

INTRODUCING...

halya kushmij

the hollywood experience

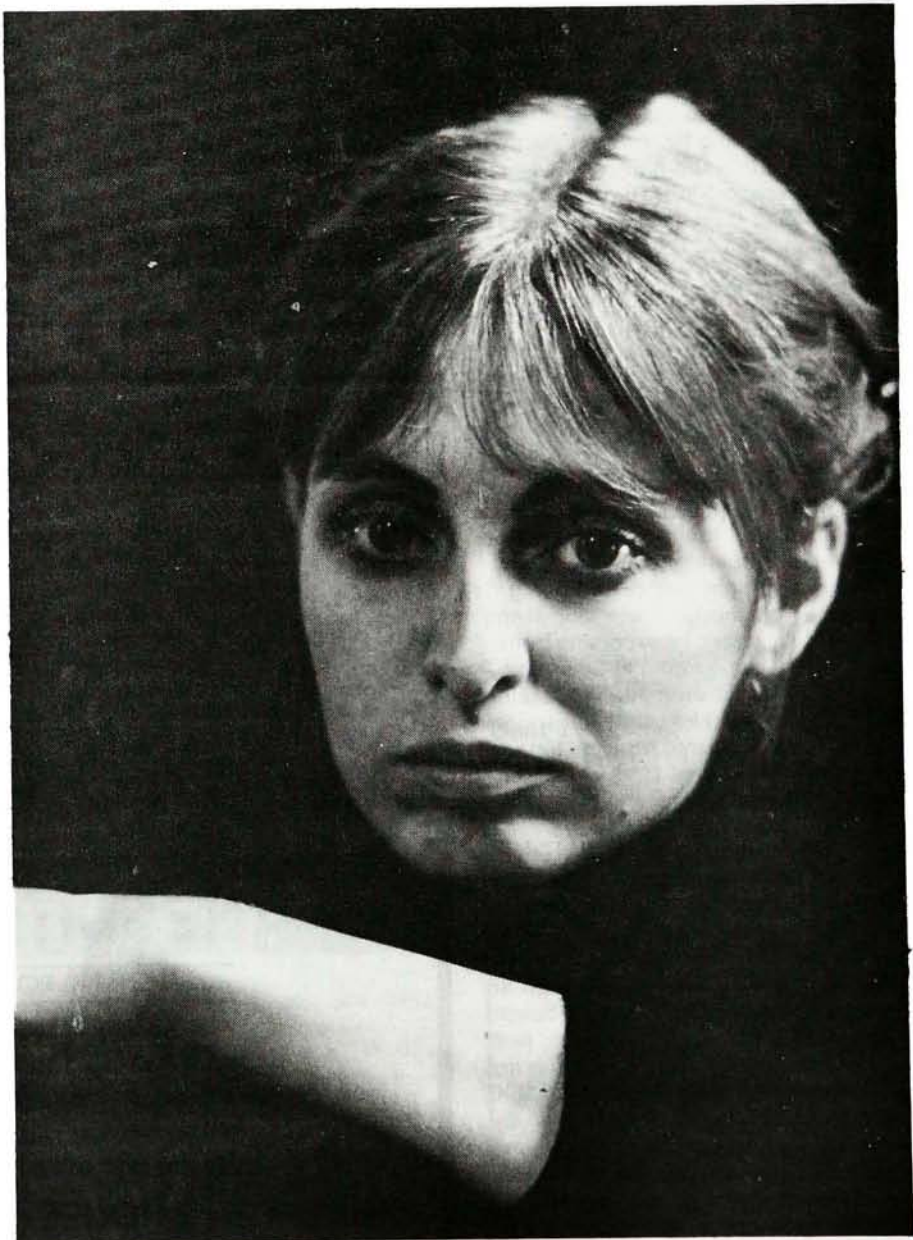
"When I'm making a film nothing else exists: that suspension of time and space is what I love about it."

Upon meeting Halya Kushmij one is immediately struck by her vivacious personality and lucid sense of self-preservation — important characteristics for an ambitious young filmmaker. She is a remarkable young woman, unequivocally dedicated to her profession.

Halya's fascination for film began at a young age. — her laconic analogy for this fascination, "Movies were a lover, not a husband." After getting a degree in English at the University of Toronto and picking up random courses in film theory and criticism, she made her first Super 8 in her final year and was inspired for life.

After numerous, diversified free-lance assignments, Halya entered the film program at York University in 1974. In this specialized two-year study of film, she distinguished herself as one of their most talented filmmakers. But the making of her award-winning film **Streetcar** — a love story set in the Unity Grill (a Ukrainian restaurant) on Queen Street— was not easy, as Halya recalls. "My crew deserted me. Nobody cares about it as much as you do. You love it like a child. Your crew doesn't have as much invested emotionally." Only sheer determination and a belief in **Streetcar** enabled her to complete the film.

A subsequent meeting with Roman Kroitor, an executive producer of drama at the National Film Board, was timely. "I went to see him because I admired his work and knew he was important. I thought he would be receptive and sympathetic to my work, as his film **Paul Tomkowicz - Railway Switchman** has many things in common with **Streetcar**. I figured that if you're going to go to the NFB you don't go there looking for an assistant directing job, or to work in distribution, but to apprentice in directing. If you get in, all the power to you. I really believe nothing



Halya Kushmij, believing that "...nothing is impossible," is out to prove it
(photo: Gary Wagner)

is impossible."

Her proposal to do a film on Jacob Maydanyk, a Ukrainian-Canadian cartoonist and satirist, was well-received. She was given a \$60,000 budget to make the film, and Roman Kroitor became her mentor. This marked the beginning of her involvement with the NFB. "I found the NFB to be tremendously supportive in every way. Nobody was trying to push anything down my throat. They were just helping me to realize my dream in the film. I was very lucky. They gave me my break and believed in me."

Halya simultaneously received a Canada Council grant to write a feature script and began her second film, **The Strongest Man in the World** — a half-hour documentary on Michael Swystun, a 78-year-old Ukrainian-Canadian from Olha, Manitoba, who was the strong man with Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1923, and who has since led an extraordinarily eccentric life. Forming her own production company she had the film certified and managed to raise \$30,000 through private investors. (She hopes to distribute both films in Canada and the States.)

In September of '78 all Halya's work in Canada was temporarily halted when The American Film Institute (A.F.I.) in Los Angeles accepted her into their fellowship directing program; a privileged position considering she was the third person and the first woman to be accepted from Canada.

The AFI was an unforgettable experience both in terms of her personal and professional life; the environment was foreign and competition grueling. "I went to Hollywood right out of Winnipeg. I didn't know anybody. It was like diving into cold deep water. I was coming from a documentary background at that point, I had no training in dramatic filmmaking and had never worked with professional actors. I was thrown into a milieu that was very commercial, very Hollywood. The AFI is Hollywood's baby; the people accepted are the crème de la crème."

The AFI environment was high-pressured with only three to five days to shoot and three days to edit the videotape, — videotape was used instead of film because it is inexpensive and expedient. Actors were easily obtained through an agreement between the AFI and the Screen Actors Guild. "You get to work with professional actors because the tapes are non-commercial. Since there are 35,000 unemployed actors in L.A. all of them are desperate and eager," Halya comments.

Her first tape was disastrous, the second, **Forever**, was a great improvement. "My first tape had a lot of soul but no frame; the second had the frame but no soul. It tried to compensate and fit into

their taste. You should never do that. **Forever** just didn't have a heart." **Women in the Room**, her third and final tape, dealing with euthanasia (about a woman who is dying of cancer and her son, who helps her to die with dignity), was a huge success, winning her the respect of her colleagues and staff. "I'm a Taurus, very strong-willed, and there is no way anyone is going to drive me out. I don't give up easily. That's what did it. I couldn't leave and face failure. I felt I had to stay and

combat my fears, because I would never be able to return to Hollywood otherwise: my pride wouldn't allow me to." The success of **Women in the Room**, has opened up many future possibilities.

After hopefully completing **The Strongest Man In The World** by December, and **Jacob Maydanyk** by June Halya's future plan is to apprentice as a director on a Hollywood feature, and finally, direct her own feature film.

Wendy Vincent

Filmography: Halya Kushmij

1979

The Woman In The Room (video/ B & W / 37 min. / Canada), director, writer, editor.

Forever (video / B & W / 35 min. / USA), director, writer, editor.

Jacob Maydanyk (16mm/colour/30 min./N.F.B./Canada), director, writer, editor.

1978

The Strongest Man In The World (16mm / colour / 30 min. / Canada), producer, director, writer, editor.

1977

Streetcar (16mm / colour / 17 min. / Canada), producer, director, writer.

Snow-Maiden (16mm/B&W/10 min. / Canada), producer, director, writer, editor.

1976

The Pavlychenko Dancers (video/ B&W/26 min./Canada), producer, director, writer, editor.

1975

Tim Settimi: Mime (video/B&W/25 min./Canada), producer, director, writer, editor.

ricky friedman

the road to repertory

As a kid, Ricky Friedman used to see serial films on Friday nights. A relative of his was connected with Columbia Pictures of Canada, therefore first-run 16mm films were available, and screenings took place at one house or another.

Ricky saw men who fell off a cliff only to be saved by a branch. But his memories of

these films are vague. The first film he really remembers is **The Graduate**, which he saw four times.

He was in school then, at McGill studying psychology, biochemistry — all sciences. They didn't have film courses. As Ricky had nothing to do during the day, he started to go to movies. "I wasn't

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