

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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