



Photo: Angel Wells

Freude Bartlett



Photo: Angel Wells

Viva



Photo: Angel Wells

Alanis Obomsawin giving a workshop in Ottawa

# Women & Film Festival

June 8 to June 17, 1973 were not quite the ten days that shook the world, but in Toronto those days were responsible for a few private shakeups of old beliefs when the Women and Film International Festival took over the St. Lawrence Centre.

Admission Free, sang the posters; Day Care Provided Free; Everyone Welcome!

These three aspects of the Festival alone set it apart from the much discussed Women's Film Festival in New York City last year that originally inspired it. Lack of day care and hefty expenses did not make everyone feel welcome in New York. Yet alleviating those problems only partially worked to make everyone welcome here too. Where were the women over thirty, the teen-aged girls? And what of all the Canadian women who could not come to Toronto?

The 18 city tour organized to proceed throughout Canada, after the Toronto Festival, with two and three-day visits showing films, partaking in seminars, panels, and discussions was the answer. Did it work? How did women in the other cities chosen respond to the films and to the concept of women as free creative people?

## Edmonton

Although the Women's Programme Centre is a University-based group, we decided to hold the film festival in a location where a more representative section of the city's population might attend. Having held a less concentrated film festival earlier this year on campus, we found that we got a film-going crowd interested in being entertained. We found that the downtown Edmon-

ton Public Library was fairly eager to be a local co-sponsor of the event, and gave us their theatre facility for three days — only charging for overtime salaries of projectionists and security guards.

The planning of the Festival was by no means limited to women of the WPC and seemed to attract quite a few interested people who had not been previously involved with us. A couple of women who worked at the National Film Board organized the Video-tape Display (Doris Mae Smith and Irene McRae). Two local film makers, Lorna Rasmussen and Ann Wheeler, worked on publicity planning and liaison with Toronto. Several women working on a local OFY project *Art Exists* collected, arranged, and hung the local submissions of art and photography. Various women's groups set up information tables outside the Theatre and are listed below:

- Edmonton Women's Centre
- Alberta Options for Women Council
- Young Socialist Women
- Abortion Coalition
- Alberta Women's Bureau
- Indian Women for Indian Rights

A local bookstore sold feminist paperbacks of current interest.

Seminars were set up on various topics, and after going to some trouble to choose topics and the appropriate people from the community to lead discussion, we found attendance at these discussions was not very good. This was due to the fact that films were running simultaneously. We later realized that we, as local organizers, probably should have insisted on sufficient time for discussion, even if it meant sacrificing some of the films.

One highlight was the showing of

slides of early Edmonton by local photographer Gladys Reeves who is now 83.

## On the success of the Festival

In terms of attendance, it was very successful in view of the time of year, and the fact that this was the type of thing that appeals to a minority of the population. Except for Friday afternoon (the festival here was on a Fri., Sat., and Sun.), the theatre having a capacity of 250 would be anywhere from 1/2 to full depending on the films being shown. Evenings were always near-capacity crowds. The people were 3/4 women during the day — a very small even age spread, while in the evenings the audience was just about 1/2 male, and in general it was a younger crowd.

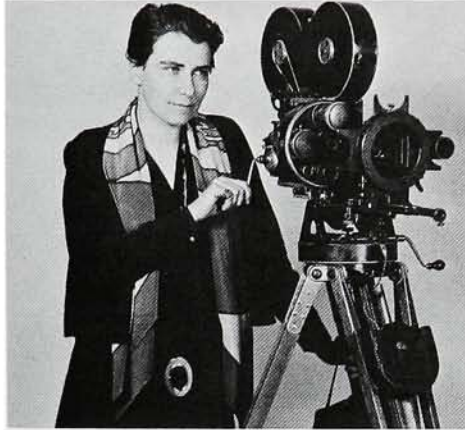
In general, reactions to the films were good; and as might be expected, a few older women walked out on some of the films having nude scenes. The only film that was severely criticized by one individual was *Day of Freedom* by Leni Riefenstahl, the question being whether the film should have been shown at all at a Women's Film Festival. Some people definitely felt it was a mistake to show a Nazi film at a women's film festival.

Films that got an excellent response were *Sambizanga*, *A Very Curious Girl*, and *Germaine Greer vs. the USA*. I feel that *Sambizanga* was outstanding because of its strong portrayal of oppression and its display of emotion. It was one of the few films that people spontaneously clapped after.

I am not sure what the response was to the information tables set up by local groups, but surely there was a fairly steady stream of people flowing past



Agnes Varda



Dorothy Arzner, Hollywood director



Mireille Dansereau

them.

The art and photography was well received.

Some positive and continuing things that came out of the festival — one woman was outstandingly enthusiastic about film-making, and had been isolated in making her super-8's which she brought to show, and felt that this was an outlet and a learning experience. She was especially keen during a film-makers discussion led by Ann Wheeler and Lorna Rasmussen.

We (the Women's Programme Centre) have a small project going now with Ann and Lorna. They will be instructing and helping a group of 8 to 10 women in preparing slide-shows and possible video-tapes on selected topics for a women's course we will be offering to the public this fall. Their woman-hours will be paid from a local Challenge for Change grant and film costs will be taken care of by an honorarium presented to the Women's Programme Centre after the tour. Ann is also interested in holding a more in-depth kind of workshop to train women in operating equipment in film-making.

The festival was a complete event in terms of presenting ideas to people, in terms of art and issues relating to women. The only failure was the scheduling of the panels and seminars. There should have been times when no films were being shown. People are easily tempted away by good films.

Sincerely yours,  
Andrea Rogers

Halifax

Dear Sister,

I was working with a community media-access group tied up in the advent of 1/2" portable video equipment, where my function was to "Welcome People to the Wonderful World of Sony", i.e. "promote the awakening of a social consciousness" in Halifax (a frustrating experience) and therefore welcomed the opportunity to work with Women & Film as well. Fortunately Sony lived up to its reputation for

repeated mechanical breakdown and enabled me to devote more time to the organizing of the Festival. And for me the experience was an *informative and valuable one*.

The women (men and children) who attended the Festival were mostly students, friends, "non-professional professionals", between the ages of 18-25; a grand cross-section of the academic middle class. We related very well. We feel one of the reasons we failed to get a greater cross-section of the city is that the Festival was held in the University Arts Centre, in the south end (affluent) and therefore saw the same faces the Arts Centre always sees. This problem might have been avoided if Women & Film had happened in the north end (low income) or had travelled the local theatre circuits.

The more popular films were *A Very Curious Girl*, *Wanda*, *La Vie Revée Peasant Women of Ryazan*, *One Woman*, *Germaine Greer vs. the U.S.A.*; any documentaries dealing specifically with women and related problems, Canadian shorts and animation films (ie. *A Windy Day*, *One Hand Clapping*, etc.). No film aroused a strong negative response.

The Festival was definitely well-received by "film-buffs" and people glad for the opportunity to view films that are otherwise inaccessible for some strange distribution reasons or other . . . and I think revived an interest in establishing an underground cinema in Halifax where local work might be screened as well as international work and films that commercial theatres aren't interested in. Women in Film also raised an outcry for a women's consciousness raising centre/meeting place; as we don't have one to speak of — but certainly a desire for one. And it created the beginnings of a Women's Photo Co-op. All in all it was a stimulating force . . . hopefully it doesn't end there.

Yours in film,  
Jay Maclean

Regina

Well the date was rapidly approaching and we were beginning to wonder if the publicity had gotten through and whether anyone would come. Well — they did.

Wednesday — the first day was a high. *Woo Hoo May Wilson* has to be on a best film list. It was seen by a lot of older women and received much vocal appreciation. *Betty Tells Her Story* — laughter and clapping the first time around — intense silence for the second part. The day ended with *A Very Curious Girl* — the audience left feeling happy and together.

Thursday had a lower energy level. The films weren't as good or were heavies. *Sambizanga* is a tremendously moving film — extremely well done — for a lot of people it was impossible to see anything else afterwards. Comic relief was needed and wasn't forthcoming. At 2 o'clock in the morning *Near The Big Chakra* was shown — what was left of the audience got up one by one and left.

Daycare was outstanding. Marilyn Driver and crew came loaded with flowers, trees, furniture, paper maché, Pooh animals and transformed a dull institutional room into a garden of delights. They didn't just babysit — they showed the children a really good time. The kids even made a movie — one child introduced it and we showed it — all three minutes of it — during the festival.

It is too soon to tell if the festival will have an impact on women's films and art in this city. The films and the workshops were stimulating and contacts were made so . . . who knows?

Was the festival worth the effort — emphatically yes!

Janet Hone

Saskatoon

The Women and Film Festival opened in Saskatoon at the Saskatoon Public Library on July 12 with an evening of poetry, music, dance and



Photo: Angel Wells

Penni Berton and Deanne Taylor

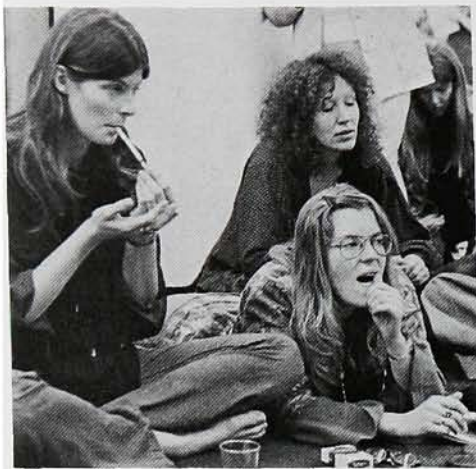


Photo: Angel Wells

One of the group discussions



Photo: Angel Wells

Lydia Wazana, member of Women & Film in a group discussion

drama, amid an exhibition of photography, painting, crafts and sculptures all by local women. This coming-together of local women on all levels of consciousness and creativity contributed immensely to the high enthusiasm that carried through the whole event.

A great number of women contributed to the eventual realization of the festival in Saskatoon. Most of the heavy organization was done by two staff members of the Public Library who were given some work time to do so. The leadership provided by the library established a dynamic that allowed interested women to plug in for a variety of artistic or feminist reasons.

The Festival was well attended, with one-third of the audience being male. As there is little opportunity in Saskatoon to see many films other than commercial ones, the great emphasis was on the screenings, with little interest shown in workshops. An attendant resource room was used, however, to relax, peruse the odd thing, listen to music, and to rap.

An interesting outcome of the festival was the awareness on the part of many women that personal statements can be meaningful in a creative way and that we could make films or, as many of our local sisters showed us, write poems, paint or take photographs.

Frances Bergles

#### Vancouver

It was a great experience working together with other women – have become friends and want and plan to continue to get together and carry on. Much support for each other. Growing intimacy in common problems and goals. Became much more than 'just an organizational' group.

We had some problems in regionalism vs. nationalism – hard not to have a say in the selection of films and scheduling. We want to do our own, yet are tied to T.O. purse strings – as selection and quantity would have been different had it all been under our control.

We are continuing to meet and in-

volve more women – not sure of our new direction at this point, but already a small film has been born, *Wonder Woman*, by four in the group (6 minutes of fun and messages) and a photo show in the North Vancouver Gallery of works from the Festival.

Good feelings from most (of the attending women.) The response positive. Some doubts re: choice of films (inevitable!) Strongest feeling was "too much too soon" – not enough time to talk between films, hard to get together without missing out on films. We would like to do it again over several weeks – months – perhaps an evening each week with time to talk afterwards.

Strong positive reactions to films relating directly to women's problems, eg. abortion etc. – also to *Gertrude Stein*, *Sambizanga*, *A Very Curious Girl*, *Dance Girl Dance*, *Windy Day*, *Germaine Greer vs. the U.S.A.*, and *La Vie Revée*.

We had several women's groups ask to set up tables to advertise, sell books, spread info, etc. Brought lots of us together for the first time. Also defined us as a 'group' in the eyes of others (we had not realised ourselves as a group until the Festival). Great mix – working women, student women, older women. We had the fourth day of the Festival for non-film activity – discussions, etc.

1. Women's Health Group
2. Women and the Law
3. Women's co-op theatre – a play
4. Slide show of women's travel through Africa
5. Plus video workshops.

A good time was had by almost all!

Take care,  
Jan Cornflower

#### Victoria

The Women and Film Festival was held in Victoria for two days at the end of June. In spite of very sunny weather and the general lack of interest most Victorians display toward film events, the Festival attracted good-sized crowds

for both afternoon and evening sessions. The main emphasis of the Festival in Victoria centered on the image of women in the film medium. For the most part audiences were young and fairly hip, although there were women of all ages and backgrounds: for instance, thanks to help from the Community Action Group in Victoria many women from low-income families were able to attend the Festival.

Generally, there was surprise at the amount of work already done in cinema by women, great interest and delight in *Dance Girl Dance*, *La Vie Revée*, *A Very Curious Girl*, and a certain degree of disappointment and irritation with a number of the shorts included with the package. In many cases, the audience felt that the criterion of selection for the tour package had perhaps been based on quantity rather than quality. As organizer, I would like to have previewed the package and edited out some of the less interesting pieces. It was my feeling that the tour package could, for Victoria, have been edited down to two evenings without the afternoon sessions, or put together as a very full (but effective and appealing) one day festival rather than have it dragging slightly over two days.

The Festival did appear to stimulate interest in the University of Victoria's film programs – the Division of Continuing Education will offer a *Media Cycle* next year, for example – but other direct influences were less easy to determine.

Nora Hutchison

#### Whitehorse, Yukon

The Women and Film Festival held in Whitehorse June 23 and 24 was received enthusiastically, with a larger turn-out than had been expected by the organizers. The feature *A Very Curious Girl* was one of the more popular films, but all were stimulating and of interest to the audience. The Video Workshop was not as popular, nor was there any parti-



"Sambizanga"

icipation by Women's Groups. The lack of participation by groups was due to the timing of the Festival; by mid-May all organizations in the north have recessed until mid-September, in order to enjoy to the fullest the short summer, and no one is willing to re-organize for any specific project such as the Festival. Taking everything into consideration, the Whitehorse Women and Film Festival was most successful, in that it succeeded in generating a feeling of interest and excitement in local women.

Joyce Hayden  
Co-Organizer

#### Toronto

The opening of the festival Friday night was the kind of success that threatens the rest of the week with anti-climax.

**Women's films are good, often very good, and they are different.**

Four shorts began the programming. Sharon Hennessey's (USA) *What I Want* was an ideal opener: the close-up of lips declaring personal desires drew back until at length the full woman and the endless list from which she read was disclosed. This was followed by a textural treat, *Orange* by Karen Johnson (USA) in which the magnified shredding and ripping of the tissues of the fruit's flesh, until, spurting and dripping, it was finally devoured, created strange sensations of empathy. The two Canadian shorts were Veronika Soul's *How the Hell are You*, an experimental work using a multiplicity of techniques to embellish the subject of communication between two people, and Sandy Wilson's funny, touching, *Bridal Shower* an affectionate mockery of some of the mores of Canadian women. These four well-selected teasers prepared the audience for a festival in which they would be constantly amazed, delighted and occasionally overwhelmed by the diversity, the skill, the cleverness and depth, originality and capabilities of women's work in the world of film.



Scene from "La Vie Revée"

The intention of the Festival was to create an awareness of what women could do, and what they have done, in film. Right from the beginning it became apparent they would succeed.

**Women's films are full of subtlety, layers of awareness, complex.**

The *pièce de resistance* Friday night was Mireille Dansereau's bright beauty of a film, her feature *La Vie Revée*. (See *Cinema Canada* issue no. 5 for a discussion of this film, and an interview). This film is Canadian (well, French Canadian) intellectually astute and sophisticated, well acted and directed, technically adept, and with just a little extra fillup of experimental flourishes in technique. Its subject matter concerns the friendship of two girls whose work with the dream world of filmmaking is as prosaic as their real lives are compared to a dream world of what Romance and Men can offer. They discover the pleasures of friendship between adult females, and they evolve toward futures which may include males and babies, but will not have to.

A bonus of the Festival, was the presence of many of the directors. Dansereau, in discussion later, revealed her present concern with the problems that hit the emancipated woman next: how to enjoy the full possibilities of being female, yet remain free; how, specifically, to bear children and use oneself fully as both a person and a woman, and not slip back into servitude in order to provide a child with security and male and female parental love. Her next film, a special project for the NFB studies four women who are each in some way tackling the complexities of the sustained free life.

Of the many other directors present during the Festival, Agnès Varda also had noticeably passed the assertive stage of female awareness and was presently

deeply involved in struggling with the practical means of managing a full womanly non-submissive creative life.

**Women's films are open-ended, full of unanswered questions, unresolved problems.**

The week became a celebration.

This was the first festival of women's films in Canada, and by far the greatest showing of Canadian women's films anywhere, anytime, and perhaps ever. The work of over 50 Canadian women was included.

I'd love to go on and on about each film, each showing, the shorts, the documentaries, the audience reactions, discussions, panels, and interviews, but since the films alone numbered 200 selections from the 450 considered, the writing would be endless.

Therefore, briefly:

Among the films that were impressive, and to indicate something of the great variety of styles and types of films shown, I'd like to note:

Nelly Kaplan's (France) *A Very Curious Girl*, a humorous hard farce in which Bernadette la Font manages to put down (literally) a whole village of men; Barbara Loden's (USA) muted, honest and pathetic *Wanda*; the opaque and multilayered brilliance of Marguerite Duras' (France) *Nathalie Granger*; the subtle sensitive and pained truth of *Le Bonheur* by Agnès Varda; the free-form, non-conformist *Daisies* by Czech "new-wave" director Vera Chytilova, a mad jig that becomes a jig-saw with the parts of the puzzle fitting together into a bizarre pattern.

**Women's films are unusually beautiful and sensitive to beauty.**

It was fascinating to see the romantic Wagnerian *Blue Light*, an early film by Leni Riefenstahl, who later went on to notoriety as Hitler's best film propagandist, as well as the seldom seen early

German film *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931) and two notable rare Russian films, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, a remarkable compilation film that established the genre, and Olga Preobrajenskaia's fabulous *Peasant Women of Ryazan* of 1927.

**Women's films are often cyclical in construction. If the "race" and the "road" are metaphors suitable to men's lives, then the circle is the metaphorical description of the female's. The films reflect the cycle of life.**

Among straight works, marketable productions suiting their day, were Dorothy Arzner's (USA 1940) *Dance, Girl, Dance* with Lucille Ball and Maureen O'Hara, Jacqueline Audry's (France) *La Garconne* and Márta Mészáros' (Hungary) *Free Breathing*. All these nevertheless were stoked by a woman and found to be permeated with subversive femininism, much to the joyous delight of the responsive audience at the Festival.

**Humor in women's films is frequently mocking and wry.**

The power associated with males, the sense of violence missing all through the week, was to some extent provided by the last film, Sarah Muldoror's *Sambizanga*, a disclosure in dramatic terms of the Angolese struggle for freedom from Portuguese domination. Even here the violence was done by establishment figures to a victim and there was not the violence of a battle or an equal fight. Interesting.

**Women's films have little violence, but death is present. Death is often the only solution; there are seldom "winners".**

Mai Zetterling's *The Girls* (Sweden) was hailed as something of a banner piece for festivals, so appropriate is its theme of the woman who tries to arouse other women to an awareness of their situation and some action concerning it. Her film involves three actresses touring with *Lysistrata* (amusingly new to much of the audience) who become influenced and inspired by the words of power and defiance spoken by the Greek ladies in the drama.

**Sex in women's films is often amusing, a little ridiculous.**

**Love in women's films is very serious and deep.**

I came in a few minutes late for Sylvia Spring's *Madeleine Is...* On screen a young couple were setting up a date, he very tickled, bumping into things, awkward and funny, she full of incredible unbelieving smiles. Audience was laughing happily and I thought, what short is this? It was with a jolt I realized this tender silly scene, amusing and touching, was in *Madeleine Is...* the over-condemned feature, that were

one to believe the General Press, would induce a bout of overwhelming nausea. By the end of the delightful film I only wished that Spring hadn't bitten off so much for this first feature. But her fault is not uncommon, I discovered after a week of viewing women's films. The general tendency of women directors seems to be to cram their films with meanings and motives on as many levels as possible, almost as though they felt they'd never get another feature to make and had to say everything while they had the chance. And maybe there's something to that.

**Many women's films are crammed too full, try to say too much.**

There were certainly some in every audience of 500 who, like Sylvia Spring, felt "they knew who the enemy was." In fact, Sunday night I was afraid that the Festival might be swerved from its essential purpose of awakening female ego and consciousness, by the numerous Ladies of Lesbos who booed and hissed all the males in the movies, so energetically were they carried away with enthusiasm for these potent views of the underdog from eye-level. A heavy day of French films on Monday quietened them entirely.

**Women's films reflect women's existence. Instead of achieving action, they build depth. Instead of killing, they die. Instead of being crushed, they smile and hide deeper.**

An issue raised by American visitors and directors was the question, what comes first to you Canadians, being women or being Canadian? The tricky situation was explained best by Sandra Gathercole who tactfully suggested that female Canadian filmmakers were as anxious not to be dominated by imperialistic female Americans as males, and thus their position was unique from the American females.

Madeleine Anderson, black female American filmmaker (who directed the documentary *I Am Somebody* about the emergence of a union for hospital workers) put prejudice in its place. Commenting on her familiarity with it, "I try not to discriminate," she said, in answer to an audience question about working with men. To a roar of audience approval, she continued, "I don't discriminate against males, whites, women or anybody else."

**There are three main types of women's films: the therapeutic, where the filmmaker says and shows a lot she needs to release; the documentary or informative, which unfortunately still mostly preaches to the converted; and the fiction film with general public appeal. There is a big unfed audience for all these films. Women are hungry for the therapy, for the information, for the image of themselves as people.**

After the whole Festival I still find the most effective image-building, politically-helpful films to be those that lure an audience into an appreciation of the woman as a unique female character. Thus the 33 minute short by American Amalie Rothschild, *Woo Who May Wilson*, made cheaply with college equipment for about \$2,000.00 in 1970, provides a superb example of the feasible and expedient type of film many women could make right now. In it we meet May Wilson, a 63 year old New York artist, and learn that after a life spent in the country tending home and husband and children and garden she abruptly was informed at the age of 60 by her husband that "his future plans did not include her." Moving to New York she discovers herself with the aid of hilarious 4/25 cent photos, object sculptures and new young friends.

Anyone under 30 today, any female that is, who *doesn't* liberate herself is pathetic. But when you see a 63 year old woman contend with an unknown self and a male world and come up smiling, then you feel liberation is possible for everyone. **If men go to women's films they will learn a lot — if they see the differences.**

It certainly was a great feeling to sit in that auditorium and *feel* so completely acceptably a woman, without any pressure from the nearest male presence. In fact I was always a little disappointed when a man sat near, still too tuned to perceiving his reactions to completely cut them off.

And the women present were beautiful. Clothes were individual and distinctive; the females floated by in every imaginable color, pattern, and material, womanly bodies visible in unashamed naturalness. I heard a visitor exclaim, "They certainly don't dress like this in Chatham!"

But what I liked best was the feel of hundreds of women; that indescribably sweet camaraderie every group gets somewhere near its walking stage. Whether the intentions are to build a barn or reorganize parliament, to make a film or save a country, groups produce, for a while at least, a lovely wave of strength and uniformity that lulls the longing human into kinship and belonging. — by Natalie Edwards

**NOTE:**

*The Programme Notes prepared by Kay Armatage and Linda Beath, a 46 page illustrated catalogue of all the features, shorts, documentaries and cartoons shown, was the bargain of this or any festival. Complete with distribution information and well-written capsule commentaries on each film plus a section on the filmmakers it is a useful resource tool to add to any collection of film information. Cinebooks in Toronto still has a number at fifty cents a copy.●*

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