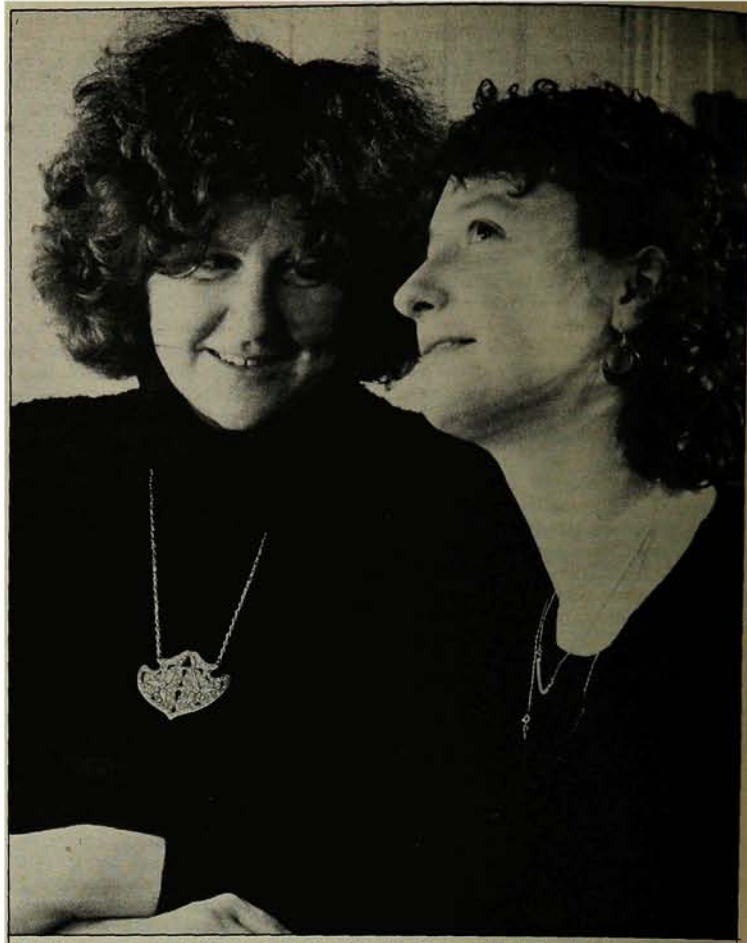


During the winter months, Cinema Canada will pay special attention to the young filmmakers who have made an impact recently. Although the commercial feature boom has all but obscured the other work being done, a new generation of filmmakers is on its way, winning awards and making a mark. Halya Kuchmij took the Genie last year for her short *The Strongest Man in the World*, Clay Borris took his *Alligator Shoes to Cannes*, Sturla Gunnarsson received broad press attention last month for *After the Axe* which was recently shown on the CBC, and Ron

Mann is wowing the festival crowds with *Imagine the Sound*.

The following is an interview with directors Sophie Bissonnette and Joyce Rock. Together with Martin Duckworth they won this year's *Prix de la Critique Québécoise* for *A Wives' Tale*. The prize is awarded each year by the Québécois critics for the film judged to be the finest of the preceeding year. Their choice was at once a commentary on the commercial production scene, and a great honour for these two young women directing their first feature-length documentary.



• "When you see this film you see our signature..." Joyce Rock, Sophie Bissonnette

Docu strikes home

by Jacqueline Levitin

A Wives' Tale (*Une histoire de femmes*), has been one of the most enthusiastically received films of the year in Quebec. Recording the participation of the wives of the 12,000 strikers in the historic eight-and-a-half-month-long Inco strike in Sudbury, Ontario, directors Sophie Bissonnette, Martin Duckworth and Joyce Rock have brought to their story a warmth and intimacy that is rare in political documentaries.

As in the 1958 Inco strike, the strikers' wives in 1978 formed a wives' committee, but an independent committee this time instead of a wives' auxiliary. The group included 250 out of a potential 7,000 women. Sixty were active. The strike was already in its fourth month when the three filmmakers first went to Sudbury. They stayed for the next four-and-a-half months. Joan Kuyek, a community organizer whom the women had chosen to chair their meetings introduced them to the committee. Together they negotiated the terms of their presence - permission to attend and film meetings, permission to follow certain women on their daily activities in the service of the committee, and general roaming privileges in exchange for the wives' power to decide, by a majority vote, to accept or reject the finished film.

The women they followed closely, a representational group, became the "main characters" of the documentary. Each of the filmmakers had accommodations in the home of a striker's family (often a main character's) where there was sufficient room to make a long-term arrangement tolerable. Their rapport with the women is evident in the spontaneous quality of the conversations in the film.

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Sophie Bissonnette: We knew what kind of political film we *didn't* want to make. We didn't want to make a film where we would be talking in the place of the women who were there. We thought that in a lot of films that we had seen about strikes, at some point just as someone was getting into something, you felt that the filmmaker was scared of what that person had to say; of where it would lead to.

What was most important to me was the feminist films I had seen and the approach of letting women speak, and of a more intimate understanding and portrayal of human relationships.

A lot of films about strikes, or about working-people's struggles, seek out people in leadership positions or people who are extremely articulate. They give a very glossy picture of what the strike is about, as if they are afraid to show that a strike is more than that. You hardly ever get a more intimate portrayal of what people might get out of a strike other than what they've won in their negotiations. For example, for one of the striker's wives it might be that she decided to learn how to drive - which, in a housewife's life, can be an enormous step.

But because we knew what we didn't want to make, but weren't sure of what we were going to make, we constantly had to fight our own fears. We thought "maybe we should go and get the union's point of view on this," or "maybe we should find out what the husbands think." We ourselves were afraid of what kind of film we would have, if it would be a valid film if we *only* had the women's point of...

Joyce Rock: ...If "the girls" only speak for themselves.

Sophie Bissonnette: You have to

constantly fight against those images that are in your head, that you see on the news, that are in every documentary and every political film you've seen. That you're supposed to be making a film about a strike and should film a picket-line and all those obvious things. So we had to put our foot down. We had to be clear about what this film was going to be about. And also fight against our own fear of "Am I completely crazy to want to film this kind of situation?" Because it was new territory. Can you imagine that in Quebec I can't think of a single film that talks about working-class women? They're a majority of the population and they've never been on film! It's very terrifying to make that first film because you don't know how to show them. Because the only images you have are the soap operas in the afternoons and the ads you see. And the question keeps coming back "Maybe they don't have anything to say. Maybe this is totally boring." It's a lot like what those women were going through during the strike. Suddenly during the strike they could afford to think things they thought were crazy alone in their houses. Maybe it was unthinkable alone in their houses to say "I should be able to go to the general meetings" but then three of them would get together and find out "you think you should go to general meetings also!" We tried to show in the historical part of the film that all the women in 1958 and before would have done all the things the 1978 women had done, but thanks to the feminist movement there was a feeling that these women could think these things and not be crazy, and we could make this film and not be crazy.

Joyce Rock: The strongest influence on me making this film was the body of

cinéma direct in terms of its attitude and approach. And it's interesting in terms of the acceptance of the film. It's bizarre because the film was 75% in English originally and then translated, yet the film is immediately understood in Quebec. The press and the film critics here never asked questions about the style or what the film was about. They all got the point even when they didn't necessarily agree with it. What I realized was that in Montreal our kind of film, or other documentaries or fictions, have a constant place in the culture pages, while in Toronto it is "What Hollywood starlet is in town?" or "What is Canadian culture?" or "What is Canadian film?" In Toronto, when I would ask critics who came to the press screenings, "Are you going to do an article?" their response was "I couldn't possibly. This is such a terrible film." And when I'd ask them why, they'd ask questions like "Is this shot in 35 or in 16 mm?" and they wouldn't understand why the camera was sometimes shakey. It seemed to me that most of them had no experience of *cinéma vérité*, and the few who did thought that the film must be *cinéma vérité*. I had to explain to them that the predominant use of *cinéma vérité* in the States was generally very manipulative, with an attitude of, "No matter what the cost, I've got to get this on film because this is real and this is life."

Sophie Bissonnette: Here political filmmakers, because there is a much greater political consciousness, are not afraid to talk about politics in everyday life, are not afraid of filming very banal situations and presenting that politically. In Ontario or in the films that I've seen from English Canada, I can't think of a political film that is not dogmatic, that is not imposed from the top, that

does not have heavy narration, while here the approach is very different. Here the approach is of going to the people and letting them speak and living with all the contradictions and conflicts and not being afraid of them.

I don't feel a split here between the filmmaker and what he is filming. When I see Quebec films I see emotion and, in a documentary, I see, without narration, that the filmmaker has put himself in the film - not in terms of doing something, but an emotional involvement.

The kind of rapport we had with the wives of the strikers comes from acknowledging in that film that I am a woman making it. Not only that I'm a woman, but that I'm a woman living in Montreal, with certain political experiences.

Joyce Rock : We never felt we had to put ourselves physically into the film. Yet when you see this film you see us, our signature, how we structured it, how we ended it. It's very different from the films I don't want to make where people pretend that they're not there and they're not manipulating and then it becomes a manipulative process.

But that's also why the CBC won't buy the film. Their basic argument is that their mandate is to be journalistically responsible, which means covering both sides. I pointed out to them that this wasn't journalism, it's a movie. But they don't make that kind of distinction. I'm not a journalist. I'm a filmmaker and it wouldn't be as interesting a film if we showed both sides. And they say, "What if INCO comes along and wants us to show one of their company films?" Our response was "Great! Show it! Stop treating your spectators as imbeciles. People would understand far more if they had the right to see two totally committed points of view from two totally different perspectives." But that's not the CBC style, nor is it the Film Board style.

I think it is important to ask who makes movies in this society, where do these people come from, what people get to go to film school, or what people got into the Film Board, because now the doors are closed. But twenty years ago when they were recruiting young people how many women did Tom Daly recruit when he recruited all those men? How many working-class men and women? It's given us a lot of good filmmakers. They were white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, educated men. But that also determines twenty years later the kinds of films that come out of the Film Board. So when people say about our film that "I haven't seen a film like this ever, it's terrific," it makes me sad, too. Because I wish this was the hundredth film like this. It should be the hundredth film like this. And if it's not, it's not because these women haven't existed before, or women like them, or this strike, or this struggle, or our approach. It's simply that getting access to the technology and getting access to the money is so hard. And if it's hard for all filmmakers it's harder for women.

Sophie Bissonnette : We could come into the lives of the women in Sudbury like we did because there was a crisis going on and because a lot of changes were happening and we were a part of those changes. I'd be surprised if we could do the same thing now in Sudbury or in any situation which wasn't similar. If we were in a house with five women we didn't need to ask questions. There was so much turmoil in their lives and

they were discovering so many things that there was no need to spark off a discussion. And actually, when we did go back to Sudbury, we were amazed by the difference, how much more difficult it was to bring things out. While the strike was going on they saw us as part of the struggle because we were there so much. They would let us know when things were happening. There was that trust that we were making a film for them and about them and they wanted the film to get out because there were things they wanted other women in similar situations to use.

But there was also an initial resistance and I consider it a healthy resistance. The experience the women had with the media was at that time very negative. They were used to giving interviews and seeing that what was edited wasn't at all what they had wanted to say. Or being given five minutes to describe everything that was going on. And that's how the idea of giving them a majority vote on the final version of the film came up. It was a way of giving them a sense that they had some kind of control.

The women knew they had a kind of rapport with us that we wouldn't include scenes they considered too intimate. For example, when after the strike Lossy talked to me very emotionally about how her best friend had gone back to Newfoundland because they had gone bankrupt, she talked about it in a way that was very beautiful - and sad - because for her it was the most dreadful thing that had happened to her in the strike; but she didn't want to say it on film because it was something that was too tragic for her. And that's part of the trust that you establish. They only gave us what they wanted to give us on film. At times it was frustrating for us and it's why some films have to be made in fiction.

Joyce Rock : You have to keep checking back almost daily to your sense of responsibility of their trust. Back to what's manipulation, and what's cheap and what's irresponsible. We had a lot of ideas that we didn't even film, for instance, about how many of the women became really afraid of becoming pregnant during the strike because they couldn't afford their birth control pills. We had the idea of getting some women together to talk about some of the more personal aspects of the strike - does it change your sexual rapport with your husband? and, when you work with men in the union and you're not used to it, how is it to have men as friends? But the more we planned, the more we realized that it didn't belong in this movie.

As a filmmaker you have to remember your context. This movie is just one that comes out in a year, in a society where there aren't very many accurate images of working-class people and especially working-class women. It's striking enough to see these women as intimately as you do in their meetings. Perhaps when we have 55 more films of this type, that render more truthful images of women like these women; then, as filmmakers, we'll be able to afford a film that goes beyond and talks in screeching terms about their most intimate thoughts and relationships.

Sophie Bissonnette : People give you on film what they're willing to give you. I'm not sure that what they said off screen was the truth. What we got on film was also the truth and what they wanted to tell us about who they are. I

don't think we fool ourselves when we talk about *cinéma vérité* - people in films are always aware that the cameras are there and are always aware that they are giving you an image of themselves. That's part of the control they had over the film.

You may have certain priorities and may say "How come that isn't important in their lives? For me it's so important." But for them if it's not important they're not going to talk to you about it. So you have to be constantly listening to what they want to say about themselves, and be very sensitive, not to what you wanted to see there but to what was actually happening.

Joyce Rock : Often we'd suggest things and they'd say "fuck-off." They were too tired, or didn't want to do it. We also got that response. We had to constantly remind ourselves that it was their strike, not our film. When the wives were organizing the mock trial we had ideas and we thought, "Oh, why don't you do this and why don't you do that?" Then we thought "No. It's not our film, it's their strike."

Sophie Bissonnette : It was hard when they saw the completed film. There was a very long and deep silence when the film was finished because at that point the strike had been over for a year and a half and most of the women had gone back to their houses and were struggling with the daily routine again. In the film they saw themselves doing incredible things. It threw back an image that most of them didn't have of themselves anymore, that they could do all those things, and it became a basis of comparison with their own lives. But the thing I've become aware of, and maybe I'm mistaken, is that we made a film that is about the wives but not for them. The film isn't addressed to them, it's addressed to women like them. It's raised a lot of questions for me to realize that since we brought the film to Sudbury, it's never been booked by any group in Sudbury other than INCO.

Joyce Rock : This strike did a lot to the fabric of the union local, made people aware of the International Steelworkers. But though their immediate crisis, the strike, went away, their situation is exactly the same.

Sophie Bissonnette : That's why it's not just the image of themselves that is hard for them to take. It's also what they see their union leadership doing in that film, and questioning that. But a lot of them haven't continued to be actively involved to change things. It's as true for the men as it is for the women.

Joan has told us that, for the men, the film was a very important experience, because it made them aware of what their wives had to go through during the strike. What they knew was that their wives would go off to a meeting and come back and say "We took this or that decision," or "Tomorrow we're going plant gating." It was like women's invisible work. It was just like returning to their house, and their house is clean, and they never see the work that has gone into making that house clean, that's gone into making that supper. And it was the same thing when the women went off to be involved. The husbands weren't aware of all those discussions, of all those conflicts, and the inner fighting with the people from the union. All that the men would see was the final result, that the women had

raised \$5000 at the plant gate, that the women had organized a mock trial. It was very important in terms of respecting their wives.

It's ironic that this was a film that was made by women who didn't have families to worry about. It was a film that was made by women, but also by women who could afford to live the way most men do who make films.

I know a lot of films that should have been done in video, or in video that should have been done in film, in terms of the access and distribution of them, and of the importance of those films. For

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instance, unions will make films around a certain strike on a very cheap budget and they're meant for a very specific public, about a very specific issue. People should make that type of film, but they should know that film is not going to be interesting out of context to an audience that it's not intended for. I think we knew when we were making our film that we weren't making a film that was only going to last for a year. We were trying to make a film that would last a long time, and that's why we put a lot of care, a lot of time and a lot of money into trying to make it as good as possible.

Joyce Rock : I would hope that we, and all filmmakers, could free ourselves from what we create as the strictures in terms of filmmaking. There are things like "documentary." And on the other side we put "fiction." It's like you have to be either/or. We take for granted all the time what those two things are. I hope the next time we're more provocative with our form and with our style.

Sophie Bissonnette : One of the things I want to do is to have fun with documentaries, lose that sense of putting it on a pedestal as if it is not something that can be played with. It comes from the conception that what you are filming is reality and it can't be played with because you're trying to get to the "truth." Once you're aware that what people give on film is the image they want to project, and that what I am filming is the vision of what I want to see in that image. Once you're aware of that I think you're freed from the illusion that the more bare it is, the more still the camera is, the more objective it will become. I think we're afraid of playing with the image because we think it's reality. ●