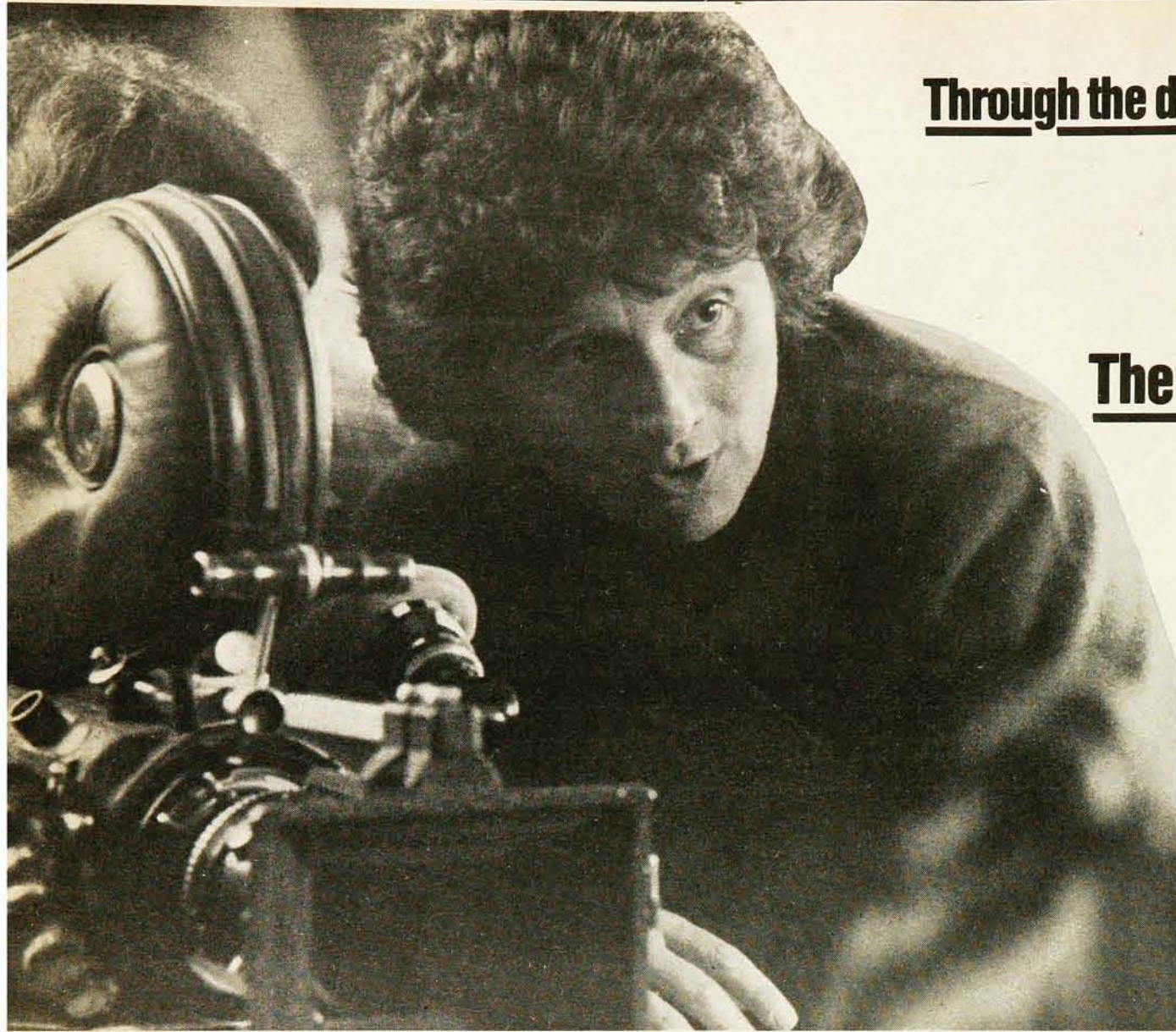


Through the directorial gender gap

The uncompromising

**Danièle
Suissa**



by Donald Martin

She was born in Casablanca forty-three years ago. She is fluent in five languages. She began her career as a stage manager at Paris' famed Palais Royale, and she lists among her friends and colleagues such names as Jeanne Moreau and Yves St-Laurent. Since coming to Canada in 1969 she has become one of Montreal's most prolific commercial directors for television and is president of the Montreal-based production company 3 Thèmes Inc. Her stage plays have been presented at The National Arts Centre and her forays into television drama include directing for the CBC series *Judge* and the *For The Record* feature *The Gender Gap*. Danièle J. Suissa is also well-known for being "a very difficult lady to work with."

It's a label this feisty director almost carries with pride. "I have that reputation," she states, the Parisian accent unmistakable, "because there are certain rules I don't like and I don't play. I will not compromise on the quality of what I'm doing nor will I compromise on the ethics of the way I am going to do it. I don't beat around the bush. The corporate game has a ring of hypocrisy to it - and I won't play it. It is a problem for

many women. If a man did all the things I do now, I really don't think he'd be called difficult. I have seen some men be much more demanding than I am. But if I want a shot a certain way and I know it can be done, they'll have to really convince me otherwise before I give up. I don't mind taking 'no' for an answer if I can be convinced there is a better way."

A Canadian citizen since 1976, Suissa brings a distinct European flavour to all her work, be it in French or English. Since 1974 she has directed over 250 commercials, promoting such products as Clorox, Dunkin' Donuts, Betty Crocker, and Bell Canada.

"The similarity in anything I do is the actor," Suissa explains, "because that is where my main interest lies - telling a story through characters. And that's just as true in a commercial as in a television drama. Commercials can be like short stories, especially since mine are often 'slice of life' commercials. The difference between the two is that with a film I'm more my own master. I don't have to turn to anyone, to a client or an agency, and seek their approval. With films I have no one to please but myself. When I first embarked on drama I was still turning around at first to seek the client's approval. Drama felt a bit lonely for a while, as a result. Directing is a lonely spot."

She admits that she very much enjoys the commercial work because "it's the best way to do what ballet dancers and singers do - exercise all year long. Directors don't do that sort of thing. We're so

lazy. When we do commercials it's like doing your exercises at the bar. And commercials usually let you try every new thing. A new film-stock comes out - it's tried on a commercial. A new camera - it's tried on a commercial. You're always on top of the technique when you do commercials."

Suissa has found that filmmaking in Canada is quite a different creature from making movies in France. It's more of a business here than a way of life and the director's role is much more isolated. That's why she describes the director's position as often a rather lonely one. "We make films in Europe the way gypsies dance," she says, "We eat together, we live together for about two and a half months. In the Anglo-Saxon way of filmmaking it is first and foremost a job. There is a hierarchy."

She took the leap into television drama thanks to the Directors' Training Course, sponsored by the CBC, to give directors from other media a chance to work with the multiple-camera approach. She was selected as one of the four Canadian directors to take the six-week course in Toronto, focusing on theory in the morning and putting it to practice in the afternoon. The result? The series *Judge*, now in its second season. Rumours abound that the show will carry on to a third season, and that suits Suissa just fine.

"I very much enjoyed that course," she recalls, having graduated from it two years ago, "Herb Rolland suggested that a series should follow the program so that it would really amount to some-

thing - so we four directors started to work on *Judge*. For me, television is a fascinating medium. It fuses everything I love as a stage director, but has the added dimension of the beauty of a close-up, the beauty of a well-framed image. The only thing that bothers me about television is that it is treated as 'the cheap medium' - so a lot of compromises are requested, and expected, a lot of the time. I don't think it should be like that. I think television could be a very exciting medium if it just wasn't considered the poor cousin of the arts."

But the stage still holds a special magic for her because of its extended rehearsal time and the small numbers of people that stand between the director and the play.

The Gender Gap, slated to air on CBC in February as the first of this year's acclaimed *For The Record* dramas, stars Toronto's Kate Trotter as a female executive who struggles to make it up the corporate ladder (as vice-president) but has to fight to stay there. The idea for the film came from the Bendix Corporation scandal in the United States a few years ago. The theory? A woman's place is just not safe in the corporate world. Trotter, primarily a stage actress and the recent winner of Toronto's Dora Mavor Moore Award for her performance in *Translations* at Toronto Free Theatre, marks her television debut with *The Gender Gap*.

The underlying theme of feminism is no accident for Suissa. She has experienced the same struggle in the world of television. "I'm sure there are many

Donald Martin is a Toronto writer who writes frequently for *Maclean's* and *TV Guide*. His screenplay *Survival* is being produced for television.

similarities between a director and the vice-president of a corporation," she explains, "because the responsibilities are similar. I suppose the loneliness is the same. I suppose the difficulty of dialogue is the same. Kate, the character, had to know *more* about many things than a lot of the men because she had to prove herself. It has been true for me as a director - I have to know more, technically, than many male directors because I have to prove myself. Of course, it is always helpful to know a bit of everything, but a good director is a motivator. As long as you can motivate your cameraman or your sound man toward one collective objective for a film then you don't necessarily have to know exactly how he is going to do it. But very often a woman will be put on trial - tested. I have had that with almost every crew I have worked with. I've been put against very silly, basic, technical tests and I *have* to know the answers!"

"This is what *The Gender Gap* is all about," she continues, " - a woman has to know everything first-hand. She's not used to team-work. Men know the meaning of team-work and they are used to doing just one part of something, then link into the rest. When a woman comes in and attempts to find out how everything works she starts to antagonize everyone. We don't share a common language."

The French flavour of her craft comes out in the visuals and in the design of *The Gender Gap*. She chuckles as she points out that there is only one pair of jeans in the whole film - and that's only when the characters are actually in the country. "This is a film about people in Toronto," she stresses, "so obviously I

cannot give them more Latin behaviour, but my main objective with the picture was to give it a maturity. In North America I feel people are often afraid to be adults. An exception to that is *Ordinary People* or *Kramer vs. Kramer*, films about adults daring to be adults. But with *Star Wars* and the like, there are no adults. And in North America I think we have a tendency to over-write... the reason for that is because we don't play the subtext. Conversation should only become an inevitability in a film. I'm very attached to the subtext. That's the kind of direction I try to achieve. I don't like scripts that are too wordy."

She doesn't like to waste time on set either - principal-photography on *The Gender Gap* was completed well before schedule.

After diving into drama, will it be difficult to go back to directing commercials? Not at all, she believes. "It can be as exciting to make a commercial as it is to make a feature film," she says.

"The only thing I don't like about commercials is that a lot of agency people are frustrated filmmakers. They don't think about the product they're selling; they just think about making their little 30 seconds better than the one the art director down the road made last week. They hope to get a prize with it. For me, I get my prize with a commercial when the client's business goes up as a result. I find that challenging - I love talking to clients, visiting their plants, and discussing the product."

She came to Canada to be close to her parents, who fell madly in love with Montreal during Expo '67. After the student riots which rocked Paris in '68 and sent the French film industry into a

prolonged state of confusion, the move across the Atlantic seemed intelligent. She has never looked back.

"I'm not at all sorry that I came to Canada," she says with pride, "but I am a bit sorry I came to Quebec. At one point in 1974 I had thought Quebec was *the* place to be - but after that it just went down and down. Now it's really the back-lot of Canada. It's not a very challenging place when you were raised in Paris. Therefore I don't know where I want my permanent base to be - but I definitely want to keep my career as open as possible. My company is called 3 Themes Inc. because I want to work in theatre, television, and film. I'd like to work everywhere - which is how I started. For a European director the ambition is always to reach an international market. Visconti was an Italian making 50 percent of his work in France. I would like to direct a film in Toronto, then one six months later in Paris... I want to have an open career."

Next on her hectic agenda is co-producing and directing a new series called *Of Love and Theatre* - like the highly successful *Masterpiece Theatre*, but with Canadian plays for both French and English television. For the series' debut, Suissa recently completed shooting the television adaptation of Monique Leyrac's one - woman show about Sarah Bernhardt, *La divine Sarah*.

Opiniated? Yes. Determined? Of course. But difficult? Not quite. Impressive seems to be a better adjective. Daniele J. Suissa seems to have walked over 'the gender gap' in this industry all by herself - and now, with the upcoming *The Gender Gap*, she just may show others the way.



● Actress Kate Trotter in *The Gender Gap*

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