



photo: John F. Phillips

● Genie-winning documentarists Cole and Dale: their prison film **P4W** was the most successful independent documentary ever made in Canada

Nightworld:

An interview with Janis Cole and Holly Dale

by John Harkness

From their documentary shorts *Cream Soda*, *Thin Line*, and *Minimum Charge*, *No Cover*, and features, *P4W: Prison for Women* and the just-released *Hookers On Davie*, one half expects Genie-winning documentarists Holly Dale and Janis Cole to be filmmakers who live on the street, dragging a battered Bolex in a shopping cart and snarling at anyone who enters their world uninvited. Instead, one meets a pair of thoughtfully articulate filmmakers who, with *P4W*, created the most successful independent documentary ever made in Canada—gaining a quarter-million dollars in Canadian sales on for a film that cost \$32,000 to make.

Both women have apartments near Toronto's downtown "Track," a neigh-

borhood they have lived in since they met eight years ago as film students at Oakville's Sheridan College.

Their films inhabit a nightworld populated by folks you would probably not take home to mother—hookers at work in a downtown massage parlour (that Dale once managed) in *Cream Soda*; transsexual and transvestite entertainers on the Yonge Street Strip (back before the strip was boutique) in *Minimum Charge*, *No Cover*; psycho- and sociopaths undergoing treatment at the *Penetang Hospital for the Criminally Insane* in *Thin Line*; the inmates of Kingston's *Prison for Women* in *P4W*, and now the hookers, gay, straight and in-between who work Davie Street in Vancouver.

Cinema Canada: *What is this obsession you seem to have with the underside of our society?*

Holly Dale: I knew you were going to ask that!

Janis Cole: Our interest goes back quite a few years. When we were kids, 16, 17 years old, a lot of our friends were prostitutes, because we were living downtown. So it was initially something that wasn't fascinating to us, but we discovered that it was something fascinating to others.

Holly Dale: When we were at Sheridan (College), we'd never go there during the day, we'd just go in at night and use the equipment and show our film at the end of the year. [Experimental filmmaker] Rick Hancox was our teacher and he told us to make films about what we knew. Our films would cause quite a stir at the end of the year.

I was managing a massage parlor and the owner owed me \$300, so instead of paying me, he let us make *Cream Soda*.

Janis Cole: Because of *Cream Soda*, we always thought we'd make a longer film on prostitutes. Street prostitution is part of our everyday life because of where we live. It's something we both observe on a daily basis.

Cinema Canada: *You've just won a Genie, your documentary is a hit, and you decide to start your new film. What was the process of setting up Hookers On Davie?*

Holly Dale: Initially, we went to Studio D at the NFB for money. They'd helped us on *P4W*. They gave us some research money with the intention that we'd go on and make the project for them, but when we finished our research, the Film Board was more interested in a different angle, and they wanted us to shoot in October, so we started looking for grant money.

Janis Cole: The process was a little slow. You go through the program committee and we had looked into the film for about nine months, we knew we wanted to shoot in Vancouver, and the best time to shoot a film about prostitution is the spring.

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● *Hookers On Davie*: "the best time to shoot a film on prostitution is the spring"



● *Hookers On Davie*: "a film about the subject, not what people think about the subject"

Holly Dale: They didn't seem to understand that when you make our kind of film, your subjects tend to disappear.

Cinema Canada: Were there any artistic differences?

Holly Dale: The Board's style is to believe that people want you to make up their minds for them – and maybe some people do – but we like to think our audience is more intelligent than that. The Board wanted to know about housewives who do it part-time, they wanted an overview, like *Not a Love Story*. I'd rather work as a waitress for a year than make a film like *Not a Love Story*.

Also, we would not have had final cut with the NFB. That frightened us very much, because when we build trust with our subjects, we promise them that we will be true to what they have to say. We can't really give our word on that when someone else has final say.

Janis Cole: We had two grant sources we'd raised, the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council. At the beginning of April, we went to Vancouver to set the film up – that took about two months, then we shot for eighteen days.

Cinema Canada: Did the acclaim for *P4W* and the *Genie* help when you went to raise the money?

Holly Dale: It didn't really make any difference, because we'd been to the Canada Council and the OAC before and gotten the money for *P4W*. With the Board, half-way through *P4W* we'd realized that we didn't have the money to finish it, and Studio D helped us without asking to see a foot of film.

Cinema Canada: What sort of problems came up during the shoot?

Janis Cole: We go through the normal problems of working on a shoestring and having to worry about money and going into a situation with one radio mike when we need two. But there were all kinds of little situations. When Michelle tells the story of the stabbing in the film, we were there that night. We'd be standing there with the hookers when eggs were being thrown at them.

Holly Dale: When we first undertook this film, we went out and met these prostitutes, and we're the other side of life to them. They had to get to know us, so a friendship developed. When the shoot was over, and I was leaving for Winnipeg and Janis was staying on a few days, we ended up in a street rumble of about 20 people. We got in a fistfight in the street. This guy started beating up one of the hookers for no reason. A couple of the other hookers grabbed him, then a car pulls up and these guys jump out, yelling "Hey! Leave him alone!" and he had started it. The next thing we know, we're fighting and everyone's fighting. It was like something out of *West Side Story*.

Janis Cole: There is a sort of constant turmoil that our subjects go through and it becomes our turmoil. On *P4W*, just before we went in, there'd been a bloodbath and seven people had been stabbed the day before we were to start shooting. There was a lot of tension, and people would tell us not to talk to certain people because we might be stabbed. We ended up including them in the film and there was no problem. After *P4W* came out, one of the people in the film came and lived with us and there was the tension of other ex-inmates calling her and trying to get her back into the scene.

Holly Dale: In our first two films, our

friends were our subjects, now our subjects become our friends.

Cinema Canada: You rely almost exclusively on interviews with your subjects and on *cinéma-vérité* style. Aside from *Thin Line*, there is no voice-over narration in your films, and you never appear in them in interview cutaways. How would you place yourselves as documentarists, and who would you consider influences?

Janis Cole: A lot of American filmmakers would call what we do *cinéma-vérité*, but *cinéma-vérité* doesn't use interviews. We deal directly with the subject and they deal directly with the audience. Direct cinema.

Holly Dale: We make a film about the subject, not about what people think about the subject.

Janis Cole: When we say direct cinema, it is mixing the approach of *cinéma-vérité* and interviews so that we can go further than just observing them.

Cinema Canada: Are you claiming objectivity or neutrality?

Holly Dale: When you're filming people, you capture the reality. In the process of editing, the reality disappears and you have a film reality. So there's always some kind of projection of the filmmaker into the process and the filmmaker's communication with the subject, but we try to remain true to our subjects.

Janis Cole: We make obvious film choices about what the film will be about, where we'll shoot, and what the message of the film will be.

Cinema Canada: Who influenced your approach to films?

Holly Dale: Ed Hunt was not a creative mentor, but he was a financial mentor, he taught us how to do things economically. I wouldn't really say that we have a creative mentor. We like Frederick Wiseman, Joan Churchill. I have a lot of respect for Peter Pearson. It was inspiring that Peter Pearson saw *Cream Soda* and liked it. He was very encouraging and he got me into the Directors' Guild, which was very important in helping me get work between our films.

Janis Cole: Pearson's *Paperback Hero* is one of our favorite films – it deals with humanity. It's the sort of thing that interests us. You see an invisible community and you want to hear from it. We approached prostitution as more of a human issue than as a feminist issue.

Holly Dale: I agree, but feminism and humanism are the same thing, and we really consider ourselves humanists. When you start dealing with us with labels, we have a hard time defining ourselves, because our whole point in filmmaking is to get rid of labels and put everyone under the same sky.

Cinema Canada: You're doing something quite unusual with *Hookers On Davie*: opening a documentary commercially without any film festival exposure. Does that worry you?

Janis Cole: I don't have any worries. It's nice when you have a documentary to have the Festival because it has a built-in audience for documentaries. If we could have had it ready for the (Toronto) Festival last September it would have been great. Since we have it ready for the spring, we have to do it ourselves. We have to work a lot harder to generate the audience.

Holly Dale: Saturday we were at the International Women's Day event with a table and fliers. That sort of thing

wouldn't be necessary with Festival exposure.

Cinema Canada: What are you planning now?

Holly Dale: We're going to do a feature next. You do a documentary and you don't control a situation. It's emotionally draining.

Janis Cole: Holly and I had a feeling when we started *Hookers On Davie* that this might be our last documentary before we do a drama, and while we might do documentaries in the future, this sort of completes a cycle of documentaries.

We have two scripts now. One is based on street experiences – not prostitution, but life in the streets. The other is about Janice Gamble (one of the subjects of *P4W*), who's doing 25 years in Kingston, about her life and the events leading to her imprisonment. There was a lot of interest in her after the film came out: people wrote to Parliament, CTV's *W5* did a report on her, there's been a lot of press.

Cinema Canada: Will it be low-budget?

Janis Cole: No, not low-budget.

Cinema Canada: Low-budget is anything under \$2 million.

Janis Cole: Okay, then it's low-budget. We're planning about a million, a million two, and we hope to write it over the summer and go into production late fall or in the spring. (By way of comparison, *Hookers On Davie* cost about \$60,000 cash, with about \$15,000 deferred, including the directors' salaries.)

Cinema Canada: Are you going to pay yourselves on this film?

Holly Dale: We've talked to a few people who are interested in raising money for us, and they tell us we have to pay ourselves. They're twisting our arms.

Cinema Canada: They're going to make you take the money? Take this cheque! That must be rough.

Holly Dale: Actually, it's a relief.

Janis Cole: It's real hard to put everything into a film and then wait for distribution. It takes a long while to see any money back.

Holly Dale: On *P4W*, we still haven't seen any money from the Premier Choix/First Choice deal.

Janis Cole: One thing about *P4W* was that it enabled us to get our own environments. We used to have to live together, and it was a nightmare. Because we work together, and our films are our lifestyle, it became very stressful to be around someone that much. Now, working sometimes 16, 18 hours a day, it's good to have your own space.

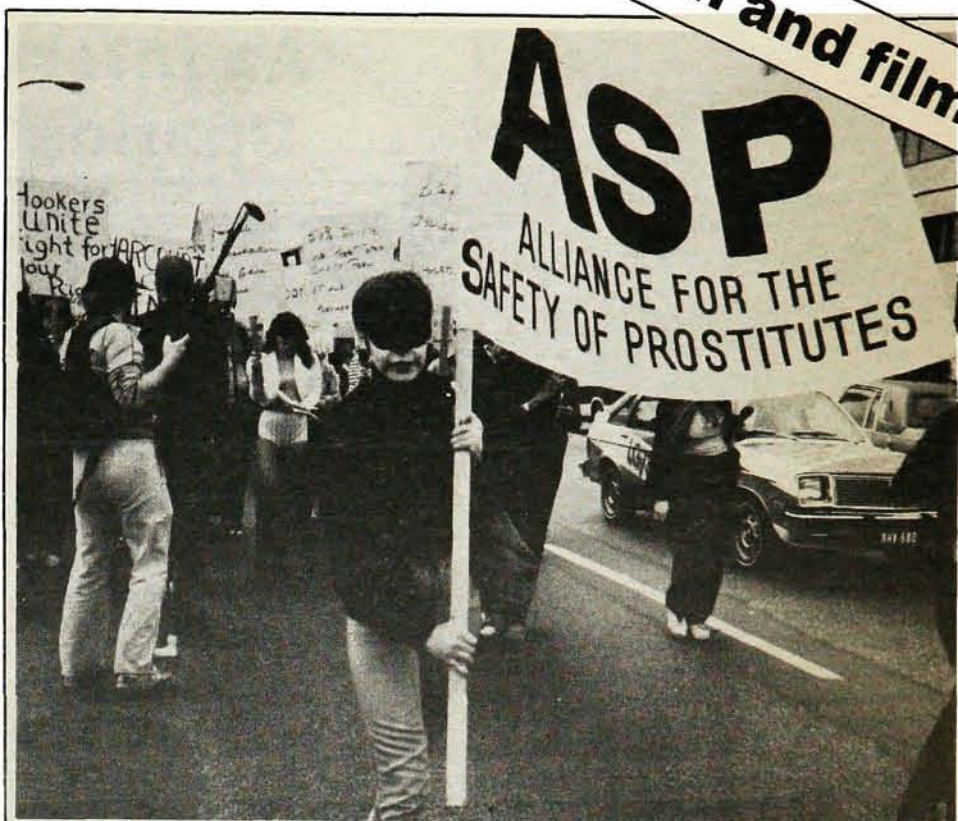
Holly Dale & Janis Cole's *Hookers On Davie*

Filmmakers Holly Dale and Janis Cole have a unique ability to understand and sensitively document the inner workings of various subcultures, usually those of society's "deviants." *Hookers On Davie* takes us into the so-called "prostitution capital of Canada" – a tree-lined street in the heart of Vancouver's residential West End, minutes from Stanley Park. As the publicity material for this film tells us, Davie Street has become a kind of drive-in brothel where up to 150 prostitutes ply their trade, making available to the cruising traffic the full spectrum of prostitution-related activity including male and female prostitutes, transvestites, transsexuals, and an increasing number of juveniles.

Having established a bond of trust with their subjects, the filmmakers take us into their world by focussing on eight male and female prostitutes (who agreed to wear radio mikes while being filmed by a hidden camera). We see them working their territory night after night, negotiating with "tricks" and killing time with friendly personal banter when the traffic is slow. They also speak quite frankly to the camera in lengthy interviews which have been intercut throughout the film – interviews which reveal painful childhood backgrounds, some of the business aspects of their profession, and the dangers which confront them from noon till 4:00 a.m., seven days a week.

Hookers On Davie seems an attempt to demystify the profession. There is little glamour here, only long nights of sitting on yellow plastic milk cartons as the cars go by, or of talking about money and tricks at the close of the work-shift. The film's structure underlines, in a subtle way, the tedium and repetition. We return again and again to the same street corner, where the cars go by in assembly-line fashion and the same verbal exchanges take place between prostitutes and prospective clients. The favorite tavern hang-out after hours also becomes familiar to us through repetition. It is like any place workers might meet after their shift.

Because there is no voice-over narration for this film, we rely totally on the words and point of view of the prostitutes themselves, along with the shaping mise en scène and structure created by the filmmakers. "Direct cinema" has its strengths, certainly, but one of its weaknesses is apparent in this film. That weakness is the possibility that, whatever social group is being filmed, its inner contradictions (which may not be apparent to the members themselves) may also pass undetected by the filmmakers. An example from *Hookers On Davie* concerns the film's emphasis on prostitution as simply a job, a way of earning a living. That is how the prostitutes themselves see it, and the film does not question this viewpoint. At the same time, however, almost all the prostitutes interviewed seem to want to leave the street, at least before they reach 40, but they talk of having no education or other skills; prostitution is the only work they know. Thus, the film conveys the sense that they are trapped in this life, with no alternatives for other work. Even the mother of one of the



• Positive energy: organizing the prostitutes' community

transsexual prostitutes says, "Where do they go and what do they do?" – as though there really is nothing else for these people.

But we also learn that, on a good night, a Davie Street prostitute can earn between \$200 and \$300, with no pimp to take his cut because these prostitutes work independently. This seems like an extraordinary income, one that *does* make it possible to plan for the future and conceive of alternatives. A basic question that the film does not answer is: what do they do with their money? While this may sound like a middle-class "Mrs. Grundy"-type question, it is central to our understanding. (After all, even at \$50 a night it would be possible to save up for a computer course, or whatever.) By not asking this basic question, the film avoids an even more central query: why do these young prostitute *stay* in the business?

One suspects that the answers to this question might cut quite close to the bone, raising psychological and emotional issues that would be difficult for both subjects and filmmakers alike. But by not raising such questions, the filmmakers allow another kind of mystification to surround the profession: that prostitution is either freely chosen, or it is chosen because there is a lack of other job alternatives.

Had the filmmakers focussed on the psychology of prostitution, not necessarily a moralistic frame of reference, the film might have brought us much closer to understanding the interpersonal dynamics of their subjects. We would come away from the film with a deeper insight into the underlying emotional "pay-off," or whatever it is, that keeps them working the streets. The film strongly conveys the bond of trust established between the prostitutes and the filmmakers – a bond that would seem to have been secure enough to allow for very probing questions. But there is a sense here that the filmmakers did not risk this bond by asking "tough" questions, questions which might have gone a long way towards helping viewers really understand prostitutes.

The film, then, does not go deep enough to give us new insights into the

whole question of prostitution. This is frustrating in that the seeds of potential depth are clearly there. All the interviewees talk quite frankly about their painful childhoods and the events which precipitated their initial experience in prostitution, but such past events seem strangely unconnected to the present, as though they themselves do not see the pattern. Obviously, prostitution is not just a job, as the film might have us believe. It is too deeply rooted in childhood trauma to be seen in such a light. By taking a "liberated" stance on this profession, the filmmakers have, ironically, given us a rather superficial film.

There are, however, several painful and personal moments in *Hookers On Davie*, moments that bring us closer to the people there. This is especially true of the transsexuals, who seem more open and emotionally expressive than any of the other women. One of them, Michelle, allows the filming of scenes with her mother, who talks quite personally about her "son, Mark" and her own feelings. The cooperation and openness from all the prostitutes makes us, in turn, care for and respect them. Nevertheless, I came away from this film with many more questions than answers, which may, of course, be what the filmmakers intended.

A highlight of *Hookers On Davie* is its emphasis on the prostitutes' attempts to organize as a community for self-protection. The scenes of leafletting, meetings, and a protest march have a real feeling of positive energy and mutual caring.

Obviously, Holly Dale and Janis Cole have once again chosen a highly charged and controversial topic, to which they bring their unique filmmaking style and human caring. Whatever its faults, the film cannot be taken lightly and will quite clearly generate much discussion and thought.

Joyce Nelson •

HOOKERS ON DAVIE p./d./ed. Holly Dale, Janis Cole **cam.** Nancy Blue, Paul Mitchnick **sd.** Aerlyn Weissman **colour** 16mm, 86 min., 1984 **dist.** Pan-Canadian Film Distributors, 214 King St. West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ont. M5H 1K4, (416) 596-2200.



photo: John Harkness