

Michael Grant

by Mac Bradden

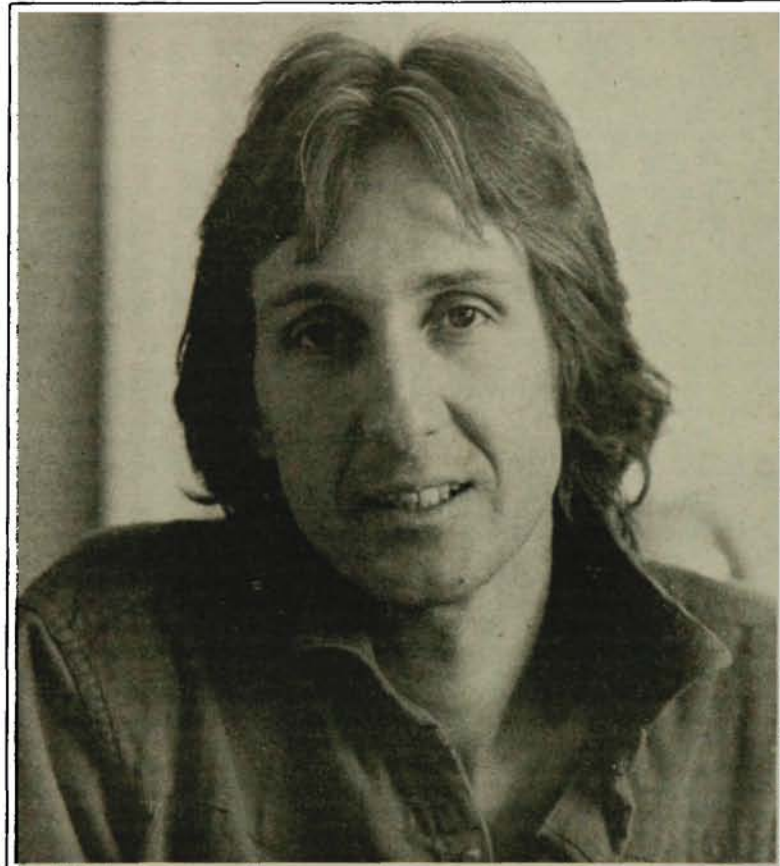
Michael Grant was born in Toronto in 1952. He read at Upper Canada College and then attended the University of Western Ontario where he was a prolific student filmmaker. After some years' subalternship to Budge Crawley he joined Deanne Judson to mount the Canadian-U.K. co-production *Ragtime Summer* in 1976. A couple of years later, having no luck at producing other directors' films, he produced and directed his own quirky drama, *The Brother's Keeper*. That experience, coupled with his business acumen, enabled him to launch the *Genie*-nominated feature *Head On* (due soon from Astral). This interview followed an afternoon of pond hockey at Grant's Mt. Albert home.

Cinema Canada: How, at age 27, did you manage to pull off your own feature film?

Michael Grant: Most of the experience I'd had in the five or six years previous was related to producing feature films. A little trial and error, and a lot of learning from other people, taught me what economic structures were necessary to satisfy investors, to package a motion picture. I started trying it with other directors. My own desire has always been to direct, but for some reason I set about learning how to actually make it happen, first. I was prepared just to produce for a while. But a couple of experiences trying to produce for other directors fell apart, principally because of my relationships with the directors or their agents. Next time out I decided to direct myself. Then, whatever else might fail, at least the director wouldn't fall out of the deal.

Probably the factor most helpful in getting the film off the ground was the climate in the economic community at the time. There were 45 features the year I made *Head On*, a lot of interest in investing. It was the thing to do. Another year, I might not have made it. Even in that very good year, there were guys with projects, more experienced filmmakers than I, who just didn't luck out. There are so many things that crop up, trying to make a feature, that the cards have to be a little bit with you.

Cinema Canada: Given, then, the odds against succeeding with any film the first time out, why go so offbeat? Did you think *Head On's* originality would



Photos: Mac Bradden

enhance its chances?

Michael Grant: Definitely. You know, we make low-budget movies out of a country whose feature films aren't highly recognized throughout the world. We're competing in the American market, so we're up against bigger budgets, more star value, all those things. I believe it's important to get your first movie noticed. Apart from making a good movie, one way to do that is to make the movie unusual. Offer something different. If you're going to compete on the big screen, you've got to make people decide to spend \$4.50 on your movie instead of on Jack Nicholson's. If you don't have a star to stack up against Jack Nicholson, then the word of mouth about your film, and your ad campaign, have to put forward an idea that clicks over in people's minds, that makes them say, "Yes, I'm interested in that subject," or "That sounds curious," or "Bizarre!" - whatever attracts them to give you their money, instead of Jack Nicholson.

I'm a firm believer that small movies from small countries arouse interest if they're unusual, or if they offer something that movies from the bigger, more recognized countries or filmmakers don't. So *Head On* was an effort to present a subject that was intriguing,

perhaps even risqué. You need an attention-getter when you're working with little budgets and limited star-power.

Cinema Canada: The mass marketers have largely looked askew at your film. Now do you think your skirting convention paid off?

Michael Grant: Oh, there's no question that the guys who have 6,000 theatres in places like Wick, Texas, know that their audiences, by and large, won't like the movie. Jimmy (Sanderson) and Sledge (Paul Illidge) and I didn't give that audience too much weight when we were writing it. It was aimed at a minority audience and will be, I believe, greatly appreciated by that minority audience. It surprised everybody in the test run in Winnipeg.

I want to emphasize, too, that *Head On* has already exceeded my expectation of reward. It's been a very complete experience, everyone's dream of a grown-up meccano set, making a movie with my friends. I'm also confident that the investors will come off reasonably well. The film only cost \$1.3 million, and it's selling for probably the same dollar-per-minute value as other Canadian films that cost five and six and eight million.

The pay-TV market is where you count the dollars on these medium-performance films. Getting millions at the box office for these films is a pipe dream. Besides, investors get back so little of the theatrical gross. Twenty percent is the standard guess, but now with the cost of money to enter and promote yourself in all the different markets, and with so many people collecting the money ahead of you, the investors are probably getting less than fifteen percent. After we've all had our moderate theatrical runs, I believe we're all going to have about the same dollar value on the secondary markets. And mine only has a million to get back. It convinces me of the wisdom of trying to make movies for less.

Cinema Canada: Did the low budget horizon inhibit the choice or scope of your subject?

Michael Grant: No, the key to the subject, really, was to touch a spot in people that they had, perhaps, wondered about but not had a look at. The idea of heightening sexual experience through fear was beginning to appear in some commercial situations; you know, Helmut Newton photography, attractive women wearing medical gear or leather, things we associate with sado-masochism - introducing an element of fear to accompany sexual arousal. That interests me because so much of the male psyche is taken up with the reproductive drive. It's an evolutionary leftover, the strong sexual drive to ensure we perpetuated the species. But in modern-day society, sexual interaction comes pretty easily - too easily, maybe, in most cases. So there's no counter-balance to the huge drive. With this residual sex-drive, then people start to explore more and more bizarre things to heighten the sexual experience. The ultimate sexual experience (this is a subject that's been approached in lots of films from *Mr. Goodbar* on down), the ultimate orgasm is death, or the resolution of the fear and sexual tension at the same time. So that's what *Head On* started into.

Cinema Canada: Coming and croaking in one big bang?

Michael Grant: Not bad.

Cinema Canada: Your promotional tag line for the festival showings in Toronto and Berlin was "Head On is not a love story." Now, for the commercial cut that was test-marketed in Winnipeg, it's become "Games can go too far."

Michael Grant: We said "it's not a love story," originally, because the line suggests to people that it obviously is a love story in some ways. And it is, in fact, a story of a man and a woman and their relationship. Trying to decide whether or not it's love is part of the intrigue of

the movie, because the relationship is so bizarre. It's probably quite unlike that of most people in the world. There's also a sort of threatening feel to "Head On is not a love story." The question arises, "Well, then, what is it?" The idea, of course, was to get people to the theatre to find out.

"Games can go to far," has, again, that threat to it, indicative of the relationship. It's a threat to the well-being of both persons involved. It has a very strong negative aspect to it. Their relationship is a clash of dangerous electricity. And that dangerous electricity was, I think, my key to get to the audience, to involve them emotionally.

I think you can scare the shit out of an audience, or make them laugh like crazy, or cry like hell. And each of those opens a little door inside us that leaves us vulnerable to what's coming at us.

If I sit you down in front of the big screen, and in 15 minutes I start to get you really scared, then I've opened that little door. Whatever I put on the screen, then, is going to flow through that little door and get inside and rough you up a bit, and get you emotionally involved in the movie. If I don't entertain you in that fashion, don't make you laugh or cry, or scare you, the movie'll never get to you.

Cinema Canada: *Is the film manipulative?*

Michael Grant: Yes it's manipulative. Subtly, of course. That's the art and craft of making movies, skillful manipulation, a dramatic structure that sets up appetites and then satisfies them, and also, of course, using the visual medium to its maximum potential.

You know, there have been lots of studies about our physiological responses to certain visual images. There are established facts about how you respond to certain colours and certain lines, certain angles and certain forms, low horizons and high horizons. Red versus blue, and diagonal versus horizontal and vertical, and how we respond to these physiologically, that is the meat of visual manipulation in the movies.

Be aware of what that frame is presenting to the audience, what it's doing to them emotionally, because you can manipulate them. You can set up a frame and make them respond in a certain way, just by virtue of the fact that the frame has certain visual statistics. Some filmmakers are much more oriented toward that form than others. And those are the guys who, for me, are making very powerful movies right now, because they understand the power of the medium. Nicholas Roeg is one, Alan Parker another. Those are people who really understand the power of visual manipulation.

Cinema Canada: *It's conventional wisdom that sex and violence are sure bets in a movie. Your subject is sex, and your treatment of it is, psychologically at least, brutal. Yet there's no overt portrayal of sex or violence on the screen. Why hold back?*

Michael Grant: Well, if I'd gone too far with the sex and violence, it would have overshadowed the other aspects of the characters and of the film, the emotional aspect of the relationship, for example. I think the film maintains a better unity and balance by being restrained in terms of how explicit the sex and violence is allowed to get. I think sometimes we're more frightened of what we imagine than of things we can actually see and come to terms with. I tried to make a film that was more

haunting because I restrained myself, than one which just gave you a charge for the 30 seconds you actually saw it portrayed on screen. Instead, I gave you a charge that wasn't satiated, and maybe you had to carry it with you when you left the theatre.

Cinema Canada: *Are you surprised at the lack of opportunity you've had to shoot other films since you finished Head On?*

Michael Grant: Oh, I guess, like everybody, I thought "I'll make this movie, and things will happen, and my whole life will change. People will start knocking on my door." I guess most people making movies have that fantasy.

In the case of *Head On*, when I was still at the cutting stage the film was



shown to the pre-selection committee for Cannes – and their reaction was very strong.

"Oh, fuck, great!" I thought, "These people are going to recognize what good work I've done, how hard I've worked. Someone's going to come ask me to do another movie."

But, of course, that hasn't happened. You can't expect anything from the film industry. It has a natural course it will run, and that course is a product of how the financial community is reacting, how good the properties are, how hard people are pushing. What the economic thermometer is like outside the film industry, the whole state of the economy, that affects us, too.

Oh, I don't see any point to complaining. Things'll go the way they go. We filmmakers and would-be filmmakers can only try our hardest to come up with the best movies we can.

Cinema Canada: *Is the market there for Canadian films as long as they're good enough, or is there a distribution problem?*

Michael Grant: There's definitely a distribution problem. As the first part of your question implies, the most important thing is to make films of high quality. That has to come first. But the distribution systems in North America make it very difficult, or impossible, for small, independent Canadian movies to get exposure in the marketplace. There are economic reasons for that, and all those economic reasons make sense, but they don't make it any easier to get your movie out.

There are many possible solutions, and in Canada, I think, the light bulb is just going on in our heads – we're realizing we've put all this money into production, and then none into distributing and promoting the movies.

I think that's the next step in the

Canadian industry. We learned how to make the movies, and now we'll learn to distribute them. We'll start putting money into that.

Then maybe the next step will be to put the money where we really need it – into the properties. The proportionate amount of money allotted to property in the Canadian movies of the past five or six years is out of whack.

Cinema Canada: *We haven't put enough bother into starting off with properties that are good enough in the first place?*

Michael Grant: Right. Working for Budge Crawley really taught me that lesson. Lots of people might suggest Budge spends too long on things, but the point is his emphasis is on the property, how good it is. And whether something was at the script stage or even at the editing stage, as with *Everest*, he'd never rush it. He'd give it every opportunity to come out its fullest, to be the best it could. And he came up with some high-quality movies as a result, one of them recognized with an Academy Award.

And look at Fellini, or Kubrick or Coppola. Those guys aren't turning out a film a year.

Cinema Canada: *Two years after you shot Head On, you've now re-cut it. Was that part of your distribution deal?*

Michael Grant: Yes. After I'd been to Berlin with the film, my artistic desires were somewhat satiated. I felt the film really needed to be re-cut before it could be commercially distributed in the United States. I wanted to tailor the film to paying customers in North America to maximize the number of dollars I can return to the investors. I am, after all, the producer of the movie, too.

So, last September, Astral looked at the version that was in Berlin, and I discussed with them what direction I wanted to go with the cut.

Then, I re-cut the film with Stan Cole. Astral approved, and that closed the deal.

Cinema Canada: *You decided to tailor the film to a paying North American audience. Is that something you have learned how better to do since shooting the film?*

Michael Grant: Yes. I spent six months writing *White Magic* with Jim Sanderson, and when we were writing that screenplay, we spent a lot of time studying video-tapes of American commercial successes. There was a consistency, a definite dramatic structure to all those movies, as far as how they fed the audience – how they aroused an appetite, and how and when they satiated it. Then I began to look from these films back to early writers and dramatists. Herodotus, Homer, you know. I could see that they realized a chronological revelation of the facts didn't interest the reader as much as an artificial structure which manipulated his reactions.

So, as a result, Stan Cole and I were able to impose on the film a dramatic structure that history told us would make the film more entertaining and interesting to the broad audience, conventions that have held through Greek theatre and Shakespeare and on up. And, having now obeyed these conventions, I agree it's a better film.

Cinema Canada: *So White Magic will be a more conventional film from the word go?*

Michael Grant: Structurally, yes. Struc-

turally, it's a classic comic conflict. Stone-Age man exists on earth today – at the same time as we're in an incredible, technological, electronic age. And here we are just an airplane ride apart. I mean, these people are from 2,500 or 3,000 years ago, in the evolutionary sense. So you stand one of them beside one of us and it's like having a time-machine. And, of course, it's a classic structure for conflict. I lift this Stone-Age man out of the Amazon jungle, and in 15 hours or so I can have him standing on the corner of Bloor and Yonge. It's as if I were to take you and drop you on Mars. Maybe you can breathe all right, but everything, absolutely everything is foreign to you. Can you survive it?

It conjures up cliché images, you know. Stone-Age man has paradise while



we have a human jungle – or vice versa; we have an electronic paradise and Stone-Age man was bored to tears. But there's more humanity to the situation than that. This character's a real, live guy, like you and I. He might be terrific or he might be an asshole, but he's a definite character. And so are the urban individuals he interacts with.

Because the situation is a natural comedy, I hope to open that same little door in people through laughter that, in *Head On*, I opened through fear. I want to get that door open so I can get in and enlighten the audience.

In this case there's a sort of journalistic urgency to get through to people. You know, there's a great rainbow of cultures on earth today that's being threatened with homogenization by the advance of technological society.

A fellow named Richard Meech and I are working on a series of TV shows on vanishing cultures with David Mayberry-Lewis, head of anthropology at Harvard. And so we're confronted with this interface between our society and theirs. How can they maintain their cultural integrity in the face of the forceful advance of a world view? This variety of cultures is something I believe will be absent from the earth in many respects in the next 10, 20 or 30 years. So, in a sense, it's evolution before our very eyes, and we have the opportunity to record it and to learn from it. We have a chance to learn from their world view, alternatives of how to see the world and the universe.

Cinema Canada: *Quickly, anything else?*

Michael Grant: Yeah, I want to do Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. It's an insightful poke at Ontario WASP Society. That's me.

I'll probably shoot the whole thing at night – black humour, you know. ●

"Individual women have been and done everything that individual men have done at some time or other if only to prove that they could."

— Jane Marsh,
pioneer woman director

(quoted by Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Before the Guerillieres," *Canadian Film Reader*)

Trailblazers

Women technicians may be an exotic species in the male-dominated film industry, but they are not a new phenomenon. Forty years ago, women sound and camera operators were being recruited, along with women producers and directors to fuel the wartime propaganda machine that was to be the National Film Board (NFB) under Grierson. Judith Crawley and Sally Macdonald were brought in as 'camera' and 'sound' respectively, to shoot films on nutrition, daycare and folk traditions with directors Evelyn Spice Cherry, Gudrun Parker and Laura Bolton. Margaret Perry, who, after the death of her husband, bought herself a camera with the insurance money and taught herself photography, worked at the Board as camera operator before going on to become a one woman show — writing, shooting, producing and directing films out of the NFB unit in Nova Scotia.

As Judith Crawley pointed out,

"There was no sex prejudice against women. There was no one else around and the thing was if there was a human being who seemed to have some command of the situation and the ability to do something, then that human being was drafted. Sex didn't enter into it. If you were there and you could do it, by all means do it."

The stipulation for women, however, was that they not allow their biology to interfere with their filmmaking. Grierson, Crawley commented, did not approve of families and demanded absolute commitment and dedication, regarding marriage or pregnancy among his women staffers as personal affronts. Crawley relates the story of being engaged to shoot a film with Gudrun Parker on daycare:

"We were all set to go and she phoned me up one day in great embarrassment, and said, 'I'd like you to have lunch with me.' She gave me a lovely belt she had bought and said, 'I've got bad news. Grierson has discovered that you are pregnant and says we won't have a pregnant cameraman. So I can't have you on the job.'"

The wartime receptivity of the film industry to women proved to be short-lived. It had been, from the very beginning, contingent on the shortage of creative manpower — a result of the war effort. Like their sisters in the farm, mining and manufacturing sectors, the services of women in the film industry were no longer required once the war was over and the men returned. The well-concerted movement which effected the massive retreat of women into the home took its toll at the NFB. Whether through attrition or conscious policy (Crawley and Sally Macdonald disagreed on the point), the women who had occupied positions at the Board during the war were quietly replaced by men.

Brenda Longfellow works as an assistant film editor. She organized the film production workshop for the NFB's Studio D last fall.

Women in Gear

by Brenda Longfellow



● Susan Trow

The cold-war hysteria which plunged the NFB into a series of crises at the end of the war (and which culminated in the removal of Grierson), changed the political climate at the Board. "People became cautious," noted Crawley, "afraid of innovation. The encouragement of women suffered as a result."

Crawley eventually hung up her camera altogether to become writer-producer at Crawley Films, later to be joined by Sally Macdonald who would work primarily as editor for the next 30 years. Women camera and sound technicians slowly disappeared from the film scene, creating a hiatus which continued until the early 1970s.

Behind the Man Behind the Camera

While female technicians may have endured an ephemeral existence, women have never been entirely absent from the film industry. They have always occupied certain positions: make-up, hair, wardrobe, administrative support — those support functions traditionally associated with women's work. These so-called 'women's ghettos' continue to provide for the largest concentrations of womenpower within the

Combined membership statistics from Association of Canadian Film Craftspersons (ACFC) (63 women out of a total membership of 205) and IATSE Technical (50 out of a total of 400) reveal that 60% of total female membership is concentrated in wardrobe and make-up with 27% fairly equally distributed among continuity, hair and set dressers.

Nor does the public sector appear any more amenable to facilitating the entry of women into non-traditional positions. The Equal Opportunity Study published by the NFB in 1978 noted that 59% of all women at the Board



● Mary Armstrong

film industry.

In the higher-paid, higher-profile technical positions which have a great deal to do with the nature of the final product — sound or camera operators — the number of women, while increased in the last five years, remains minimal.

International Association of Theater and Screen Employees (IATSE) 647 has four women camera operators and assistants out of a total membership of 200. The Canadian Association of Motion Picture and Electronic Recording Artists (CAMERA) maintains a slightly better showing with 10 women out of a total of 100. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has no female camera persons on staff, out of a total of 70 cameramen and the NFB has two out of 13. Female sound recordists are an even rarer breed, the Canadian Film Sound Society reporting only eight out of 60.

The Feminine Mystique

But if the numbers are insignificant, the challenge posed by the group of women who have crossed the frontier of 'no women allowed' is not. There is something subversive about the image of a woman confidently operating a camera or adjusting levels on a Nagra.

were employed in administrative, clerical and secretarial positions. Only 19.6% of female employees were engaged in production as compared to 34% of men, and of these only 6.6% were employed as technicians as compared to 26.5% of men.

Job category breakdowns at the CBC reveal a similar pattern with 69% of all female employees concentrated in administrative support categories; 30% are involved in production (of the latter, 43% are engaged as production assistants); and only 6% of total female employees are involved in technical positions as compared to 43% of men.

Like female rock bands, the effect is uncanny and exciting. Which is not to say that changing the gender behind the equipment automatically ushers in a feminist vision of filmmaking. Obviously, the latter demands the development of a women-identified consciousness and a work environment in which women have the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process.

The emergence of a new generation of women sound and camera operators, however, does provide a critical element in the evolution of woman's film practice. All too often, one tends to define the latter in terms of women directors or of particular subject matter, ignoring the fact that the majority of directors are dependent on a knowledge of technique developed over the last 90 years in the context of an institution dominated by male perceptions and visions. The increasing mastery of technique by women working in conjunction with directors open to creative interchange and innovation would, indeed, constitute a very real potential for the future.

Coming from backgrounds as varied as medieval studies, English literature, still photography or teaching emotionally disturbed children, today's women sound recordists, camera operators and assistants may be seen as the just descendents of the NFB pioneers under Grierson. While largely concentrated in independent documentary production which, in the majority of cases, provided the point of entry and the training ground, some have succeeded in crossing the more resistant barriers of the feature film industry and several have established their own production companies. Stationed on the front line of production, with a collective experience that runs the gamut of Dracula documentaries in Bucharest to television reportage of the Middle East War, they are proving on a daily, practical basis the fallacy of myths that a woman can't: that she is physically too weak, or that the technical mastery required is beyond her grasp.

With reference to the 'physically weak' argument (and apart from the fact that the development of lightweight equipment is undermining its legitimacy), all of the women interviewed were engaged in some regular physical regime as a means of developing the muscle structure required for their work. Zoe Dirse, assistant camera at the NFB remarked, "The thing is knowing your limits." She tells the story of being challenged to lift a 90 lb. camera by a fellow student in a course given by the Canadian Society of Cinematographers (CSC). She refused and suggested the challenger attempt it. "Of course," she adds wryly, "he couldn't."

Women have historically been isolated from technology by a sexual division of labour and a socialization process which discourages women from gaining a familiarity with machines. Not surprisingly, many of the women interviewed admitted to certain inhibitions in confronting the technology of filmmaking. Said Dirse,

"I grew up on a farm and had been around tractors but I was always more directed into the kitchen and garden with my mother. So when I got to the point of putting a camera together, I didn't know what all the screws and bolts were and all the tools you have to use. And there were guys who knew this stuff. From taking woodwork and machine shop."

Photos: National Film Board

Susan Trow, camera operator at the NFB adds,

"I have had to confront my own fear of technical things and I still do from time to time. I'll pick up a piece of equipment and say, 'This is mindboggling.' But I've grown up with that kind of conditioning. Now I'm fascinated by technical things. It's just a question of getting over that intimidation."

In any event, an absorption with technology was never the single most important factor inspiring the movement of women into technical positions. More often, the reasons cited were that working in sound or camera provided financial security and a means of realizing social and creative ambitions. As Aerlyn Wiseman, sound recordist, explains,

"I'm not a techy. I don't spend hours playing with my equipment. I keep it in shape and do what I have to. But that's never been the most absorbing thing about filmmaking for me. I wanted to go out in the real world and deal with people. Sound was a way of doing that. It's only a vehicle."

Breaking In

"Women feel they have to work harder at it. There's this feeling, 'I've got to be better than he is in order to be accepted, in order to make it.' There's this drive to show them that we can do it too."

— Susan Trow

Most of the women arrived in filmmaking by a number of circuitous routes, having already embarked on one career or other. Zoe Dirse, for example, was engaged on a film for emotionally disturbed children because she had worked in the field for two years. Aerlyn Wiseman wrangled her way into a job as sound recordist with a student documentary crew, having never been introduced to a Nagra before:

"I needed the money. I was trying to work my way through medieval studies at the University of Illinois and I heard of this job paying \$2.50 an hour which was more than you could make waitressing. They asked me if I knew how to record and I lied. But I learned very rapidly where to plug the mike in, what a crystal generator was and how to turn the machine off and on. I just proceeded from there."

While a number of the women had attended college, university or CSC courses, the majority started by experimenting with the machinery on their own and then set out to gain experience in the 'real world'. A difficult prospect, it seems.

Getting the first break is a major obstacle for anyone trying to work in the film industry, but for women who, for the most part, are denied access to the informal mentor system — the old boys' network which brings in and grooms new technicians — the obstacles are doubly difficult. With the exception of Studio D (the women's studio at the NFB), which has endeavoured to promote women technicians and with which both Trow and Joan Hutton, assistant camera, credited getting their starts, the majority of women relied on their own considerable resources. Take Deborah Parks, assistant camera, for example.

"I had done a lot of sewing in high school, so I set up a Barney-making business (a Barney is the cloth coat used over a camera to muffle noise).

I'd phone up cameramen. 'Hello. I'm an assistant but I make barneys.' They'd drop their equipment at my place and I'd meet them. I built up quite a rapport and they started thinking of me when they needed an assistant."

Or Carol Betts, camera operator:

"I was teaching English at college and realized this wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So I went out and bought a Bolex, and some short ends and started doing local stories for TV news on spec: covering events and bringing the film in. I learned how to react quickly. Just picking up the camera and doing it allowed me the freedom to do what I wanted and to experiment."



● Petra Valier

If starting is one thing, getting hired is quite another. People in positions of hiring — usually male producers and directors — tend to hire male technicians who have had the advantage of being similarly favoured by other male directors and producers. For women, this creates a kind of double bind situation as Deborah Parks explains. "The excuse is usually that women are not experienced enough. But how can I get the experience if I'm never given a chance? I'll never have the confidence to shoot 'til I do it."

Breaking into the charmed circle poses problems for women who must overcome the reservations of directors and producers for whom a woman technician is often an unknown or dangerous element. Many, indeed, are reluctant about hiring women, particularly for location shoots, fearing the questionable 'propriety' of being isolated with a strange woman.

Zoe Dirse relates the story of being refused a job by a director who felt she couldn't handle the travel to exotic places, all of which she had already visited.

"I later ended up working with this same director, and he regretted not having hired me before. It was funny, he had to meet me to realize I could have done the job. His official reaction was just to say 'no' based on the fact that I was a woman. Seeing that I was capable and competent — I was probably the first woman technician he had worked with — was kind of an education for him."

The problem of gaining acceptance, however, does not stop short of being engaged by a director or producer. There is the whole delicate area of establishing a working relationship with film crews, which have traditionally functioned on a dynamic of male camaraderie and which, naturally, have a certain interest in preserving the territory.

"Anyone new," says Wiseman, "is subjected to the 'checkout', but for women it's different. There are a lot more preconceptions."

"You've got to prove yourself more if you're a woman because people are watching for it," adds Dirse:

"At first, there are always people around trying to help you carry and you just don't do that. They wouldn't do it for a man and it's not their job. They have to learn too. That's the first thing someone will turn around and point their finger at. Oh, she can't do the job. We won't hire her."

Defining a new working relationship is, however, a two-way process, and it's not only the male crew members who have had to make the social adjustments demanded by the entry of women into



● Debra Parks

the field. Women, as well, have had to make certain psychological accommodations, as Trow points out,

"I've had to do some adjusting myself to being in a position of authority. It's role reversal for women. I've often wondered how does this man feel about being my assistant. But I've never felt resentment."

Changing the Balance

There is every evidence that a new dynamic is evolving as women attain a certain visibility and prove the potential of their contribution. Ingrid G. Cusiell, sound recordist, points out that many directors "are now discovering that women bring something special to a film." "Especially on a feature film," adds Dirse, "if you have five men on the camera crew then a woman can bring a really nice balance."

John Walker, director, who has just completed a documentary on artist Georgia O'Keefe with Wiseman on sound and Parks as camera assistant commented that:

"Too often we neglect the emotional, passionate side of filmmaking. Filmmaking is not just a technical medium, particularly with social documentaries. It's dealing with human beings, relating to the subject you are filming. Women can make that contribution. They aren't afraid of expressing their feelings. I find I get a lot more valuable input on a film from a mixed crew."

One particularly encouraging sign is the increasing collaboration between women technicians and women directors with films such as *P4W*. Janis Cole and Holly Dale's splendid documentary on the Kingston Prison for Women. Aerlyn Wiseman, who recorded sound with Nesya Shapiro on camera, insisted the all-women crew was instrumental in producing the final quality of the film:

"My God! people say, 'how did you

get people to talk to you?' It meant developing a good trusting rapport, making those ladies feel comfortable. And that involved all of us. We all contributed."

Future Predictions

"I can't understand why there aren't more women. Being a technician is the most fantastic thing..."

— Joan Hutton

What about the future? Is the current revival of women technicians again an ephemeral phenomenon? Most of the women interviewed claimed they did not see many encouraging signs among younger groups of women of a pronounced desire to enter the field.

"It would be marvelous to work with other women," says Ingrid G. Cusiell.

"But there aren't that many. It's a hard and lonely job. There's so much demand to build a reputation and that takes years as a technician. And there's the investment you have to make in the equipment which gets very restrictive."

"There's also the emotional and lifestyle demands," adds Wiseman, for whom a traditional family scene "is simply not in the cards."

"Certainly I've thought of having children," adds Trow, "but the system really forces you to make a choice and that's frustrating because men can always have both. Women in this kind of work simply don't have the support systems that would make it possible."

While enrollment of women in film production courses has in fact increased, the numbers are still far from encouraging. York University, for example, had only three women graduating in 1981 as compared to 11 men; Concordia had one as compared to 13 men; Ryerson 19 out of 87 and Sheridan College 13 out of 28. Of these, the overwhelming majority tended to secure employment in media-related industries as writers or producers.

Why the continued under-representation of women in technical positions? Can the responsibility be laid at the doors of the film schools? "Not really," says Marjorie Morton, director of production at Concordia.

"Women themselves are making those decisions. Women tend to see film as an expressive medium and, as a result, opt more for studio courses — experimental filmmaking or animation. More often than not, they tend to get alienated by the egos and personality politics of large crews and prefer working on their own."

Obviously enhancing the development of women technicians would demand the increased commitment of all sectors of the film industry — schools, unions, public and private institutions. A difficult prospect given the current climate of economic restraint and unemployment. One possible solution might lie in the development of apprenticeship programs specifically geared to meeting the needs and interests of women, programs like the month-long Film Production Workshop organized at Studio D last Fall which proved to be enormously successful.

For there is a need. "And for women prepared to meet the challenge," says Cusiell,

"the doors are open. Women always have to be better but if they are knowledgeable there is a place. And it's proven that women can do the job."