. She hopes her next project, a thriller, will continue to break new ground for both herself and women directors.

"Women are rarely given erotic thrillers to direct, and I must admit there is something quite exciting about being able to give the women in an exploitive genre all the power. By subverting a look or the act of lovemaking, I'm finding little ways to turn the formula around." With that final half-statement, half-personal challenge, Gail Harvey's face breaks into a very confident grin. **TI**

Kate Lynch, Janet Laine Greene and Brent Carver

