

# Why not D?

## An historical look at the NFB's Woman's Studio

by Chris Sherbarth

Of all the films emerging from the National Film Board in the '80s, *Not a Love Story* and *If You Love This Planet* have likely left the deepest, most indelible impressions on a broad spectrum of viewers.

The fact that both documentaries are productions of Studio D, the NFB women's unit, is no coincidence. That they took Canadian audiences by storm in successive waves six months apart borders on the extraordinary. Even

*Chris Scherbarth of Whitehorse recently completed a master's thesis based on Studio D's first decade, at Carleton University.*

three years after their release, they remained the most frequently booked documentaries within the entire NFB repertoire.

Ironically, at the same time these films were garnering unprecedented acclaim (and censure) across the continent, the 1982 Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee recommended a downscaling of NFB operations because

the "Board's output no longer represents a significant film experience for the Canadian public."

The success of *Not a Love Story* and *If You Love This Planet* marks a significant moment in NFB history; more pointedly, they mark the beginning of Chapter Two in the tale surrounding the evolution of the globe's first state-funded women's film unit.<sup>1</sup>

### Chapter One: the experiment

Opinion is mixed within Studio D as to whether its birth 13 years ago can be chalked up to mere tokenism, or to the honest attempt of a federal institution to make amends for the near exclusion of women filmmakers from the NFB payroll for three decades.

John Grierson, the Film Board's charismatic founder, is sometimes praised for opening up a half dozen directing/producing jobs to women during the Second World War. The other side of the story, however, is that Grierson is on record asserting that film production was an area "where they [women] had ideas above the station to which it had pleased God to call them."

It did please the Film Board to let women near the cameras during the war, and, to pay them far less than men. But after the war, both societal and bureaucratic pressure found NFB women (with the exception of animator Eve Lambert) trading in their filmmakers' caps for other pursuits.

By the mid '60s, women had regained a limited degree of access to NFB filmmaking positions, making up 14 per cent of NFB production staff — mostly as assistants and editors. They were promoted slowly, surpassed by their own male trainees, and were even openly discouraged from aspiring to become directors.

Just as the ability of women filmmakers was suspect, so too were the film proposals coming out of female experience. Anne-Claire Poirier, who became not only a direc-





•The Academy Award-winning *Flamenco* at 5:15

tor but a *celebrated* director during the '60s, recalls being told once by her executive producer that "forgetting she was a woman" might be the key to coming up with better film ideas.

While the proportion of women in filmmaking did not increase over the next decade, 14 per cent proved to be a sufficient critical mass to prompt some change at the Film Board. The decision to create a separate film unit not only to employ women but produce films from a woman's perspective was the specific outcome of several factors.

First, the Film Board's *Challenge for Change* program, launched in the late '60s, became the unwitting sponsor of two very different series of films addressing women's experiences in male-dominated society: *En tant que femmes*, produced by Anne-Claire Poirier; and *Working Mothers*, produced by Kathleen Shannon. Both the making of these series (with largely female crews), and the energetic audience responses to them, furthered the case for more female representation on both sides of the NFB camera.

Second, in 1972 the Canadian Government announced its commitment to the goals of International Women's Year, set for 1975. This commitment gave women within federal institutions the moral ammunition with which to lobby for the improved status of women as citizens, and as employees.

And third, two key spokespersons, namely Poirier and Shannon, used that ammunition to press for continued funding to make film projects — devoted to and orchestrated by women — a matter of course, rather than a one-time event.

Shannon's particular vision for a women's film unit eventually worked its way into the imagination of NFB bureaucrats, who agreed to make the vi-

sion come true — on a shoestring budget. Shannon was appointed to head the new studio in August 1974, thereby becoming the first woman executive producer at the Film Board.

Poirier, who had simply bid for increased funding and opportunities for women, was offered a Francophone women's studio. She rejected the offer on two fronts: she wanted more than a token amount of money, and feared that a women's studio would be treated as a women's ghetto.

Alternatively, Shannon was determined that the new studio would not be treated nor act like a ghetto. "Ghettos are where others put you, in their minds," she observed recently while contemplating Studio D's past. "Studio D is where we wanted to be, it wasn't a ghetto but a refuge. Besides, no one ever calls all-men situations a ghetto."

As a matter of fact, up until 1985 Studio D was never an all-women setting. During the '70s, men filmmakers working out of the Studio were almost as numerous as women. Their energies, however, were devoted largely to projects elsewhere in the Film Board.

During its early years, Studio D was regarded in fact as something less than a full-blown studio. Located "down among the pipes" in basement offices, it began with three staff members and a paltry budget of \$100,000: enough to run some training and apprenticeship programs, plan a few films and conduct audience research.

The years 1976-77 saw a budget of \$600,000; and the release of Beverly Shaffer's *My Friends Call Me Tony*, Filmwest Associates' *Great Grand Mother*, and Diane Beaudry's *Maud Lewis*. Shaffer's film was the first production of Studio D's *Children of Canada* series, now comprised of 10 film portraits of children who represent, in

microcosm, the Canadian mosaic.

Shaffer came to Studio D not as a feminist seeking the environment of a 'women's room' in which to develop her craft, but as a talented although novice filmmaker looking for a chance to prove herself. She was referred, by the well-meaning gents of the NFB, to the women's studio, of course. And Shannon, with her wait of two decades for the opportunity to direct films recently behind her, gave Shaffer that chance.

The sweet reward for Shannon's decision came in 1978, when Shaffer's sixth film in the series, *I'll Find a Way*, was awarded one of two Oscars claimed by the Film Board that year. The Studio D production along with Co Hoedeman's animated short, *The Sand Castle*, put an end to the 26-year drought since Norman McLaren's Oscar for *Neighbours* in 1952.

From the time of its first studio meeting to its first Oscar, Studio D had evolved from an idea — an experiment — to an active film unit churning out modest, NFB-quality films.

In addition to the six *Children of Canada* films directed by Shaffer, Studio D had by then produced a core of films that accomplished what few other NFB films had ever done. That is, Studio D films used female rather than male experience to focus and comment on social life.<sup>2</sup>

*The Lady from Grey County*, *Some American Feminists*, *Eve Lambert*, *Patricia's Moving Picture*, *The Right Candidate for Rosedale*: these films are all documentaries which, as a common denominator, bring the distinctive aspects of female experience to the screen as an essential — hitherto missing — reflection of human society.

They also poignantly document, some more explicitly than others, how

patriarchal power relations have impinged negatively on the experience of their film subjects. In *Some American Feminists*, the articulate Kate Millet describes the painful process of recouping her soul from its occupation by patriarchal ideals. Housewife Patricia's struggle, in *Patricia's Moving Picture*, is expressed more simply although no less engagingly. Her sheer delight in signing her very first cheque or finally owning something in her own name is so quaint it demands serious attention. (And now, Patricia has a film named after her!)

Also in 1978, Studio D produced *How They Saw Us*, a package of eight archival films from the '40s and '50s. What can be discerned from these black-and-white reprints is that early NFB films devoted to women subjects were devoted, rather, to the subject of women. The questions these films (almost all made by men) attempt to answer are: what should be women's role during the war effort? what should it be after the war effort? what should women who insist on 'working' aspire to gain from the workplace?

Terri Nash, in her doctoral examination of the *ten* women-centred NFB films produced in the '40s (out of hundreds of titles), concludes that the "semantic differentiation" within women's film images has much to do with the filmmaker's gender. Men's portrayals of women in these films are enmeshed in codes of passivity and triviality, whereas women's portrayals demonstrate competence and accomplishment.

Nash's prescriptive corollary to these observations is that, in general, the most meaningful changes in women's film images can be expected to come from women themselves.

Not all of Studio D's earlier films are dedicated to projecting new and challenging images of women. *Sun, Wind and Wood* by Dorothy Hénaut is an environmentalist documentary concerning renewable energy. Don Rennick's *Boys Will Be Men* takes a bleak look at male juvenile delinquents in an urban centre. Two animated shorts by Laurent Coderre, *Rencontre* and *Rusting World*, are simple allegories of sojourn and warfare.

The remaining women-centred documentaries produced during the first chapter of the Studio D experiment are *An Unremarkable Birth*, *Just a Lady* and *Laila*. The first is a well-crafted commentary on modern obstetrics, while the other two examine past and present sex-role stereotyping.

*If You Love This Planet and Not a Love Story*, which catapulted Studio D into the international limelight, are not 'better' films than their predecessors. Because of their incredible popularity, critics have actually gone to great pains to illustrate their shortcomings as cinema.

They do, however, possess a magic. And that magic is their bold and passionate grappling with controversial issues immediately relevant to the aver-



●I'll Find a Way found Studio D with its first Oscar

age North American citizen.

In terms of conventional NFB programming procedures, these films are also flukes: projects that slipped into production between the cracks. The proposal for *Not a Love Story*, which was given the NFB nod to proceed by one solitary vote, was a hasty bid for year-end, unearmarked production funds.

Although planning a leave of absence, Bonnie Klein submitted the proposal because of a gut-level feeling that women needed to break untold silences about pornography on a broad scale. She noticed how friends' eyes lit up and nostrils flared when she broached the topic, and also how long-repressed feelings and testimonials would eventually come flooding out. This was Klein's market research.

Terri Nash, whose previous experience in filmcraft amounted to a one-minute short, would likely not have been given the chance to direct *If You Love This Planet* anywhere else but Studio D. She was convinced that Helen Caldicott's power to move an audience would come through on film, still in lecture format. And supplemented with historical footage already in the public domain, this celluloid lecture would have a wide audience. Studio D took the gamble, and Nash was proven correct.

**A memorable page in NFB history**

The evidence of the film experiences generated by *Not a Love Story* and *If You Love This Planet* would fill several books.

One of three focused studies on viewer reactions to *Not a Love Story* was conducted at the University of Illinois by Pauline Bart. Summarizing the overall impact of the film, Bart proposes "*Not a Love Story* is to the anti-pornography movement what the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the anti-slavery movement"

In other words, the film's release was absolutely timely, representing the first documentary collage of pornographic culture presented from a critical – and accessible – perspective. (Some experimental films also contain collages of filmed porn, but the critical message re-

quires much imaginative interpretation.)

For many women, the film was also a first exposure to images classified as hard-core porn: a measured exposure that brought the troublesome aspects of soft-core submission into deeper focus. *Not a Love Story* made a lot of women cry. And, it led many men to defensiveness, and questioning. It also revitalized the NFB practice of post-screening group discussions.

Thanks to added publicity from the Ontario Censor Board's ban on public screenings, the subject matter of the film made for hot press, long line-ups, and unprecedented NFB booking contracts with mainstream movie-houses (outside Ontario).

In 1982, *Not a Love Story* was used as briefing material for a federal standing committee and a provincial commission. It has been used also as an educational tool in police stations and medical schools, and became a key referent in the 1983 Canadawide protest against *Playboy* programming on pay-television.

Between 1980 and 1983, the discussion of pornography in the popular Canadian press swelled by a factor of ten, with much of this increase attributable to the catalytic effect of Klein's film.

*If You Love This Planet*, rather than sharing in the birth of a specialized

movement, became a widely touted manifesto for an ongoing cause. From the earliest screenings, it was repeatedly described as a film that bowled viewers over, inciting them to action. As a result of the film, peace groups were established; peace marchers carried *If You Love This Planet* banners and placards; school children sent letters to Prime Minister Trudeau and President Reagan, and to the CBC (which initially wouldn't broadcast the documentary).

The United States Justice Department was also incited to act, declaring the film "political propaganda" from a foreign agent. No doubt the dramatic footage of actor Ronald Reagan portraying a gung-ho bomber pilot helped provoke this response.

Accepting her Oscar in 1983, Nash did not miss the chance to tell Americans they sure knew how to show foreign agents a good time. This was another sweet moment for Studio D, and proof of the potential of novice filmmakers with heart-felt ideas.

Combined, the Oscar and the Justice Department's reaction encouraged Prime Minister Trudeau to order a video-cassette of the 28-minute 'hot potato' produced by the nation's film agency. Shortly after, he invited Helen Caldicott to lunch and then to a Liberal policy session. Commenting on

Trudeau's subsequent peace mission in the autumn of 1983, a senior government official told journalists that Trudeau mentioned Caldicott more than any other person he had talked to on the subject.

Between 1983 and 1985, *Not a Love Story* and *If You Love This Planet* interchangeably shared the top three spots for annual popularity in Canadian NFB distribution with the animated short *The Sand Castle*.<sup>5</sup> Further, as of December 1985, they were the only NFB films produced in the '80s to appear among the "top 500" of all time, measured in terms of cumulative bookings; and already, they were half way to the top of the list. (The third most recent film appearing in the "top 500" NFB films was Studio D's *I'll Find a Way*.)

In short, Studio D's 'top two' have written an unforgettable page in NFB history.

**Chapter Two:  
great expectations**

In 1983-84, Studio D was at the height of activity. Not only had it become rather famous and in-demand, it now commanded a budget on par with other NFB studios. With an annual allotment of \$1.7 million, the Studio held 11.2 per cent of total English Production funds (for 10 studios) and 15.9 per cent of the wealth among the five studios in Montreal. (Its share has since decreased.)

Recent productions took in *Louise Drouin, Veterinarian* and *Portrait of the Artist – As an Old Lady*; and co-productions *The Way It Is* and the Oscar-winning *Flamenco at 5:15*. Another ten films or so were in production.

While things looked good on the surface, there were some fundamental hitches. Studio D could not meet the film needs of its constituency, made known to staff from substantial networking efforts; nor could it accommodate the numerous requests for employment and training from both francophone and anglophone filmmakers.

Some staff began to feel like vocational counsellors, since women with filmmaking ideas were typically refer-



red to the women's studio.

Women freelancers, who either honestly or cynically looked to Studio D as their best bet for equal opportunity at the Film Board, became discouraged and critical of the privilege held by the Studio's dozen permanent employees. Others knocked the Studio's apparent predilection for documentary, and equated its limited film inventory to limited imagination.

One significant step toward addressing the swelling demand for women-centred films and filmmaking opportunities was the formation of the Federal Women's Film Program. Co-ordinated by Studio D, the program was set up to produce and distribute basic information documentaries, thereby releasing Studio D funds for more creative pursuits.

What became more and more apparent as the '80s progressed was that Studio D was itself *the* Women's Program at the Film Board. And yet, it had only 10 per cent of funds for English Production. It was also becoming clear that Studio D's high profile obscured the fact that few women in other studios – and in total – at the Film Board had significant control over the setting of filmmaking priorities.

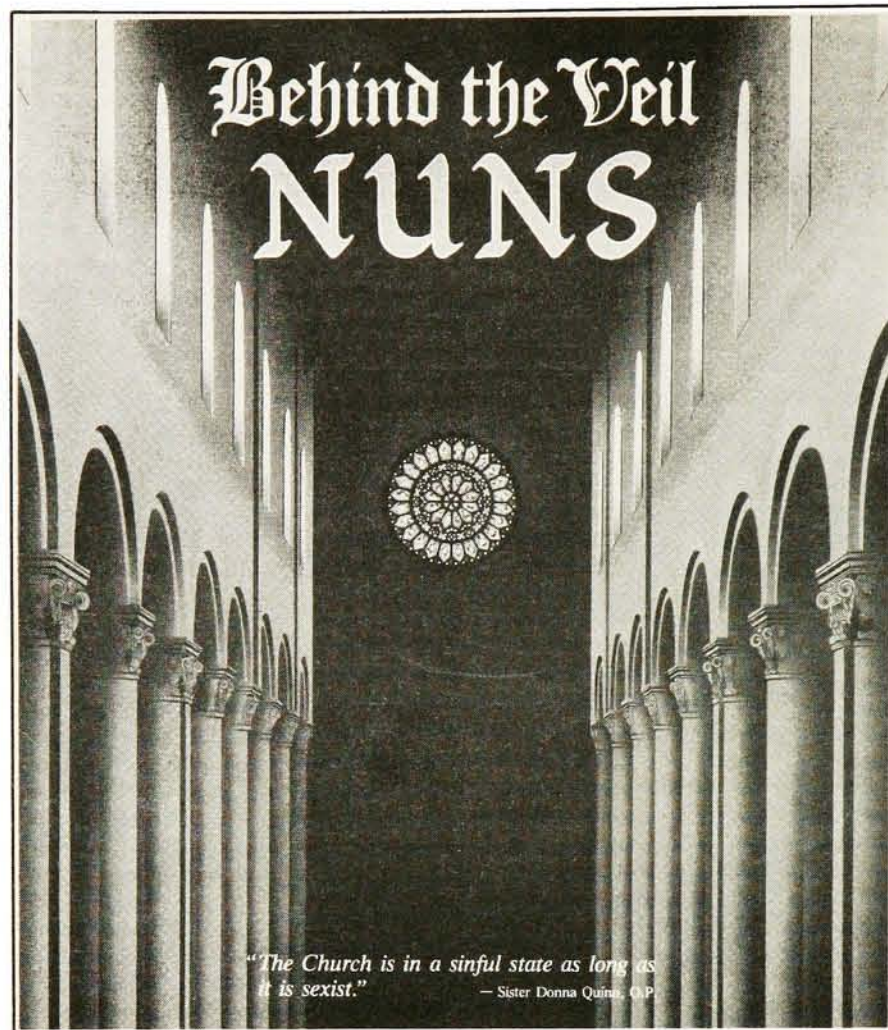
The aspirations of women filmmakers across Canada could not be met by the occasional hiring of a regional freelancer by Studio D. Some francophone women who worked with the Studio longed to create in their native tongue.

In response to these pressures, to the paradox that it harboured the mandate to foster women's film culture yet with a fraction of resources, Studio D gave voice to its greater expectations of the Film Board. In 1983 Shannon, who had always been the principal NFB advocate on the issue of resource and employment equity between the sexes, submitted a proposal arguing the case for a 'women's branch'.

What began as an experimental women's room, a room of one's own, was now challenging NFB management to declare the experiment a success: to consecrate the idea that women have as much right to programming autonomy as French-speaking Canadians. (The French Production branch, now referred to as the French Program, was created in 1964 after considerable lobbying.)

The idea didn't sit well outside Studio D's corridors. In fact, it didn't even merit a formal reply from management. Shannon's radical proposal, however, did seem to precipitate a tidal wave of policy overtures toward women at the Film Board. These overtures have now, in 1987, materialized into a substantive "equality and access" plan that proposes to implement gender parity in terms of employment and freelance contracts, across-the-board, within the next decade. [See insert]

Perhaps this effect is what Shannon had in mind all along, as a second-best strategy. What she didn't count on was the cut in Studio D's budget during



1984-85, and a shrinking share of English Program funds. The most dramatic decrease has been Studio D's allocation of discretionary money (after fixed costs).

In 1981-82, Studio D operated on a budget of \$1.5 million, with 10.9 per cent of the English branch's discretionary funds. Its share of this money – for travel, research and contracts – dropped to 6.2 per cent in 1984-85, and 7.6 in 1986-87.

To a specially mandated studio, painfully aware of the limited resources

placed in women's hands, these cut-backs were tantamount to a slap in the face: punishment for having 'expected' not simply a reward for success but a "budget commensurate with our [Studio D's] task and vision."

Two movements afoot at the Film Board have been offered as explanations for the money freezes and decreases. First, a higher ratio of NFB resources has been committed to regional studios, leaving proportionately less for those in Montreal. Fine, but not all

Montreal studios have shared the burden of regionalization to the same degree.

Second, NFB management says it wants to open the entire Film Board to women, and further, that women shouldn't have to conform to Studio D's "philosophy" to inherit their own cultural resources. Fair enough, except that the NFB has historically done a poor job (even after two previous equal opportunity studies) of putting its money where its policy is. Why, if structural barriers have been all but removed, have the women in the French Program opted to create their own Studio D equivalent?

Why are Studio D's growth and greater fairness to all NFB women so often seen as mutually exclusive scenarios?

Current reports from Studio D state that there are no new films being developed due to lack of discretionary spending options. There are only enough dollars of this sort to support ongoing projects in the present year.

This has not been good for morale. And Shannon, who has carried the brightest torch for women's rights at the NFB for more than a decade, has declared herself burnt out. She stepped down from her esteemed post last summer, at least with an upcoming Order of Canada ceremony to recognize her achievements.

One could say the mid-'80s have not been kind to Studio D, for all that it aspired to accomplish this decade. Such a comment is by no means a reflection on audience response to its films; for the Studio's productions, as a whole, are quite popular.

Compared to a matched, random sample of NFB films, the average Studio D title is booked twice as frequently in Canada as the average NFB production. Excluding the Studio's 'top two' from the sample, Studio D films still outperform regular NFB fare by 50 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Although the comparison is somewhat strained, six recent Studio D documentaries show a rate of Canadian bookings higher than the random sample by a factor of five. (The NFB-wide sample includes a proportion of films from the '70s.) The six Studio D films in question are the "top two", plus **Dream of a Free Country: A Message from Nicaraguan Women**; **Abortion: Stories from North and South**; **Behind the Veil: Nuns**, and **Speaking Our Peace**.

These films are among the most explicitly 'political' productions of the Studio. As a collection, they represent an integrated statement drawing connections, in the Western world, between sexism, militarism and capitalism. All of them have been called biased and one-sided. All of them have been praised for the unique perspective on various social issues they bring to the screen.

Other recent productions include **This Borrowed Land**, **D.E.S. – An Uncertain Legacy**, **The Best Years of My Life**; co-productions **Dark Lullabies**,

### Highlights from Equity and Access: A New Social Contract, a study by Bonnie Diamond and Francine Fournier for the National Film Board of Canada, 1986.

#### Employment and Production Statistics, 1986

- Men hold 78 % of management and 69 % of filmmaking positions.
- Women hold 93 % of secretarial/clerical jobs.
- In the filmmaking category, women make up 46 % of editors, 31 % of directors, 25 % of producers and 7 % of camerapersons.
- Men filmmakers make on average \$4,600 more than women.
- Almost twice as many dollars are spent on the services of male than female freelancers.
- Women produced 15 % of NFB films in 1986, on 11 % of the current production budget.
- Women directed 34 % of NFB films in 1986, on 31 % of the current production budget.

#### Recommendations (paraphrased)

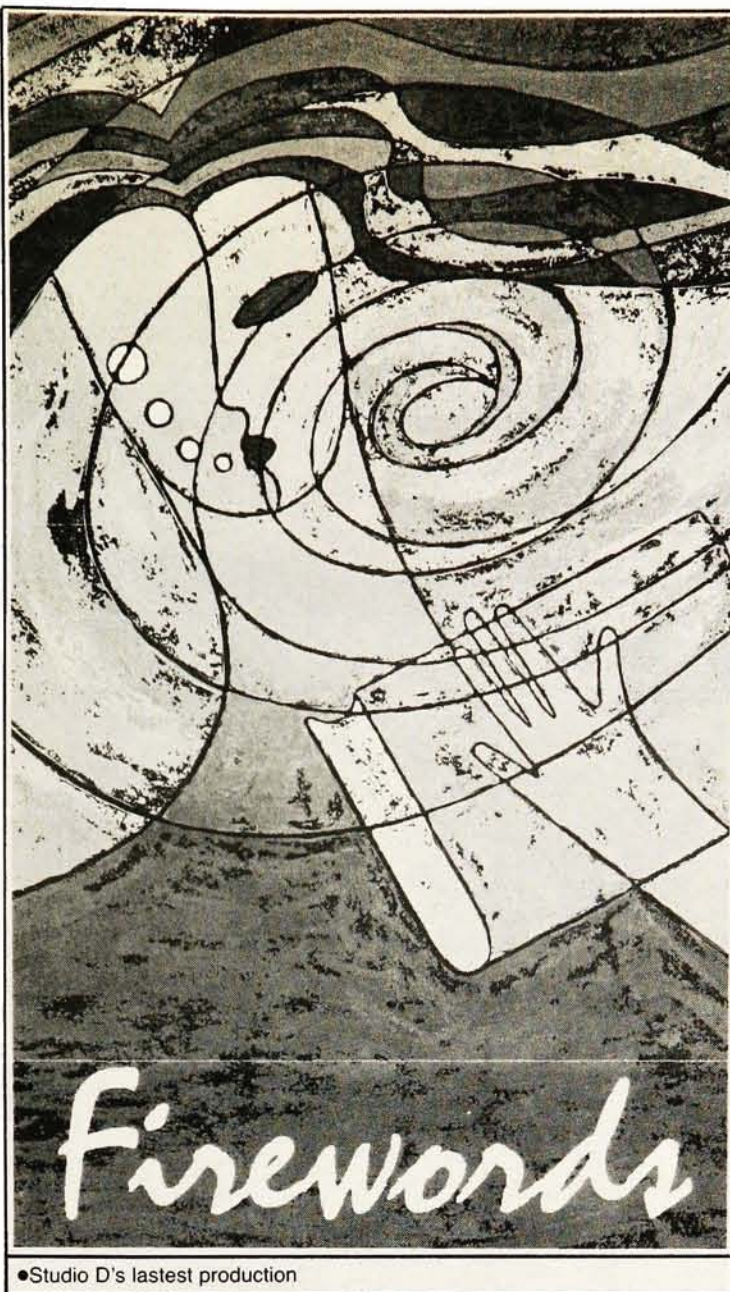
- The NFB should implement an employment equity programme having as its primary objective to achieve parity between men and women in all occupational categories and at all levels by at least 1996.
- In competition, all factors being equal, preference should be given to the candidate of the under-represented sex for that occupation.
- Failure of contractors to observe the policy of employment equity may affect future contracts with the NFB.

**Speaking of Nairobi and No Longer Silent**, and a series of spin-offs from **Speaking Our Peace**. (This is not a complete list.)

Like their predecessors, these documentaries add to the growing body of films that, as a basic denominator, recognize women as historical subjects and articulators of culture. Given the preoccupations of the NFB's first three decades of production, this is no small feat.

In more eloquent terms, college instructor Barbara Latham describes Studio D films as tools for learning "in a burgeoning field of inquiry into women's experience in Canada and the world... so that a large constituency which experiences itself as an international community, dare I say a global sisterhood, sees itself." Men, likewise, are given by these film texts an alternate way of seeing the legacy of patriarchy handed down to them by their 'forefathers'.

A recent NFB international distribution report points to a noteworthy effect of the production of films of this nature from one identifiable source. It states Studio D has become an "international brand name", with "a public out there awaiting and expecting its product."



●Studio D's latest production

With over a decade of experience to its credit, Studio D is ready to enter into a more mature phase of filmmaking – to further develop what Bonnie Klein refers to as its "visionism." If the Studio must consistently turn its energies inward, and defend its funding base time and time again, we may never see that vision unfold.

Once again Studio D is being compelled to justify why as a women's studio, as a centralized source of women's film culture, it should have more creative license. Given that 'Studio D' is a renowned Canadian brand name, we might be asking the Film Board, instead, why such license should not be granted.

**Notes**

1. In 1984, Film Australia established the world's second permanent film unit for women. In 1986, NFB's French Program branch undertook to create a francophone counterpart to Studio D

2. The use of female principals is a simple but still rare feature of NFB films. In the 1984-85 English catalogue, for example, about 8 per cent of the titles were listed under "women" or "women – portraits" in the index. No parallel heading existed for "men" or "men – portraits".

3. I am not aware of their distribution performance over the past year.

4. These figures have been calculated from distribution data, as of December 1985, provided by the Film Board. The random sample was matched to Studio D productions in terms of running time (length) and date of release.



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