

Champions of distinct Canadian drama

The National Screen Institute and DramaLAB

BY JOAN JARVIS

The 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 Bucks' 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." She talked to numerous people in Edmonton's film community, whose reaction was "Why go somewhere else, why not set up something in Edmonton?" So Miller did just that. With Producer Don Williams as a resource person, one of Bill Meilen's scripts, and the help of NAIT, Canada Council Explorations, NFB, Alberta Culture, and others, the first "Professional Film and Television Directors/Actors Workshop" (now expanded and known as the DramaLAB Programme) was born in 1982.

However, the workshop was not enough for Miller. "Although it was significant," she says, "we still had not made a dramatic production. The general reaction in the community was that it would be too hard and too expensive to do in the regions." Undaunted, Miller asked herself "Who is doing the kind of films that I wish we could make?" - The prominent international and Canadian filmmakers who were using local actors and local crews, producing indigenous

stories with humour and sadness. Miller worked out of her bedroom office to bring International and Canadian filmmakers to Edmonton's first film symposium, LOCAL HEROES '84.

The momentum was building. Tom Radford, NSI's first Executive Director and then head of Edmonton NFB Northwest Studio, believed the workshop and the film symposium had been successful in making filmmakers realise they could, with a bit of help, film their own stories in their own provinces. He asked Miller to organize the first 'official' DramaLAB Programme, under the NFB's umbrella.

Radford got the ball rolling. The University of Alberta, Department of Communications, Alberta Culture and the National Film Board - Canada joined forces with him and Miller to produce DramaLAB '85.

For the first time, producers joined directors and writers in the programme. Also, it was the beginnings of a national selection process. The eight-week workshop again took place in Edmonton but the programme was run somewhat differently. This time the participants worked on scripts and then shot scenes under the artistic directorship of Allan King.

A jury selected participants from DramaLAB '85 Phase I to attend the first 'official' Phase II of DramaLAB, which was a training programme produced by Andy Thompson, then of the Montreal NFB.

The National Screen Institute - Canada became an official body, separate from the National Film Board - Canada, in April 1986, under the leadership of Tom Radford.

Miller explains, "We wanted our filmmakers to be identified with innovative 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,...

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GIL CARDINAL



Gil Cardinal is one of the original NSI-DramaLAB participants. He is the award-winning Director of *Foster Child*, an NFB documentary. In 1988, Gil directed *Bordertown Cafe*, a half-hour CBC television drama developed through the DramaLAB '85 Programme, which picked up three AMPA Awards at Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association Gala.

Some of the key people then were Jan Miller, (Edmonton actor) Tom Radford, (then the NFB Regional Head) and Carl Hare (Drama Professor). They selected writers and directors from the three prairie provinces to take part in the programme. We worked for seven weeks on scripts with an ensemble of professional actors, using the University's facilities. Each of us then went back to our own region to shoot half-hour video dramas.

While DramaLAB was being set up, Radford and Hare were also working on an experimental programme, where, as an introduction to DramaLAB, (and to give an established documentary filmmaker a thorough exposure to film drama), a documentary filmmaker would go into the University of Alberta's Drama Department on a 'Visiting Fellowship'. I was selected to be the guinea pig – and I am thankful that I was – it was an incredible experience! For the first three months of 1984 I went to university every day, taking acting or directing classes or being an observer at rehearsals of faculty and guest Directors. The whole programme was a real lifesaver! The thing that is fundamental to me about DramaLAB – because so many filmmakers come from a documentary background – is that it gives you intense exposure to drama in a nurturing setting, which is very difficult to get in the real world! Usually, if you are lucky enough to get a crack at drama – you get thrown into it. You need to know – What is drama? How does it work? What is their language – their craft – their process? A Director should not have to 'jump' into doing drama – you should be able to have some training. 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 process 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 Colony programme. The School was interested in offering a similar programme to Screenwriters. Maria and I, as 'film people', were introduced to the Playwrights process to see how/if we (as filmmakers) would fit in. We worked on a film script called *Metis 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 DramaLABers who were already engaged in Phase I. I teamed up with the late Dave Billington and we worked on *Hot Walker*, 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 Walker* as a half-hour video during DramaLAB '84.

As a DramaLABer, I was selected to participate in that Phase II, which took place at the NFB studios in Montreal. We worked on a sponsored dramatic film series titled *Discussion In Bioethics*. 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, also in 1985, during that summer, as part of DramaLAB's Phase III Programme, *Hot Walker* 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 direct *Bordertown Cafe*, which was produced by Geoff LeBoutillier, and written by Kelly Rebar, both '84 DramaLABers. Kelly and I had already worked together – she 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 (*Border's* Executive Producer) involved especially during the editing of *Bordertown 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 films that evocatively reflect the filmmakers' stories. Also Canada's individual provinces have allowed their filmmakers to survive and develop an independent spirit. They are less barraged 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



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 sure knows how to sell an idea. 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 talented people in their region and acted on their dream. 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 Ritco at the National Film Board in Montreal. Phase III is the continuing voyage, where we boldly go where many 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 in 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

producers, I learned about the possibilities and the problems of working with images. I remember the day a frustrated producer tried to explain to me the financial difference between using one line of description and cutting that line. The line – 'The hero walked home in the rain.' – rain, I discovered, is an expensive addition to any script. I also discovered film works best when it is a collaborative process. My screenplays improved when I listened to what my director and my producer had to say – up to that point beyond which no self-respecting writer goes, of course.

A wealth of contacts was another benefit. I worked with like-minded individuals from across the country. I met directors and film editors from Hollywood, script editors from Toronto, cinematographers from Vancouver and producers from, of all places, Halifax. Since contacts are everything, or so I've been told, this plethora of people, names and places alone would make DramaLAB a priceless experience. As it was, it was icing on the cake.

There were practical benefits. Working on the NFB series gave me my first credit as a screenwriter, a valuable thing indeed. And there were intangible benefits. The friendships, the arguments, learning to live with 18 artistic egos, long nights spent drinking Big Rock beer in the infamous Adventure Inn Bar discussing our ideas about film, and the confidence in my own writing that I discovered quite by accident. Hard stuff to put on a balance sheet, but worth a great deal.

The mix of people brought experiences as varied as the regions they came from, so suiting the training to the different skill levels was a challenge for the instructors. Some of the refinements NSI has since made in the DramaLAB programme reflect its continued efforts to give us the most effective training which we need to survive in the marketplace.

But in the long run, DramaLAB has been one of the best experiences of my career as a writer. It opened a new world for me, and gave me the opportunity to enter that world on a professional basis. I've worked to improve the skills I learnt in DramaLAB. I also discovered that a vibrant, creative film industry was already living in my stomping grounds, populated by people who believe, as I do, that you don't have to go to T. O. or Vancouver to make a good film. None of this would have happened without DramaLAB.

And the idea of creating talent in the regions makes the National Screen Institute's DramaLAB a very valuable ingredient in the Canadian film and television industry – because the NSI is the only organization with the courage, insight and imagination to recognize what this kind of dream means to us culturally.

So if you ever have the chance to interview, or even talk to, Jan Miller, or any of the NSI's crew of believers, be ready to be converted. It just might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. ●

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 *Lifesize: 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 Mireille Dansereau (*Le Sourd dans la ville*), 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 workshop. 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 Lulu 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. "But it's not a hard and fast gender line – that all women like one thing and men another," she adds.

SOMEONE ELSE'S LANGUAGE

Says Halifax-based editor Kimberlee McTaggart, 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 a different view 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."

"It's like 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 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 Girourd 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 Girourd.

While it was a women-oriented workshop, it was not a women-only environment. Men were



Ilkay Silk, Laurel Smith and Norma Bailey on set.

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 daycare 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 childrearing 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 Mireille Dansereau asserts, women are indeed developing a "countercinema", it will be worth the wait. ●

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