



Kathleen SHANNON

...we really have to stop being invalidated by people who call us idealistic, or naive, or too emotional, or all these other things that are said to silence the brilliance of ordinary people.

Kathleen Shannon

Kathleen Shannon, who passed away in January, will be remembered for her enormous role in promoting Canadian women's film—women as filmmakers, women as subjects, women as audiences. But her contribution is wider: she forever validated the rights of women and all marginalized groups to have their stories told and to be included in the Canadian and world consciousness. Kathleen believed feminism was a project on which women filmmakers were embarked alongside the millions of women who were struggling to achieve a world of equality and justice.

Kathleen started working in film immediately out of high school. She joined the National Film Board in 1956 when she was 21, where she worked as a sound, music and picture editor. The subject of the films she was helping to make was men's lives. Kathleen hungered along with many other women to see the reality of women's lives on film, to share experiences, to speak the truths that were held in silence and denied a voice.

In 1970, with 18 years experience as an editor and over 200 films to her credit, Kathleen directed her childhood memoir *Goldwood*, previewing her commitment to

personal stories. Next came *Working Mothers*, a series of 11 short films about "ordinary" women struggling to raise their children while working outside the home.

The *Working Mothers* series was dismissed by some of her NFB colleagues as "boring talking heads." It turned out to be pivotal for Kathleen and a formative event in the women's movement in Canada. Building on the *Challenge for Change* model of film as a catalyst for social change, Kathleen organized screenings of the films for small groups of women across the country. The reception was overwhelming. Women

resonated with these films, identified, got angry, and were inspired to continue the dialogue that the films began.

Working Mothers made Kathleen a feminist and proved the need for a separate woman's space at the NFB, where women could control the subjects, the budget, the production and even the distribution of films by, for and about women. With International Women's Year approaching, the federal government was looking to its agencies for programs on women's issues. Only then did the NFB turn to Kathleen for the ideas and proposals that had previously been ignored. Kathleen's vision and single-mindedness turned what started out to be a bureaucratic response to a governmental mandate into a phenomenon which inspired and nurtured several generations of women filmmakers. Studio D, the only government-financed feminist production unit in the world, produced some of the most influential films of its time and invigorated the genre of documentary film.

Kathleen devised programs that spread and decentralized the limited resources of the Studio to the greatest number of new filmmakers: *Just-a-Minute* enabled 27 women across the country to create their first short films. She joked that women know 100 things to do with hamburger meat. Although funds were meagre, women around the country were given NFB technical assistance for their projects, allowing them to attract funding for films that otherwise would not be made:

women and alcoholism, women in sports, and rape to name a few.

In a hierarchical medium, Kathleen taught filmmakers to work collaboratively. A craftsman herself (her imaginative knitting was as legendary as her editing), she encouraged and supported women to enter the traditionally male domains of camera, lighting and sound, changing the mix of Canadian film crews. Under her leadership, women's silences were broken on incest (*To a Safer Place*); abortion (*Abortion: Stories From North and South*); and pornography (*Not a Love Story*). Women's lost history was unearthed (*Great Grand Mother*); heroines were celebrated (*The Lady From Grey County*); and artists acknowledged (*Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows*). Kathleen believed that all issues are women's issues and need our perspective, hence *Dream of a Free Country: A Message From Nicaraguan Women and Speaking Our Peace*. The ultimate "talking head" film, the low-budget, single location *If You Love This Planet*, won not only an Oscar but possibly the Cold War!

Kathleen battled fiercely for films and filmmakers when they became controversial, were accused of bias or banned. With characteristic wit, she once defined "objectivity" as "I object to your activity." The films she produced set records for distribution and awards. They were screened in schools, church basements, commercial cinemas and the Houses of Parliament.

After more than a dozen years leading Studio D and women's filmmaking in Canada, Kathleen left the NFB. She retired to the Kootenays, the wild landscape of her childhood, where she began a new calling as a therapist and converted her home to a guest house and retreat for women. Kathleen is remembered as a gentle woman and great artist, teacher, leader and friend by those of us lucky enough to have worked with her. She established the highest of standards for those who follow.

Kathleen Shannon may well be the greatest film producer Canada has known to date. Through her commitment and vision, Kathleen challenged all of us to remember why we make films.

Most important to me is the amazing number of individual women who have told me how their lives were positively changed by one or another of Studio D's films.

Kathleen Shannon, *Herizons*