

JOAN HUTTON

Living and Learning Behind the Lens, SHOT BY SHOT

By Paul Eichhorn



Joan Hutton became a cinematographer purely by accident. After working in graphic arts and studying commercial photography, she decided to enroll in film at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. She had a need to tell stories with photos. During her final year at Ryerson, she and another student Louise Roy needed materials to make an animated film they were developing. It was suggested they approach the National Film Board. As it happened, they connected with Studio B head Kathleen Shannon. They ended up making the film with the help and support of the NFB. The five-minute animated short, *The Spring and Fall of Nina Polanski*, required Hutton and Roy to take on specific roles. Roy did the artwork and Hutton had to learn to shoot animation. This learning experience has led Hutton to an award-winning career as one of Canada's leading cinematographers, lensing such films as Paul Jay's *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows* and Katherine Gilday's *The Famine Within* along with Ken Finkleman's acclaimed TV series, *The Newsroom*.

Hutton admits it wasn't easy as a woman making a go of it in a guy's field. "There really wasn't any women behind the camera in the 1970s. Many people I worked with either found it interesting for a woman to be in that position or threatening. Initially, I thought I would just be a camera assistant and then try to make my own films. I never thought I would be shooting films." She founded High Road Productions with Jay in 1980. Today it is one of Canada's leading independent production houses. Hutton, who recently left the firm, says High Road was an ideal place to shoot film and build up an impressive reel of work. Along with documentaries for the CBC, the firm produced programs for TVOntario, CTV and The Discovery Channel. "We were both learning and we had a chance to do what we wanted to do."

All the while, Hutton continued to freelance for anyone who was interested, including the NFB. If you search the Board Web site with her name, a long list of credits appears, including *Playing For Keeps*, *Ms. Conceptions*, *The Powder Room*, *The Game of Her Life* and more recently *Kim Campbell: Through the Looking Glass*. Along with documentaries, she has also shot several dramas for TV and film. Always doing something different is important to Hutton. "I don't want to be pigeon-

holed. I enjoy moving between drama and documentary. Often I enjoy working on low-budget projects by first-time directors and trying new things. I recently shot some drinking and driving public service announcements and found I learned a lot of new things."

She admits dramas or fiction pieces are usually much easier to shoot. For starters, everyone involved understands the process and the fact it can take hours to set lights for a scene. Hutton says shooting documentaries with real people is a different story. They don't have the patience or understanding of actors (who take direction). On the other hand, she enjoys building up trust with the real people in the documentaries she shoots. And quite often, she is deeply touched by what she hears. "They are speaking words to the camera that are coming from their heart." Today Hutton shoots on both film and video. Dramas tend to still be on film and documentaries are on tape. Hutton points out that budget limitations make tape a must for most docs today but she adds with the right lighting, video can look very film-like. "On a piece such as the *Hitman Hart* documentary, it was shot on video but has a 35mm look. For *The Newsroom*, I used a digital Betacam camera."

For Hutton, getting the best shot has to do with light. "I love doing the lighting. It's also why I prefer the term director of photography. Getting the right shot is all about light." She adds with tight budgets in Canada, there's no money or time to do fancy electronic shot adjustments or enhancements in the editing room. "It has to look good when we get the shot."

For someone who originally thought her opportunities would be limited in the field of cinematography because of her gender, nothing could be further from the truth. She's currently the president of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers (CSC) and her honours include a Gemini, the Toronto Women in Film Outstanding Achievement Award, a Blizzard Award and numerous CSC awards. Hutton is looking forward to continuing her behind-the-lens journey of trying and learning new things (she's shooting three documentaries this winter). But she freely admits, she's satisfied with the shots already made. "I've very pleased with what I've done." ●