Champions of distinct Canadian drama

The National Screen Institute and DramaLAB

BY JOAN JARVIS

T he National Screen Institute - Canada is a pioneer in new ways to develop dramatic talent across Canada. "The DramaLAB Programme is working," says Caryl Brandt, NSI Executive Director. "Last year, three TV Dramas, developed by DramaLAB '85 participants, were produced for CBC. This spring, DramaLAB '87 participants finished producing, writing and directing six short dramas for NFB. Four of these dramas have been selected for screening at the Canadian TV Workshops during this year's Banff TV Festival. And, NSI just completed another Local Heroes symposium with a 'Bibles to Bills' TV series workshop. Now we are looking forward to the next exciting DramaLAB, which we will be announcing shortly."

"All this has evolved," Brandt emphasizes, "from a single workshop to the three-phase, two-year DramaLAB programme that provides a much needed training avenue for Canada's young professional filmmakers crossing into dramatic film production."

Edmonton actor Jan Miller, NSI's DramaLAB Co-ordinator, agrees. Bitten by the film acting bug, Miller remembers the days in the late '70s when film work in Alberta was scarce. She started to explore opportunities, stating, "I will go anywhere in the world to train."

The next opportunity presented itself in Edmonton's film community when Miller was introduced to a group of filmmakers and writers in her early 20s who were planning to produce a new work. "I was very excited by the idea of working on something that was my own," Miller remembers. "I wanted to be involved with something that would have meaning to me as a filmmaker and as a human being."

Miller remembered the days in the late '70s when film work in Alberta was scarce. She started to explore opportunities, stating, "I will go anywhere in the world to train."

Within a few years, Miller had established herself as a successful filmmaker and writer, producing a variety of films that have earned her critical acclaim and numerous awards.

Miller remembers the days in the late '70s when film work in Alberta was scarce. She started to explore opportunities, stating, "I will go anywhere in the world to train."

Within a few years, Miller had established herself as a successful filmmaker and writer, producing a variety of films that have earned her critical acclaim and numerous awards.

The National Screen Institute - Canada became an official body, separate from the National Film Board, in April 1986, under the leadership of Tom Radford. Miller explains, "We wanted our filmmakers to be identified with innovative and creative thinking. We wanted them to have every opportunity to create films in a variety of styles. Most importantly, we want them to be able to work independently in their own region - that was our main goal; to develop filmmakers who could and would stay to produce drama in and of their own regions."

Here, two DramaLAB alumni, Gil Cardinal and Tom Regan, offer their reflections on the DramaLAB experience.

For more information about the upcoming DramaLAB '90 programme or the National Screen Institute, contact:

National Screen Institute-Canada
Suite 202, 855-109 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1J6
Tel. (403) 439-4861

Joan Jarvis is Projects Manager for the National Screen Institute-Canada.
GIL CARDINAL

DramaLAB provides directors with experience with professional actors, which holds one in good stead.

Following my studies at the University, I was sent to work as a P.A. on the shoot of John Cat, an NFB-Atlantic half-hour drama. From there, the programme flew me to Montreal to work as Assistant Editor on John Cat with Wolf Koenig of NFB, Montreal. So I got to follow the programme the whole way through to the finished product.

And then in June, as part of my specific program, Metis author Maria Campbell and I were shipped off to the Banff School of Fine Arts for three weeks to be part of their Playwrights Co-op Programme. I was interested in offering a similar programme to Screenwriters, Maria and I, as ‘film people’, were introduced to the Playwrights process to see how it works (as filmmakers) would fit in. We worked on a film script called Muts Family which we are still hoping will go further. It was a great experience sharing our work and film process with the group. The end result was that the School did establish a Screenwriters Program.

After Banff I joined up with the ‘84 DramaLAB-ers who were already engaged in Phase I. I teamed up with the late Dave Billington and we worked on Hot Valley, which was his story, it was loosely based on an experience Dave had as a young groom at a racetrack in Ontario. I produced, directed and edited Hot Valley as a half-hour video during DramaLAB ’84.

As a DramaLAB-er, I was selected to participate in that Phase II, which took place at the NFB studios in Montreal. We worked on a sponsored dramatic series film titled Discussion in Beetroots. My particular project was The Courage Of One’s Conviction. There was very much a sense of being nurtured and guided during that Phase.

And then after that, in 1985, during that summer, as part of DramaLAB’s Phase III Programme, Hot Valley became a half-hour film drama, produced through NFB-Atlantic. So my first two dramatic films very much grew out of DramaLAB.

When DramaLAB Phase III was officially introduced, originally under the auspices of the Border series, I was given the opportunity to team up with the late Bob Borderline and by Geof Lebo, and together we wrote The Courage Of One’s Conviction which I directed through Phase II of DramaLAB. DramaLAB, as originally conceived, was different from subsequent programmes. The Institute seems to continually be trying to improve the programme and meet the needs of young filmmakers.

I wanted to learn the traditional ways of directing drama rather than attempting experimental work. I was concerned with the fundamentals of drama productions, of actors, and acting. DramaLAB gave me the opportunity to develop my knowledge and awareness.

I feel I am exceedingly lucky to have had the opportunity of DramaLAB. The three months at the University opened doors to a whole new world for me. There is tons to know about drama. I don’t know what I would do if I hadn’t had that experience.

DramaLAB Phase III was by now more structured with an executive producer to oversee both development and production. It was really great to have Michael Scott (Board’s Executive Producer) involved especially during the editing of Borderline Cafe. His sometimes not-so-gentle guiding hand and experience forced me to evaluate what I was doing and why, resulting in a better film.

Now that the time has come for me to actively start marketing myself as a drama director, I highlight my experience with the DramaLAB Programme as an important aspect of my background.

Dramatic film is a scary thing for documentary directors, because basically we do not understand the process of actors; so we tend to want to concentrate on the camera and the lights and retreat to the safety of the technical aspects of filmmaking, and ignore the people. Yet the greatest joy I’ve found, when directing dramas, has been working with the actors.

I know I have a long way to go, but now I have some idea of what the acting process and the language is — thanks to DramaLAB.

I really believe that the stories that are going to put the Canadian film on the map are the stories that will evoke sympathy of the filmmakers’ stories. Canada’s individual provinces have allowed their filmmakers to survive and develop an independent spirit. They are less harried by the proximity of the American seduction. We need to be given a chance to make these films. The National Screen Institute’s DramaLAB Programme has provided some of us with that chance.

Tom Regan has worked at a number of radio and television stations as a columnist, host, critic, interviewer and reporter. In Phase II of DramaLAB ‘87 Tom wrote Sidetracked, one of six 15-minute dramas made for the National Film Board’s Without Work series.

JAN MILLER

I learned this great truth when I interviewed Jan two years ago. I was an entertainment writer for the Halifax Daily News (these days I’m a columnist) and Jan wanted me to write an article about something called DramaLAB. I had never heard of DramaLAB, or the National Screen Institute, the organization that Jan represented. But after an hour long conversation at the National Film Board offices in Halifax, I became a believer.

When the interview finished, we talked for another 40 minutes about film and writing. As we were about to go our separate ways, Jan said ‘You should think about applying.’ I did think about it, and I did apply. For the past two years, I’ve been working in DramaLAB and with the National Screen Institute.

DramaLAB is the brainchild of a group of Edmonton filmmakers and actors who believed in the talent of people in their region and acted on their dreams. DramaLAB is the progeny of their efforts.

When I interviewed Jan, she said two things that convinced me DramaLAB was a good idea. First, DramaLAB was about storytelling, and second, the National Screen Institute wanted to train professionals who could return to their regions and tell their own stories for film and TV.

So in October of 1987, 18 of us went to Edmonton - six writers, six directors, and six producers, chosen from across Canada. We studied in Edmonton for two months - Phase I. For Phase II this past summer, we divided into six writer-director-producer teams and each team did a 15-minute dramatic film on an aspect of how unemployment affects people, with Wolf Koenig and Penny Rizer at the National Film Board in Montreal. Phase III is the continuing voyage, where we boldly go where we have gone before - the real world of film and television, where we try and sell our ideas and products beyond the regional marketplace.

If you asked each member of the ’87 group about the value of their experiences, you would get 18 different answers.

The best thing that DramaLAB did for me was to develop a sense of thinking pictures - pretty important if you want to write for film or television. After two years of trying to develop that sense, I can see why so many producers complain about a lack of ‘workable scripts’. My training was primarily in theatre and I didn’t think a screenplay could be much different from a stage play. Wrong! Big difference, as you, dear reader, probably know.

DramaLAB also taught me a great deal about film in general. Working with directors and...
Women’s film series gives birth to workshops for women filmmakers in the Atlantic provinces

BY ELSPETH TULLOCH

The first directing and scriptwriting workshops geared specifically for women in the Atlantic provinces took place May 27 to June 1 at Tatamagouche on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia. Twenty-four women with backgrounds in film and theatre took part in “the experiment” as workshop coordinator Patricia Fish referred to the simultaneously held sessions. They were an extension of the Lifestyles: Women and Film project of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Student Union Women’s Committee. Acclaimed filmmakers Norma Bailey (Daughters of the Country) and Ninelle Darder (Le Sound dans la still), attracted by the goals of the project’s organizers, acted as facilitators.

But, why for women? And did the experiment work?

The answer to the first question reflects the complexity of the goal of encouraging women’s voices in film. As many as six years ago, women interested in making films for and about women were meeting in Halifax and discussing, among other things, the need for alternate forms of training. Little was being offered in the way of workshops in the region at that time.

Halifax filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton (Black Mother, Black Daughter) participated in these early discussions and in the Lifesize directing workshops. She comments, “Work and family responsibilities meant that we needed ways of acquiring experience other than dropping everything and going to film school.”

Women who later took part in mixed-gender film workshops in the region discovered that they were searching for more than flexible opportunities to gain skills. They also wanted to work and learn in an environment where their ways of looking at and making film were validated.

CONFIDENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY

Women’s experience, points of view and approaches to film were not always well understood, nor well received, by a film culture dominated by men. “Confidence-building through community building was a key principle of our approach to these workshops,” says Cathy Busby, who oversaw the nine-month development of the project. “We believed that women needed to know that their ideas were worthwhile and could be developed. We wanted to provide an opportunity for women to develop their own networks and support systems.”

This approach allowed participants to share with their peers and the facilitators not only knowledge, but experience and perceptions.

Participants, such as Halifax filmmaker Leila Keating (The Midday Sun), began to identify the context of their own struggles for a distinct voice. “I realized that we women have a different way of looking at things, different things to say and different ways of saying them. These workshops have allowed us to explore our own ways and to identify clichés in the male-dominated industry that do not appeal to us, such as a lot of action and chase scenes, and sex scenes shot in a different way than we would,” observes Keating who took part in Dansereau’s scriptwriting workshop.

“She’s not a hard and last gender line—that all women like one thing and men another,” she adds.

SOMEONE ELSE’S LANGUAGE

Says Halifax-based editor Kimberlee McGaag, a 1987 graduate of York University’s Film department (and the only female in a class of 12): “It didn’t occur to me at school that women may have different views of things, but now I see that generally, women seem to be more interested in character development and storyline. At school the emphasis was on production values, the number of dolly shots, that sort of thing.”

“If it’s one you’re always dealing with someone else’s language,” adds assistant editor Pam Gallant who hails from Moncton. “I realized when I came here that there were others like me dealing with the same frustrations.”

Acknowledging the struggles many young female filmmakers have, Norma Bailey, the facilitator of the director’s workshop, asserts: “We need more women in decision-making roles. We have been conditioned to interpret or appreciate men’s stories, but neither men nor women have been conditioned to interpret or appreciate women’s stories. The only way we will see ourselves on screen is to make films ourselves.”

Many of the participants affirmed that working alongside other women who had succeeded in film gave them the “ guts,” as Anna Gourde of Moncton puts it, to go on. The female environment also allowed the participants to feel more comfortable about making mistakes and asking questions in technical areas. “In mixed groups you can feel awkward about your imperfections and lack of knowledge,” observes Gourde.

While it was a women-oriented workshop, it was not a women-only environment. Men were supportive of the project and offered to help out in various ways. John Taylor, who acted as the project’s bookkeeper and publicist, notes: “While the male film industry in general has moved into doing big-budget production with ‘the perfect look,’ women in general are still interested in being creative working on low budgets. Men are losing the essence of the creative process.” Jan Meyerowitz of Production Services Atlantic, who offered a hands-on lighting workshop, agreed with Taylor.

A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT

To make the experiment work, the organizers needed to acknowledge the realities of the potential participants. This approach meant ensuring child care. Although the funders viewed day-care as an expendable budget item, the organizers held their ground.

“Quite simply saying ‘no’ to daycare was saying ‘no’ to mothers, especially of young children,” states Patricia Fish. As project manager Cathy Busby notes, “The age of women making film tends to coincide with childbearing and child-rearing years, and with an age where one has gained some life experience.”

Without the service, several of the participants, as well as facilitator Norma Bailey, would have been unable to attend.

The participants expressed nothing but enthusiasm at having had the opportunity to hone their skills in a supportive environment. Numerous participants noted the sessions coincided with a key point in their careers and had left them feeling “empowered.” There is no doubt that they feel they received the encouragement to carry on and suggestions as to how to do so more effectively.

Says Kim Williamson of Sydney, N.S., “We didn’t come here looking to be patronized. We came here looking for honest criticism and we got it. It may take several years for the output of the creative energy nurtured at the sessions to be seen on the screen. But if, as Ninelle Dansereau asserts, women are indeed developing a ‘counter-cinema,’ it will be worth the wait.”