

# REVERB

## Independent vs. NFB

*Cinema Canada received the following exchange of letters from the authors. Ed.*

Kathleen Shannon,  
Women's Studio,  
National Film Board  
Montreal, Quebec.

Dear Ms. Shannon,

I am an independent woman filmmaker in Montreal who has graduated from a university film program two and a half years ago. Since then I have had experiences in documentary films and experimental films, among these a film done for the Montreal Association for the Mentally Retarded, a Canada Council grant for a film to document a cross-Canada trip, and others being distributed and/or entering festivals.

In the spring of this year I heard about the Women's Studio in the NFB and its training program. At that time I had a script written for the International Women's Year and I wanted to see it produced. As usual, funds were hard to come by, and I was advised by the Women's Program at the Secretary of State to contact your studio. I did, and after a long delay, I was told that the studio was not financially equipped to handle dramatic projects at the moment and that you were concentrating on documentary projects. Great, I said, would there be any openings on your crews for me. I was then told of the training programs for this summer. It sounded good; I wanted the experience of working with a new team within an organisation. It is all part of the process of gaining experience wherever you can and 'stepping into the professional world', which I thought was what (part of) the aim of the Women's Studio was. Hanna Fisher told me that from the work I had shown her, obviously I had experience in filmmaking. (!) She thought I might be able to help in this training pro-

### For your information

In last month's article about the Seventh Canadian Student Film Festival, Dr. Serge Losique was given credit for directing the event. However, the article failed to mention that the Festival is sponsored and organized by the Conservatory of Cinematographic Art of Concordia University. Dr. Losique is the Director of the Conservatory.

gram and she would ask you. After some delay again and daily phone calls from me, Hanna finally told me that you said no; if you needed anyone to help, you would find someone from inside the Board. O.K. Then I asked if I could participate in the training program, since that would be good for me too. No, I was told that the training program was only for people who had no experience at all. After hanging up, I thought for a while, thought about how I had been trying to obtain work and experience, and I called again and asked if I could enter the training program for sound, since that was an area I wasn't familiar with. This time I was told no, because you wanted people who had had *some* experience and could go out straight from the program into the 'real' world of productions. What it boils down to is that I am either over-qualified or under-qualified and I can never win. I asked then what your studio intended the trainees to come out and do. The answer was that *hopefully* they would attach themselves to one of the studios and 'make themselves indispensable'. Well, I have been trying to 'attach myself' and 'make myself indispensable' many many times. I sort of thought that aim was pretty ambiguous.

What bothers me is the attitude of the people in your studio, as presented to me anyway. Here I am, a young qualified filmmaker, with the necessary training, willing to train in other areas and work in any capacity, asking you for help because you are the Women's Studio and I am a woman; and you offered no help whatsoever, if anything, you gave frustrations, headaches, and total disillusionment. I had to catch you ladies between meetings, lunches and whatnot (which is understandable) and no one ever calls back. If I call and ask to speak to K. Shannon, the other end says with a cynical grunt, "O.K., I'll tell her but I can't promise anything." I am given feeble apologies of "I'm sorry that I'm speaking to you like a male employer." Well, as far as I am concerned, the sex of the employer is not the issue, it is the attitude, and the sincerity of a group which is established to help precisely those like me. Although I am speaking from only one person's experience, I have heard other instances of inability and unwillingness to help independent women filmmakers (shall I add struggling?) by your studio.

I dread to see the Women's Studio become a tightly-knit little bureaucratic group ignoring those out there who are fighting for themselves. I hope you will re-evaluate your objectives and your attitudes, not those towards men, but those towards women.

Mary Stephen

Mrs. Mary Stephen,  
Ste. Dorothée,  
Laval, Quebec.

Dear Mary Stephen,

I'm sorry that you feel you've been badly treated by Studio D, and want you to know some of our realities.

During the past year I have interviewed about 300 people needing jobs and/or training. We've had the smallest budget of any headquarters studio, being new, and have attempted a real Loaves and Fishes act - devising different programmes to meet different needs - so you may well have been contradictorily overqualified for one and underqualified for another.

It is important that you know that Studio D is *not* mandated as a "women's studio" *nor* a training programme. That we are perceived as such is a *reflection of our own commitments*. Just as all studios at the National Film Board, we are under pressure to use staff people before free lancers - nevertheless, this studio has involved about 80 independent women, in one way or another, during the past year.

While there aren't enough of us in what you perceive as a "tightly-knit little bureaucratic group" to respond adequately to the needs of all the would-be women filmmakers across this country, I cannot believe that any of my people ever answered you with a "cynical grunt." Cynical we're not - it often seems idealistic folly that I took on this job.

I've not solved the problem of returning all phone calls to me, though I usually devote my evenings to that purpose. If I took all my calls during the day I would not be able to accomplish other things that I perceive as important, like lobbying for women at a management level, developing viable and thrifty projects, being in touch with audiences and communities, organizing training programmes, writing proposals to government to raise funds for new programmes, etc., etc.



## REVERB

Probably my first commitment is not to experimental filmmakers, partly as there are other agencies like the Canada Council that can respond (or other studios at NFB), partly because I'm overwhelmed by the practical information needs of women in the community, (partly because of my own background - most filmmakers of my generation worked for many years before getting a chance to direct films of our own).

I congratulate you on what you've achieved already and want to suggest that while there is much wrong with the situation for independent young filmmakers generally in this country - women particularly - you should do some more reflecting before making accusations.

Sincerely,  
Kathleen Shannon,  
Executive Producer,  
Studio D.

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