

Remembering Gloria Demers

BY KATHLEEN SHANNON

In July, two NFB filmmakers died. Everyone knows the name of Donald Brittain, but few know who Gloria Demers was. Kathleen Shannon, founder of Studio D and Demers' longtime friend and colleague, pays tribute to Gloria, and in doing so points out how difficult it was for her as a woman to build a career at the Film Board.



Gloria Demers (left).

How will we remember Gloria? As the writer and narrator of *Behind The Veil: Nuns*. As the skilled writer of numerous other commentaries, and author of far fewer screenplays than she wished. As a clown, as a boggle player to be reckoned with, as a woman of unshakable loyalties, vivid passions, exuberance and enthusiasms. A lover of birthdays, dogs, teddy bears, jokes, surprises and chocolate; a champion of others; a frustrated talent tempered

by humility, fairness to others, and an emerging self-esteem. There will be a pun intended when we speak of someone having a glorious sense of humour.

I feel a regret and poignancy beyond the loss of a cherished friend, and politically and intellectually challenging, feminist colleague. We have not only lost what Gloria would have written during the next several decades, had she not sickened and died so prematurely. We are

also poorer for the loss of what she could have written two decades earlier, had she been given the opportunities she merited.

Gloria initially was hired at the NFB as a "casual" secretary.¹ Her ambition was to write and direct films, and she also was a natural actress. After her first year, a supervisor wrote this note in her file: "This girl seems the type we are looking for. She appears bright and cheerful." So Gloria was hired on permanent

staff... as a secretary. That was June 1965.

She got praise for a story she showed a few people, and finally - nothing more promising seemed available - accepted the assignment of secretary to the Program Committee. There was the promise of "working with writers on their scripts". But, in fact... no: She was to *keep track* of the scripts that came in, organize meetings, find alternates when committee members couldn't make it. And keep minutes.

In 1972 she applied for an opening as assistant editor but she wasn't selected. That was the year *MS Magazine* appeared, and an early issue carried an article about the holes in the Peter Principle: that *all employees do not "rise to their level of incompetence": not if they're female.* With very occasional, and conspicuous, exceptions, most women are held at a level below their optimum competence - they "can't be spared" from the routine support jobs they fill. Let's face it - "bright cheerful 'girls'" make good secretaries.

Gloria and I strategized. She was anxious to get into production. I needed help editing a large film project. So I asked my boss if she could assist me. First he said no, then relented to agree she could, if it wasn't official. Nevertheless, the experience did count when Gloria next applied for a one-year "trainee production assistant" position and was accepted. Fourteen months later, she got classified as an assistant sound editor, and a year later, in June 1975, a sound editor. She was a good one. Which didn't help her aspirations to be a writer! The NFB was "short of sound editors".

Meanwhile, in 1974, I had been able to start Studio D. As a sound editor, she wasn't able to make Studio D her official base, but she participated informally, and enlivened most everything that went on. It's disconcerting, chairing a Serious Meeting, to realize that the only voice that has answered my latest Serious Challenge is Gloria's bear, Allison, attending the meeting on her lap.

Gloria regularly applied to be reclassified as a writer. And/or be allowed to join Studio D. Finally, as part of a package of the kind of bargains one resorts to in these institutions: give a little here - get a little less there - Gloria was permitted to join Studio D in 1980, but *only as a sound editor*. Not until two years later - 17 years after she joined the NFB - was she officially recognized as a writer.

Gloria's experience precisely illustrates one of the facts revealed by the 1978 study on Equal Opportunity at NFB: that on average, it has

taken women five job changes to attain the level at which men were assigned when hired. This is not attributable to education or to experience; this is the average.

But Gloria was not "average." She'd passed the test qualifying her for membership in Mensa, an exclusive association of people with exceptionally high IQs. But she never actually joined. Passing the test was what was important to her, not sporting the little yellow badge of membership.

It takes brilliance to create comedy: her one-woman performance of the Peking Opera convulsed a delegation of women filmmakers visiting Studio D from China. She had a rich cast of characters, who weren't always quite so scrupulously kind and fair as Gloria herself. Many of her friends can no longer listen to Leonard Cohen with due seriousness - Gloria "did" Leonard - the voice, the lyrics, the attitudes... I've forgotten the name of the Olde English Sheepdog (he's gay) that was one of my favorites. I recently came across a cartoon she'd copied for me - an absently exasperated man, looking down, saying "Oh dear. I just stepped on a woman - hope it doesn't leave a mess on my shoe." "Isn't that awful?" she tried to gasp indignantly, through giggles.

Gloria was a substantial woman, with larger shoulders than this society prescribes for women. She didn't attempt to be "fashionable." So she encountered the irritation that women engender if they do not look as though they are trying to please. I remember one male colleague fuming about women who "deliberately make themselves ugly" - by not wearing makeup! Apparently, we are only "attractive" when trying to attract.

A year and a half before her death, Gloria had found her own style - a confident posture, an adored leather jacket, a sparkle, a flowering of her ability, a circle of good friends. She was "just coming into her time," as a friend put it. What delayed Gloria's "time" so long? Institutional reluctance to recognize and promote women is not unique to the Film Board. It simply reflects

underlying attitudes in our society.

Like so many secretaries, Gloria endured sexual harassment from "a superior," before women had coined the term to describe it. Later, she wrote a script on the subject. It didn't get through the predominantly male Program Committee. A "noted filmmaker" pronounced

his judgement that the "man-women thing" is bound to create "cross-currents" in any working environment, and that "makes things interesting." (Hunting is likely more "interesting" for the hunter than the hunted, too.)

An NFB director was telling me once about his concern that not enough new people were being

hired so that "new Stanley Jacksons" (shorthand for fine film writers) could emerge. I pointed out that some "Stanley Jacksons" do not "emerge" just from being on staff - if they are female. He earnestly protested that he had always been willing to "help Gloria along." I sputtered to a halt, and only too late realized what I wanted to say: "In a fair employment situation, it would have been Gloria who was in the position to decide whether to help you along". She had joined the NFB more than a dozen years earlier than he.

Her first "official" screenplay for the NFB was *First Winter*. She wrote it in 1979, and it was nominated for an Academy Award in 1981. (You will recall that her reclassification as a writer didn't come until a year later.) We have lost a brilliant thinker, a writer with the ear for dialogue that evidences a deep humanity. A delightful friend and madcap colleague who'd straighten me out smartly when I got too boss-y.

I believe that we can honour and remember Gloria best by using the lessons of her life that she shared with us: by working to eliminate the sources of her pain, supporting the sources of her gladness and achievements. We will remember Gloria by actively encouraging women's talent; by promoting, judging, rewarding women for their work on its own merit; we will take women's work, and perceptions, seriously; we will recognize and celebrate the diversity among women.

While celebrating Gloria's absolute uniqueness, we will remember that her life is linked to other women's lives, and the difficulties she faced because she was a woman are difficulties that must be eliminated for all women, before we can claim we've honoured her well enough.

P. S. A scholarship fund for feminist writers is being created in Gloria's name. For details on how you can contribute, write Studio D, P. O. Box 6100, Station A, St. Laurent, P. Q. H3C 3H5.

¹ "casual" describes the employer's lack of obligation, not the employee's attitude.

Eulogy at memorial service for Gloria Demers, July 21, 1989

Gloria had the ability to find the right words. She would do a better job for any one of us today, than any of us can do for her. She has left us wordless, so how to describe who she has been, and what she has meant to all of us?

As a daughter, a family member, a friend, colleague, companion, mentor, she has contributed deeply to every one of us here, and to yet others who are not here.

Gloria was a woman who represented the best of womanly qualities and strengths - of honour, devotion, loyalty, trust, generosity, love, courage, passion, humour and playfulness. She was able to bring out the child in all the rest of us when we grew too serious, or pompous, to be fun any more. She felt her feelings strongly and unabashedly, and endeavoured to share them honestly. A woman of integrity, she always tried to do the right thing, particularly where other people's feelings were concerned.

A woman of intellect, she thought things through, and often dared to be the first to speak up. Her unwavering woman-centered perspective will continue to provide an important reference point for many of us, both personally and professionally. We'll ask ourselves, "What would Gloria think?" And

she'll continue to challenge us with her steadfast example.

She was a gifted woman who, when for a long time her talent went unrecognized and was denied opportunity, grew patience and resilience instead of bitterness or resentments. A woman who demanded high standards of her own work, and had started to acknowledge her abilities. Many National Film Board films would not be as good as they are without her contributions - sometimes it was the crucial story line or commentary, sometimes the almost invisible touches that make the difference. There are important films that could literally not have been made without her on the team.

She was generous, in her help and in her praise, and kind about our shortcomings. And she was fun.

She was game for just about anything. Games, in particular. She was spectacularly unimpressed by pretentiousness, and brought her rich ability as an actress to deflate overblown images. She could freely express the enthusiasm and excitement that so many of us have stifled in ourselves. In all these ways, Gloria lived richly, and enriched those around her. She gave us lasting gifts, and many joyful memories. We will all miss her.

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