Documentarist errant: Peter Raymont splits for Boston

Filmmakers are rediscovering that religious figures make for fascinating film fare.

The NFB's Studio D in '84-'85 produced Behind The Veil: Nuns to document the religious life as a career choice relevant to women today. A recent episode of CBC-TV's Seeing Things portrayed a priest as a strong, viable character with little trace of the 'my son syndrom.


So two Ottawa filmmakers - Judith Crawley and Sara Lee Stadelman - who plan to give Marie Guyart (better known as the Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, founders of Ursuline in Quebec City) a central place in the Canadian film landscape, are suddenly finding their project less unlikely than it might have seemed not long ago.

"I want to see this made," says Raymond. "If anything was going to happen, it was this."

"Sara's created an imaginative piece, a film of inspiration for people of today rather than a religious film. And Marie's adventure is basic to Canadian history."

"Marie Guyart identified completely with Canada," Stadelman explains. "She's the first person to speak of it with the words Gilles Vigneault would later come to sing 'Mon pays.' She's a winner. She experiences the whole bag. She has the book thrown at her. But she catches it and rewrites it." But she was leading a double life.

While narrating shrewdly with work and images, rearing her son, managing her sister's household and her brother-in-law's business, Marie was simultaneously committed to an interior life.

In what seemed a sudden move to everyone but Marie, she became an Ursuline - a cloistered nun. Her family fought hard against her decision, the nuns tormented her cruelly, and 11-year-old Claude stood outside the convent gate, screaming, 'Donnez-moi ma mère.' "Marie stayed in the cloister.

All this happened in France. In 1639 Marie landed in the middle of winter, in Quebec, the first woman missionary in the world. She worked to educate Indian and French children together, learned and wrote dictionaries in three Indian languages; survived earthquake, fire, flood, and temptations of suicide. She died in Quebec exactly 35 years later.

Stadelman, developing Marie Guyart's story has been a long, lonely road. She began research in 1978, with a grant-in-aid from the Ursulines to write the script. In 1982 Mid-Canada Communications donated studio time and technicians so she could make a video-demon.

That was when Judith Crawley saw Stadelman's video. "I was so taken by Sara's ability as a performer! I knew right away: we've got to make a film of it. People must see it."

"It's not a biography," says Stadelman. "It's an imaginative piece," adds Crawley, "highly sophisticated technically."

Stadelman uses a form in which acting is synthesized with choreographed movement. This allows the actor to span time and space economically, and let's the viewer participate in the full dimensions of the character.

For Judith Crawley, who speaks with the authority of 25 national and 59 international awards, including an Oscar, "This is a film for today - the inspiration of a woman with a strong vision."

Stadelman believes Marie's faith, hope, and compassion thread inextricably through the fabric of Canada.

Religion isn't a sermon or an argument," she adds. "Religion is more than ritual or worship. It can be devastatingly destructive when perverted, or wonderfully instructive when lived out." Guyart's life is not Stadelman's first encounter with religious figures as dramatic subjects. The Ontario Arts Council gave her a Senior Filmmakers' Award for her 1975 short film of Saint Catherine of Siena in dialogue with modern Everywoman. But for Crawley, making a film on Marie of the Incarnation marks a radical change in genre.

I liked the story, I saw the video. Sara was so good. Although I'm not a Catholic, I've had a spiritual feeling for Marie from childhood and I can't explain why. Later I understood a little because I could identify with some of her hard choices.

Sara's story has insights modern.viewers wouldn't look for. They'll be surprised by it. It has serendipity. To be a good filmmaker you must have that. You must find gold where you're not looking for it."