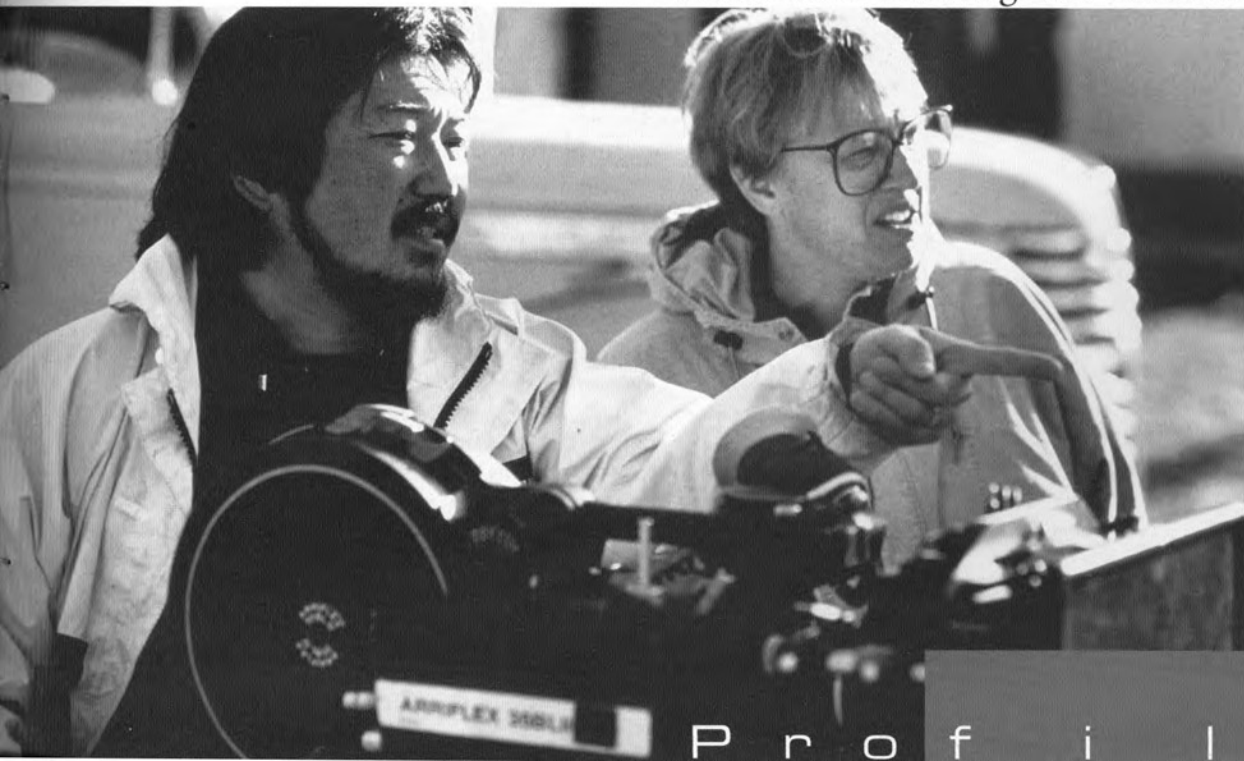


An
the Drama

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ne Wheeler and of Everyday Life

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In Anne Wheeler's first documentary film, *The Great Grandmother*, a 1975 production with the National Film Board, the voice-over states the film's intention is “to salvage the lost or hidden history



cinematographer René Ohashi with director Anne Wheeler; opposite page: shooting *The War Between Us* on location in the Slocan Valley, British Columbia



of the pioneer women who settled the prairies." The voice speaks of recording "the drama of everyday life," a fitting phrase that captures the essence of Anne Wheeler's varied career in film production. Spanning television commercials, instructional shorts, NFB documentaries, feature films, episodic television, and work for the CBC, Wheeler's *oeuvre* can be seen as that of the auteur, foregrounding key themes regardless of the form in question.

In the next few months, *The War*

Between Us, Wheeler's latest work as director, will be seen. Wheeler was only hired to direct the film, written by Sharon Gibbon, but nevertheless her trademark themes are crucial elements in the narrative's unfolding. A MOW for CBC shot on 35mm, the film deals with Japanese-Canadian internment camps in the interior of B.C. during WWII, and focuses on the relationship between a white Canadian woman living in the small town where the camp is built, and a Japanese-Canadian woman whose fam-

ily is stripped of all its possessions.

To understand Wheeler's work and the personal history behind it, a look at two very different but intimately related films discloses much. In *A War Story* and the popular dramatic feature *Bye Bye Blues*, which she wrote as well as directed, Wheeler recounts the history of the early years of her parents' marriage, a period brutally interrupted by WWII, which her father, Major Ben Wheeler, spent as a POW in a Japanese work camp in Taiwan. Her mother survived the war years supporting herself and her three children by playing piano for dance bands in Alberta, with little or no news of her husband. The two films not only provide a historical context in which to place Wheeler and her work, but also play out her recurring concerns—the survival of ordinary people against the inevitable exigencies of life; the strengths of women recognizing and embracing their independence; the fact of children; the power of place; and the filmmaker's drive to realize her own story in a dramatic form.

Wheeler studied mathematics at the University of Alberta, chiefly, she explains, because there were "no labs and no papers." Freed up by the convenience of her studies, Wheeler pursued her interest in theatre and music, singing in night clubs and performing in children's theatre during summer vacations, to earn enough to continue her education. A job as a computer programmer after graduation lasted six months and was followed by an extended global tour. Upon returning to Alberta, she qualified as a teacher of music, a position which made her the perfect candidate to stage school productions, although her theatrical talents also extended to the professional stage where she continued her performing career.

Eventually Wheeler began a master's program in music in Edmonton, and it was then that she became involved in filmmaking. Reacquainting herself with old friends engaged in documentary production, Wheeler became an on-screen personality for (she ruefully admits) a series of Social Credit political campaign films. (The Socreds, incidentally, failed to get elected on that occasion.) Instructional films on the correct way to brush one's teeth followed, part of an Opportunities for Youth program. While still working on her master's, Wheeler and a group of eight friends created Film West Associates, an independent film production cooperative and ad hoc film school, where she honed her skills in the rudi-



**this page and
opposite:
The War
Between Us—
survival of
ordinary
people**

ments of all aspects of production.

In the mid 1970s, the National Film Board in Montreal sent John N. Smith and Cynthia Scott out to make films about the realities of prairie life. The resulting series of nine films are collected under the title *West*, and purport to describe the "colourful mosaic" of life in Central Canada. While carrying out their work, the NFB crew met with Wheeler and her Film West Associates. Wheeler was working on *Great Grandmother* at the time and production had stalled. The NFB helped her to complete the film, and a number of freelance films made in association with the Board's Montreal and Vancouver studios followed. In 1976, Wheeler helped establish the Board's North West Centre in Edmonton.

As an Albertan, Wheeler had already showed her commitment to telling regional stories, and this new development in her career enabled her to be part of "building a community to tell our own stories." It was during these years that Wheeler settled down and had twin sons, a happy existence that continued until the early 1980s when the Board decided to cut all directors on staff. Wheeler had initially been hired as a producer/director, but was expected to drop her directing role in order to keep her post. She decided that it was an opportune moment to move on, and with Anne Frank (a colleague from her freelance days then working at the CBC on *For the Record*), Wheeler developed a feature-length script. She discussed with Frank ideas about women's roles in society and the legacy built for them by the early settlers—including hard-won enfranchisement—and why it was that women did not seem to be making best use of the laws pertaining to them. The result was the CBC-produced movie, *A Change of Heart*.

Since then, Wheeler has had one of the most consistent and successful careers of any director working in mainstream film and television drama in Canada. *A Change of Heart* also marked Wheeler's complete transition to dramatic work. Even though her earlier work in film was in information and documentaries, drama had always been a key element in the exposition of her themes. The documentaries *Great Grandmother* and *A War Story* include extended dramatized passages, and *Teach Me to Dance* (1978), an NFB short about cultural tolerance, is a dramatic period piece. The transition to drama was, therefore, smooth and inevitable.

In assessing her preference for the dramatic form, even in a documentary context, Wheeler explains her discomfort with *cinéma vérité*. She describes herself as "a private person, uncomfortable exploiting people's emotions to make my movies." In her subsequent feature-length work, Wheeler has preferred to look more to herself for themes, stories and sensibilities, and it is in these dramatic films that her celebrated "feel for place" has been fully realized. In 1986, Wheeler directed and co-wrote, with Sharon Riis, perhaps her finest piece of work, *Loyalties*. The film is set in Lac la Biche, 100 miles north-east of Edmonton, and focuses on the relationship between a native woman and an upper middle class English woman who comes to live there with her doctor husband under mysterious circumstances. *Loyalties* is a dramatically and emotionally riveting piece of cinema and one of its strengths is the fine and detailed description of life in small-town northern Canada. Right from the first scenes in a cavernous country and western bar, with terry-towel-covered tables, location becomes a key player in the drama.

Wheeler wrote and directed *Cowboys Don't Cry* in 1988, a family drama set in rural Alberta, and *Bye Bye Blues* in 1989, which was a popular box office success. Adapted directly from the experiences of her parents in WWII, the film opens in India but soon shifts to the Canadian

own right to sexual pleasure. After this pivotal moment, Daisy begins to assert herself as a fully realized individual.

While continuing to write material, develop stories and pitch them to the agencies, Wheeler has, in the last three years, worked successfully as a director-for-hire in the world of television movies. *The Diviners* was produced for the CBC in 1993, with the production taking place in Winnipeg. Wheeler was hired to direct Linda Svendsen's gripping adaptation of the Margaret Laurence novel, and it is clearly material that perfectly suits her *oeuvre*. The themes of place, period, dislocation, women dealing with their own independence and self-expression, and the daily and unremarkable pain of living with love, loss and death, are those that have driven her work from the beginning.

With *The War Between Us* (Wheeler has a writing credit for script consulting and rewrites undertaken on the set during a fast-paced production schedule), Wheeler's sensitivity for location is applied to the interior of B.C., the province she and her family moved to in 1990. As one might expect from a filmmaker with a keen respect for the role of place, the film's brooding, socked-in, forested landscape speaks volumes about the nature of the people living there and how it has shaped their ways of dealing with the drama of everyday life.

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Prairies where Wheeler's mother and siblings moved when her father was stationed in Singapore. As the locale changes from the heat and opulence of India to the harshness of a prairie winter, one feels the film sliding into familiar territory as we observe the painterly landmarks. As in *Loyalties*, a developing friendship between the two female protagonists serves as a central dramatic device (a device which also drives the narrative of *The War Between Us*). Daisy's (Rebecca Jenkins) latent sense of independence blooms during a scene with her sister-in-law. The two women take a bath together while consuming quantities of liquor and discussing their

