

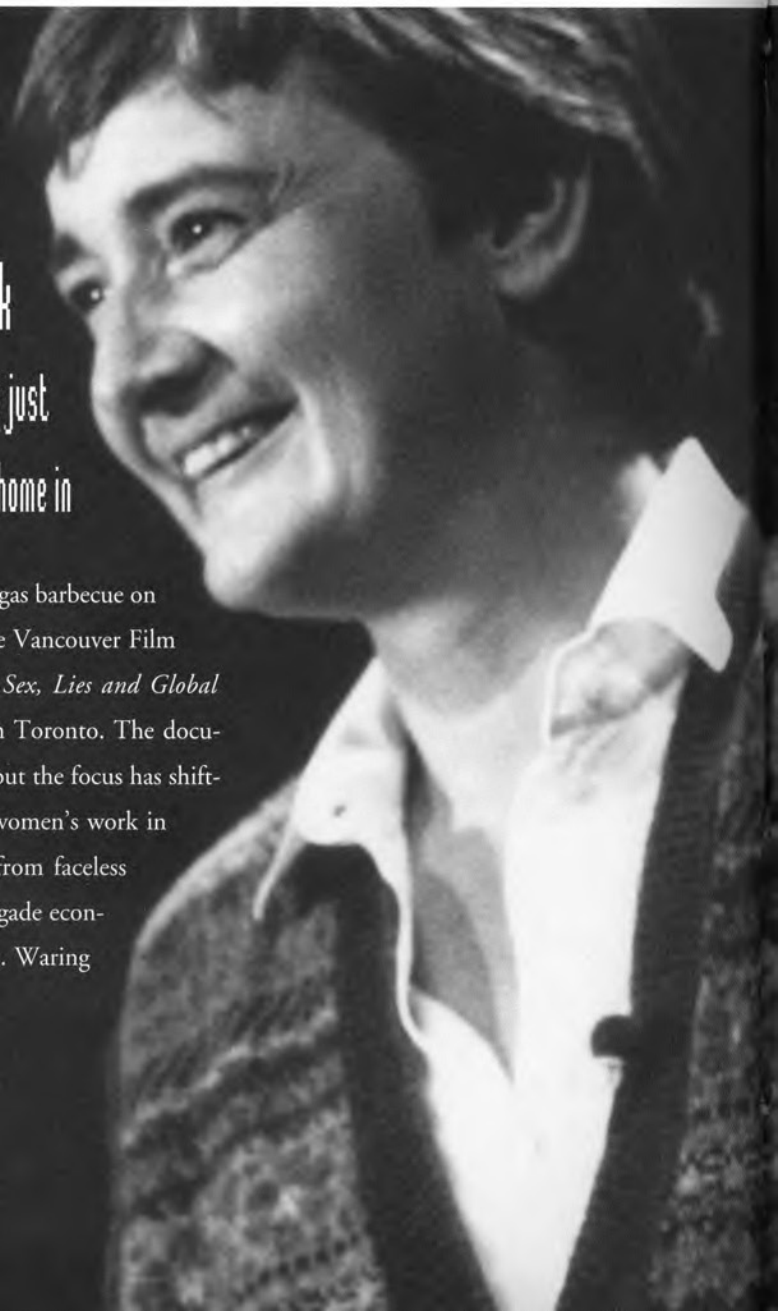
Who's Counting?

by Joanne Latimer

Terre

Terre Nash keeps her Oscar® in the bathroom, on the back of her toilet. "I've been burgled a few times," she explains. "No one thinks to look there." The Academy Award for *IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET* is just one of the odd and exceptional trinkets that populate Nash's home in Montreal, where the clock on the wall runs backwards

and the gas barbecue on the patio acts as a flower planter. Nash has just returned from the Vancouver Film Festival. Her latest film, *Who's Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics* was a hit with West Coast festival junkies, as it was in Toronto. The documentary is just as controversial as her Oscar®-winner from 1983, but the focus has shifted from the medical effects of nuclear war to the invisibility of women's work in international ledgers and policies—policies that take their cue from faceless statistics. And the stats are skewed argues Marilyn Waring, a renegade economist from New Zealand and the dynamic subject of Nash's film. Waring



Counting?

Nash, Marilyn Waring, Sex,
Lies and Global Economics

argues persuasively that the United Nations system of national accounting uses exclusionary methods for tallying a nation's GDP. Where's the unpaid housework taken into account? Where's the time counted for food preparation, child rearing and medical attention for the elderly?

Waring levels some grave accusations at the economic establishment, but her style is part stand-up comic, part sociology professor. Nash knows a good spokeswoman when she hears one, and captures Waring's panache on film. *Who's Counting?* is not a relentless diatribe from the fire and brimstone school of feminist revisionism. While it makes convincing arguments about the bias in the world's economic matrix, *Who's*

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Counting? also makes you laugh.

"Marilyn has worked enough crowds and been on stage long enough that by now she's like Laurie Anderson," says Nash. "So was Dr. Helen Caldicott [the "star" of *If You Love This Planet*]. Marilyn's humour is a very important part of the film precisely because it's such a heavy subject. The humour adds to the

accessibility of economics and it demystifies something that comes with a deliberate priesthood attached to it.

Demystification is, in itself, a political act. Because people assume the film is going to be dry material—because it's about economics—you have to constantly foil that expectation, constantly disabuse them of that notion.

It's about values, not money and jargon."

MARILYN
WARING:
maverick
economist and
global gadfly

It's easy to see how Nash

has earned her rep as a social activist, but she insists that her interests are equally artistic. And literary. "What attracted me to Helen and Marilyn was their ability to tell stories and to frame things. This is key for documentaries. In order to make a good documentary film, you have to make it like fiction, with dramatic drive." A good deal of dramatic drive occurred after the release of *If You Love This Planet*. The U.S. banned it. Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, the American Justice Department ruled that *If You Love This Planet* was foreign propaganda. The law was initially intended to curb Nazi activity in the States, and hadn't been enacted since WWII. A CBC crew filmed Nash's trip to Washington

Academy Awards, she gave one of the best opening lines on record: "You really know how to show a foreign agent a good time!"

"Ironically," Nash muses, "I couldn't make *If You Love This Planet* today. The entire film keeps you trapped in the lecture hall with Helen. I did a three-camera shoot, at different focal lengths and then took audience reactions, but I didn't even get any establishing shots. I just didn't know any better! Today, I would make sure to get a shot of the building, the city, the hallway, and there'd be more background on Helen. But the emotional impact would've been diluted and something would be lost in terms of intensity."

Nash considers *If You Love This*

"My first film efforts were hand-drawn animated shorts," recalls Nash. "One was a little pixilated film—only a minute long—about a kid who daydreams that the pile of vegetables on his plate turns into these magnificent desserts. They turn back into veggies, though." It was the National Film Board that first gave Nash the opportunity to turn her film aspirations into something more concrete and professional. Studio D, the women's studio newly formed in the early 1970s, put out a call for one-minute scripts to advertise International Women's Year. "So I sent in five," says Nash, who has been making films and editing other people's films ever since. "As you get more into the social activist stuff,

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HELEN CALDICOTT: the "star" of *IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET*—foreign propaganda

and her speech to the U.S. Subcommittee. They called the mini-documentary, *If You Love Free Speech: An Unguided Tour Through the Twilight Zone*.

"It was an incredible day," recalls Nash. "There was this senator chairing the hearing who looked like Gregory Peck. It was a cast from Hollywood movies. The guys from the Justice Department were these buffoons who had memorized their rhetoric and had no idea of the larger implications of what they were doing. You could actually see them sweating." While addressing the committee, Nash thanked the U.S. government for promoting her film and later, at the

Planet her first "real" film. She took English literature and sociology at Simon Fraser University and did her master's in behavioural science and communications. A Canada Council Doctoral Fellowship brought her to Montreal in 1974, where she did a Ph.D. at McGill University in communications. Her thesis was on the psychological effects of images and video on viewers, a topic she took further with research on people's predispositions towards imagery. Her academic career was hectic, but Nash made room for more artistic interests, and she studied photography and film animation at the Vancouver School of Art during the summer months.

you feel a responsibility to use your skills," says Nash. "But I've always felt a need to paint a larger, global picture. Knowing the big picture allows you to know where to put your energy. I mean, look at the U.N. It's a completely benign institution. They're doing things with good intentions, but once you step back you can see some of the damage that's being done."

An afternoon with Nash is not, however, like a Greenpeace meeting. She loves to talk about the more "filmic" aspects of her work, and has given thought to the shape her *oeuvre* has taken. "Everything I do tends to be cyclical in theme and structure," observes

Nash. "Like in *Who's Counting?* it starts and ends with a sunrise and a sunset. That lets the whole film act as a metaphor for a day—since one of the main themes is how women occupy their day with work that isn't acknowledged. All of these subtexts, even if they don't register, contribute to its overall effect." If the coloured doodles by Nash that are lying on the table in her sitting room are any indication, she has a holistic approach to the most compositional things. "I feel a real need for the integration of images and the use of negative space. And sound. Sometimes I think of film as music. After seeing *Mother Earth* [a film Nash shot in 1992] someone said: "It's not that music was an important

part of the film, but that the film was like music." Nash smiles at the memory. "Success comes when the music doesn't overwhelm the imagery and visa versa. I want to delight people, visually and with sound. I want to entrance and delight in as many ways as the medium can. It's not a book after all."

The dramatic drive that Nash strives for has a lot to do with her editing. She edits her own work painstakingly. "There are certain things everyone's good at. I'm not talented at raising money for films. That's not my skill. While directing, I

tend to think like an editor, so I'm not left with great shots that go nowhere. It all comes down to what you've got in that editing room. Then I've only got myself to blame."

After a two-week stay in Vancouver, Nash's vacation is over and she's busy with an editing job. The leaves are changing colour around her patio—an elevated oasis called Knashville—and baby toys clutter the area. Her young nephew is in town these days, and Aunt Terre has been learning how to baby-proof her house. The Oscar®, however, remains safely in the john ●

Joanne Latimer is a contributing editor for the film section of the MONTREAL

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