



ANNE-CLAIRE POIRIER

Laurinda Hartt

en tant que femmes

Anne-Claire Poirier (right) with her mother



In 1970 an exciting possibility began evolving in the minds of certain employees of L'Office National du Film in Montreal. The employees were women; the basic idea was the creation of a special program devoted to filling a pressing need for films conceived and executed by, for, about, and with the co-operation of women. The previous year had already seen the establishment of Société Nouvelle, the French-language counterpart of the English-language program Challenge for Change which had gotten underway in the mid 1960's with Tanya Ballantyne's *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) and Colin Low's landmark series of films on Fogo Island produced in co-operation with Newfoundland's Memorial University Extension Service.

Officially described as "an experimental program established by the Government of Canada as a participation between the National Film Board of Canada and certain federal government agencies", Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle is a program "designed to improve communications, create greater understanding, promote new ideas and provoke social change" (from Access, the English-language Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle newsletter). Thus described, Société Nouvelle seemed to provide a most appropriate framework within which the women could work together to reach the women of Québec and help foster a sense of identity, an understanding of themselves as individuals and as active members of the society around them.

March 1971 saw the first concrete manifestation of this special women's program when the initial plan was presented to the Board. Approval was attained, due at least in part to the timeliness of the submission: the rights of women as distinct individuals was not only becoming a *cause célèbre* but the government-appointed Commission on the Status of Women in Canada had legitimized the cause with a public presentation of its recommendations. By September, the already forming

group of Film Board women had completed extensive research (which had combined the analysis of statistics and available literature on women with a series of intensive personal discussions with groups of women representatives of a wide variety of ages, occupations and social surroundings) and submitted a lengthy and detailed report. It was this research that revealed the original plan of producing a one-hour in-depth film about women to be impossible and impractical — so much that needed to be expressed would go unexpressed and unexplored in anything less than a series of films.

The end result was the program *En tant que femmes*, consisting of the production of a series of six films, which had commenced by 1972 under the guidance of NFB producer-director Anne-Claire Poirier. Ms. Poirier had been a prime mover behind the project since its inception and had undertaken the ground-breaking basic research, along with Jeanne Boucher Morazain who was to direct one of the films in the subsequent series. (See box for a list of films and their makers.)

Although officially designated the program's producer, the imposing Ms. Poirier stresses the strong sense of teamwork manifested by all the women participating in the production of the series, and feels it is misleading that her contribution be singled out as being any more important than that of any other member. Nevertheless, it has been said that the women's program would never have materialized had it not been for her work in initiating the project and then in keeping it alive and productive during its past two and a half years of existence. Four films have been completed and aired on Radio-Canada. The fifth film has just been finished and a sixth is in preparation.

Three basic objectives have motivated the work within the *En tant que femmes* program: 1) to end the psychological isolation of women by helping them to identify themselves

first as women, then as members of a group sharing similar characteristics, and to look upon other women as potential friends and allies rather than as competitors; 2) to encourage a process of self-awareness and acceptance of one's individuality through a critical reappraisal and redefinition of self in terms of personal interests rather than solely in relation to a man or family; 3) to develop a social awareness within women so that once they have rediscovered themselves as individuals, they will assume their crucial role in redefining and reshaping a society that has made the lives of both men and women difficult by defining their existence primarily in terms of biological differences.

Just how effective *En tant que femmes* will prove to be in achieving such objectives now remains to be seen as the public is given access to the films. So far the results having been most heartening: the first four films have been aired on Radio-Canada to a response characterized by the Board's newsletter *Pot Pourri* as "overwhelmingly positive."

Anne-Claire Poirier joined the National Film Board in 1960 after having studied law (at the University of Montréal) and theatre (at the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de la province le Québec) and after a brief career as a writer and interviewer for Radio-Canada. She worked as a film editor, most notably on Clément Perron's *Jour Après Jour* (Day After Day), a near-abstract documentary film, striking and powerful in its use of editing and asynchronous sound (including a rhythmic narration read by Ms. Poirier) to evoke the reality of life as a

quite a few years I took it for a fault of mine that I was dealing with things that didn't seem interesting to those to whom I was proposing a subject with a view that was different from the other films being proposed and made.

"I was constantly being told I was emotional or irrational. I tried not to be and had a lot of trouble not to be so (laughs), until the day when together we decided, OK, we *are* emotional. . . . That's the way we perceive things and deal with things. Why should we continue to be ashamed of it? Maybe it's *not* a fault. So we said, 'Let's try to work *our* way.' And I think that's what turned out to be the greatest aspect of the adventure: we worked in a world we knew, realizing very fast that being with women and saying the things we were feeling, we were very close to each other without knowing it — very profoundly similar.

"I remember that we had discussions that disturbed a lot of people when we said that very often we felt closer to a woman Anglophone than a man Francophone. This was regarded as a kind of *trahison* in relation to another aspect of our reality which was to the people of Québec. But I'm sure that none of us did betray anything or betray ourselves or our reality as Québécoises. It may sound exaggerated, but it's not."

Gaining official approval for the project from the Board's predominantly male management was not easy but "not too difficult" either "because we arrived at the right time with the right kind of proposal, putting them in a position where they couldn't say no" without seeming unduly unreasonable. Per-

Mireille Dansereau



factory worker and to provoke a powerful emotional response in the viewer. Then in 1961 Anne-Claire became one of the Board's few women directors. It was a question of being in the right place at the right time: producer Jacques Bobet who had already made two films on women had revealed what Anne-Claire terms "a very feminist approach" was not only not against having women working in film production but "very open to it and almost looking for one, so I guess that I happened to be the one that arrived at the right time." (laughs)

With Bobet producing, she directed four films: *Nomades de l'ouest* (Stampede) with co-director Claude Fournier in 1961; *30 Minutes, Mr. Plummer* (1962); *La Fin des étés* (1964); and *Les Ludions* (1965). Guy L. Côté produced her next film, her first feature-length film, *De mère en fille* (1968). As producer-director she was responsible for two series of short films, *Impôt et tout . . . et tout* (1968) and *Le savoir-faire s'impose*, (1971) for the Department of National Revenue. It was from her experiences as one of the only active women producer-directors on the Film Board staff that the impetus for the *En tant que femmes* program first emerged. "I realized myself the problems I had making films here. . . . It took awhile because at first I was constantly blaming myself for the projects I was proposing, feeling that I was the one that was wrong. But evidently the projects I was bringing in were not being perceived in a way that women would have perceived them. Because I am a woman, I see things in a certain way. So for



Scene from "J'me marie, j'me marie pas"

son-to-person contact with Québec women during basic research was an attempt "to go a little deeper into the reality of the lives the women were leading" states Ms. Poirier, something she felt was necessary in order to gain a clear, realistic understanding of the nature of their existence, an understanding not attained by pouring over factual statistics and written materials alone.

As the research progressed, the aims of the projected program came into clearer focus: to explain something about life as a woman and to request things (legal changes, etc.) for women would be to say things that almost everyone knew already. "They are things that are important to be said, but I felt more and more that what needed to be done was for women to *do* things their way and speak about themselves *their* way. So we came back to the Film Board with a report . . . and asked that a series of films be made by women, researched by women, and including as many women as possible on the production crew as well as training some to eventually become technically capable on a professional level. At the beginning they (Board officials) thought it would be something like a "first movie" — cheap budget and with girls who would try to make films. That's why as producer I tried — and succeeded, I think — to keep the professional standard up to what is usually done at the Board, and avoid having such a qualification put on the series. That's why once the idea was accepted, I went to Aimée Danis and Mireille Dansereau, two women I knew in private industry in Montréal who were



Micheline Lanctôt and Luce Guilbeault

experienced filmmakers.”

Everyone expected frequent clashes of temperament amongst the women of the *En tant que femme* production group, but in fact they worked very closely and harmoniously together; united by a common belief in what they were doing; the women laughed, had fun and truly worked together as a co-operative unit to help one another make the best films possible. Their way of working and their love and respect for one another influenced the people around them; they were told that they had given a new sense to documentaries because of their faith in what they were doing. Nicole Chamson, administrator on the five completed films, told Anne-Claire that these were the best organized, the least sloppy and the most punctual productions with which she has been involved at the Board. Anne-Claire attributes this degree of organization to a basic desire to prove themselves fully capable of producing quality work without being told they were wasting time and money. She says that the Société Nouvelle, as a whole, used to work with the same high degree of commitment but feels it is palling now perhaps because the program has grown too large to sustain the same cohesiveness. Nevertheless, she adds, “In the last few years the Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle has given a new swing to the documentaries we’re making, even if Challenge for Change is very different from Société Nouvelle.” She feels that the films made by each sector of the program are very different and has heard it said that the films of Société Nouvelle “films like *our* films”, are “too much like *films* and less tools of social intervention. I disagree – I don’t believe that because a film is good it is less effective as a means of social intervention.” For her, the more professionally executed a film, the more effective it is as an instrument of influence and change.

The women of *En tant que femmes* hope to continue their work beyond the completion of the final film of the present series. The danger now is the “you’ve had your candy” syndrome which would signal a return to things as they were at the Board before the formation of the women’s group, and this “would not be normal” says Anne-Claire. Until the women’s program, the Board didn’t let women enter film on a highly professional technical level. “But through fact and reality, we proved that women *were* capable of doing professional work in technical capacities. . . . Now they *know* this in the camera department because it’s been done; now they *know* it in the sound department because we brought the second woman into that department. The barriers that were there were only in people’s heads.”

Because the general NFB budget is “already too tight for those already here” and because the women “don’t expect change in the institution proper”, they have applied for a “B budget” (one set aside for special projects) of \$500,000 a year for a five-year project combining French and English-language sectors in the formation of a special women’s unit. Although the decision has not been announced, the women seem guardedly optimistic in light of the success of the *En tant que*

femmes program and the advent of International Women’s Year in 1975 (and the need for women’s films to represent Canada during that year).

“We insisted on the B budget because we didn’t want to take the money away from our brothers. The difference that has to be filled is so great that it can’t be done unless a special project is set up. Otherwise it would take years before women would be capable of getting into the profession and not be alone to be treated as ‘special cases’, a situation very wrong for any human being – it’s not better if they insist she’s a woman more than a filmmaker. While working with each other amongst ourselves, we were much more at ease, feeling that we could say what we wanted to say with much less pressure on proving our capacities, qualities and talents.”

A man at the Board once told Anne-Claire that if they received the requested B budget, it would be extraordinary – ‘You’ll have \$500,000 to speak about yourselves. How lucky you are,’ he said. Anne-Claire Poirier replied: “But you have two million a year to do the same thing. Why haven’t you started yet? It’s a choice they (the men) have made, to talk about others in their films. But”, adds Anne-Claire, “there’s nothing that stops them from changing it.” ●

The films:

A qui appartient ce cage? – a film that goes beyond an analysis of children’s day care centres to reflect on the child and the nature of the adults’ commitment to that child. (16mm colour, 56 mins. 40 secs.)

A film by Jeanne Morazain, Susan Gibbard, Marthe Blackburn, Francine Saia, Clorinda Warny. Photography by Jacques Fogel and Thomas Vamos, with assistants Michel Caron and Susan Gabori. Edited by Marthe de la Chevrotière. Produced by Anne-Claire Poirier.

Les Filles du roy – in the form of a love letter, this film represents a quest for the identity of the Québec woman. (16mm colour, 56 mins. 40 secs.)

A film by Anne-Claire Poirier. Scenario by Marthe Blackburn with Jeanne Morazain and Anne-Claire Poirier. Photography by Georges Dufaux, assisted by Susan Gabori. Animation by Jean Bédard. Editing assistance by Suzanne Allard. Produced by Anne-Claire Poirier.

J’mé marie, j’mé marie pas – a film about four women who make four different, conscious choices about their lives. (16mm colour, 81 mins. 18 secs.)

A film by Mireille Dansereau. Assistant direction by Hélène Girard. Photography by Benoît Rivard, assisted by Robert Karstens. Animation by Jean Bédard-Vartkes Cholskian. Edited by Claire Boyer. Produced by Anne-Claire Poirier. The women: Francine Larrivière, artist; Linda Gaboriau, journalist; Jocelyne Lepage, translator; Tanya Mackay, filmmaker.

Souris, tu m’inquiètes – a film that combines drama and nonfiction to express the daily life of a woman of Québec. (16mm colour, 56 mins. 40 secs.)

A film by Aimée Danis. Assistant direction by Francine Gagné. Scenario by Aimée Danis. Photography by Daniel Fournier, assisted by Jacques Tougas. Edited by Claire Boyer. Produced by Anne-Claire Poirier and Jean-Marc Garand. With a cast including Micheline Lanctôt, Luc Durand, Olivette Thibault, Luce Guilbeault, Yves Létourneau.

The fifth film, *Les jeunes filles* (tentatively titled) will present a multiple portrait of today’s young woman by going beyond the image projected by the world of fashion, advertising and beauty contests. The sixth and final film of the series is presently underway.

The women involved in *En tant que femmes* production:

Jeanne Boucher Morazain, Susan Gibbard, Françoise Berd, Madeleine Savoie, Michèle Saumier, Thérèse Lindsay, Aimée Danis, Mireille Dansereau, Janine Careau, Hélène Girard, Francine Saia, Anne-Claire Poirier, Susan Gabori, Nicole Chamson, Jeanne Lapointe, Maria Nicoloff, Marthe Blackburn, Clorinda Warny, Claire Boyer, Mona Josée Gagnon, Francine Desbiens, Suzanne Gervais, Vivianne Elnécavé, Francine Gagné, Marthe de la Chevrotière, Andrée Thibault, Adèle Lauzon, Monique Larocque.