

fireweed anne vs. the feminists

by Anne Cameron

Anne Cameron participated in a film festival in Vancouver recently and had an uncomfortable time. She has written an uncomfortable article, and many readers may disapprove. But that doesn't worry the author. Meanwhile, jurists across the country may rise to salute her. Like those who did the preselection for the Canadian Film Awards, only to have to spend \$25 to see the show, Cameron learned that judging isn't all it's trumped up to be.



Illustrations by Don Arioli

I was sitting at my desk, staring out the window, watching my erratic neighbours totally insane Maltese bounce at the end of his tie-cord, pretending I was working on my novel, knowing in my heart of hearts that all I was doing was fantasizing more ways to get rid of the yapping dog. I'd been through the more obvious ways, like charge out of the house, run across the road and kick the little sucker to death, and had gotten to the more esoteric planning stage. I'd take fibre glass insulation, roll it up inside little balls of tempting hamburger, feed it to the ugly little scum and sit back and laugh while he died a slow and agonizing death, his innards shredded by the glass fibres, his yap-yap-yap diminishing as he weakened... and the phone rang.

It always does. I might have been able to swing from the yapping dog to an international spy thriller, written a script that would have been snatched up by hungry producers, made a smash hit movie and gotten rich and been able to move to... this week it's Little Cayman Island, I understand it is not only eternally warm there, they have few phones and a Canadian dollar will still buy a cup of coffee. A demi-tasse, no doubt.

The voice on the other end of the phone asked me if I would consider being on the jury of the Feminist Film and Video Festival in Vancouver. I've never been on any kind of a jury, not even the kind where the law demands you give up your job, home, and family, and decide fine points of law for eleven dollars a day. Besides, I'm a sucker for anything that might improve the disgusting lack of opportunity for talented women in film. So I said yes. Before we agreed that I would, in fact, be part of the jury, the caller stressed a point. "One thing," she warned, "this is a *feminist* film festival." "Yeah?" I replied with my usual verbal skills showing. "Are you sure you can work with *feminists*?" I was going to laugh, but she sounded dreadfully serious, which, somehow, 'everybody' does, more's the pity, so instead of laughing I tried a little humour for the folks on the mainland, a little Vancouver Island humour, which I keep forgetting is not always understood. "I've even been known to be able to work with men." I don't think I should have said that.

Anyway, we patched up that misunderstanding, and made arrangements for me to receive a package explaining the concept and planning of the feminist film festival. It wasn't a big package and it didn't take me long to read it, but it didn't answer very many of my questions.

Over I went to the mainland and braved the mysteries of the Vancouver transit system. Of course, I had help; a friend of mine met me and escorted me because I'm always getting on the right bus on the wrong side of the street, thus going away from instead of towards my supposed destination. My friends tell me the rest of my life is like that, too, the right bus, but the wrong direction and me watching out the window in happy ignorance, enjoying the scenery anyway.

I have to admit, right off the bat, that I didn't get to every viewing evening and didn't see all the entries. It isn't always easy to cross 42 miles of water (3 hours from downtown Nanaimo to downtown Vancouver), then make it clear across town on busses, even when you have people who will guide you like the badly directed hillbilly you are. Sometimes one

gets detoured. The more bits and snippets of bad film I saw the easier it was to get detoured. I have an alter-ego lives inside the sophisticated, demure veneer I present to the world. (!) Her name is Fireweed Anne, and she's eleven and a half years old. Her hair is unruly, she has a patch on the knee of her jeans and a Black Diamond softball mitt hangs from her belt. She chews DoubleBubble gum and snaps it viciously and looks with gimlet eyes on the doin's of the Big People. She also makes rude mental comments when bullshit tries to baffle brains and on those rare occasions when I lose my temper (which of course Never Happens) she stands on the sidelines yelling Sic 'em Cami... she loves good film and will sit with me happily through untold playings of **Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox** or **The Conversation**, but she curls up and goes to sleep when it's bad film and helped me do something in Toronto that I have never before done, not since I saw my first film at age six (it was **Lassie Come Home**). I walked out of a film, an event not unnoticed by half a dozen of my friends. An event I thought would be cause for Trudeau to declare a national holiday. And Fireweed Anne was not enjoying being around during the judging of the entries for the feminist film festival. I resisted the temptations she offered with dedicated zeal and did not detour by way of the aquarium to watch the whales. I did not go to watch the human zoo on Skid Row. I didn't even pop into the planetarium to see what the other kind of stars were doing, but I did miss some of the showings.

I get hardnosed and difficult when things which are supposed to kick off at seven haven't kicked off at eight. I begin to feel like a fool when I've been five hours in the journeying and find myself, out of a supposed jury of twelve, one of four in a viewing room. I get downright mean natured when I suspect that whatever the jury thinks or doesn't think a film will be shown at the festival anyway, *if* the right person wants that film shown. For whatever reason. "Why're you bothering to mark all them dumb pieces of paper when you *know* she's gonna show that dirty piece of trash?" F/A kept asking. And I didn't have an answer for her. And the piece of trash got shown even though it was ripped apart by the members of the jury present when it was previewed.

And people begin to dislike me intensely when I ask awkward questions. Like the one I asked the very first night of previewing. We'd sat through a couple of hours of agonizingly bad pieces of drivel and F/A was giving me a lot of trouble and the friend who had escorted me to the proper place was falling asleep and we broke for coffee. Nobody seemed to "know" anybody else and we were all being kind of hesitant and stiff and F/A gave me a kick in the slats that caused me to turn to the woman who had phoned me in the first place. I reminded her of the phone conversation and her question about whether or not I was sure I could work with *feminists*, and then F/A made me ask "What is a 'feminist'?"

Well, you don't ask questions like that, I guess. There was just silence. Everybody looked at everybody else. I, of course, *knew* in my heart of hearts they were looking at each other and thinking Christ, is she dumb! So I asked it again a different way. "What, exactly, do you mean when you say *feminist*?" The silence just got deeper, darker, and more disapproving. Finally, a woman filmmaker grinned at me and said "you're surrounded by a room full of them." F/A nudged me and I replied "I'm in a room full of women. If all wo-

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men are feminists, why ask the question. Can't men be feminists too?" Nobody answered that one.

I guess I'm still waiting for an answer to my question. I'm getting so confused about "the movement" that the more I read and ask, the less I understand.



Some very nice pieces of work done by women didn't get shown at the film festival. Pardon me, the Feminist Film Festival. Some pieces of unmitigated trash did get shown. And I don't understand that, either.

I didn't even attend all of the festival. So what, you ask, is she doing writing an article, she didn't go to all the judging,

she didn't understand what was meant by feminist, and she didn't attend the festival in its entirety; well, probably nobody else is going to write anything at all about it and nature abhors a vacuum (grade seven English, parables and quotations).

The festival ran from Friday to Sunday, inclusive and on Friday I was flying back from Toronto and the film awards and festival (where I walked out of my first film; a Canadian film at that, I just couldn't stand the tank and the crushed tent and found it impossible to endure another minute). Friday night I had a poetry reading in Vancouver, but on Saturday I went to the Feminist Film Festival. I was supposed to be part of a panel that was supposed to discuss Women, the Law, Violence against Women and Alternatives. The panel never really happened, or rather the panel happened, we just didn't discuss anything and I'm not sure why, everything was such confusion and none of us seemed to know what we were doing there.

I did see a couple of really nice films and the food facilities were extremely well set up, with good food available at reasonable prices.

And I had the wonderful experience of hearing Barbara Martineau give a talk on the history of women in film. A talk I think this magazine ought to print in its entirety because of the sheer superior quality of content. The audience not only enjoyed the talk, they asked if it would be possible to get copies and asked a question that needs answering; why don't we hear, read and see more about the women who have made good films and meaningful contributions to the history of film?

After Martineau's talk, I left. It was partly spite, partly the fact I *knew* the rest of the afternoon would be downhill and it's VanIsle to leave when the party is at its peak and go home with good memories. The spite? Well, I have a very small mind. My friend and I walked up to the front door and went inside and were asked if we were "registered." I said I'd only come to participate in the panel discussion and a little woman with an aggressive face and even more aggressive attitude told me I'd have to pay to get in anyway. For a start, anybody with an aggressive face and aggressive attitude isn't going to see the sunny side of *me*. Then there's the red-necked reactionary in me who is turned off by anybody who mixes their sexual identity and their politics and waves it in my face by gluing sequins (bright red ones) to the back of a jean jacket and walks around like a living advertisement for "Lesbian Unity." I openly admit, that kind of public display threatens me. I don't know *why* it threatens me and I don't care why it threatens me, but F/A just mutters "tacky tacky tacky" and I agree with her. Suddenly all I could think of was My God, three return trips by ferry at ten bucks a trip, then add the cost of meals while away from home and how many hours sitting on a hard chair watching crap and filling out forms and this little runt with the confrontation syndrome sticking out of her ears, wants another five bucks? "Bullshit" said F/A. "I'm not paying a cent," I said and walked in as bold as brass. I was told I could stay for the panel discussion but I wasn't to watch any films. And to spite them (because you will find few people more small minded than me when there's a point to be made or a nit to be picked) I watched two! So there!

We didn't go to the dance they threw on Saturday night. Cleo Laine was appearing at the Queen Elizabeth and we went to sit in comfortable seats and watch Professionalism at work

on stage. "Howcum you can't sing like that?" F/A asked and didn't pop her gum once in nearly three hours. After Cleo we went to my friend's place to listen to records, having agreed that there was no way we wanted to walk out of an evening of first rate music to go to a dance where they didn't even have a live band. VanIsle logic again, you don't ruin a good meal with a lousy desert!

And Sunday there were too many other things to do that seemed preferable to tangling with the aggressive lady at the front door; because there was no way at that point that I was going to pay, you understand! Besides we didn't get out of bed until nearly noon, jet lag and ten days in Tarana had caught up with me.

I still don't know what a *feminist* is. I do know women are making film. Some of it is bad. Some of it is very, very good. I watched and admired a half hour film *Anastasia* by a Quebec filmmaker, Paule Baillargeon and thought it as fine a short as I had seen; made with practically no money, using a theatre group of dedicated actors and actresses and, so far, not only ignored but deliberately suppressed by "everyone." The National Film Board, which seems somehow to help train and develop many less talented filmmakers, just refused to help this woman make a second film. Some of the stuff the NFB entered in the feminist film festival wasn't one-tenth the film *Anastasia* is, so I don't understand their decision process at all. Does anybody?

Women are making film and have a long history of making film. The history, like many women's films is being suppressed. They aren't teaching it in film courses, they aren't telling us or showing us. Good films are sitting in archives and libraries, being deliberately ignored. So every generation of bright young women who want to make film wind up having to find out for themselves, re-make mistakes other women have had to make, use up a lot of energy and time stumbling and experimenting, re-tracing the same rocky paths.

It's a good way to keep us from forging ahead and making real progress.

I guess some men out there are going to say Pshaw, more Womens Lib bullshit, I don't believe it, so what... there aren't enough *good* filmmakers in this country to support a national film industry. The women who could help and make vital contributions are being suppressed. It isn't only to the benefit of women that we be allowed into the sacred fields, it's to your benefit, too. We aren't all wearing confrontation messages on our backs, we aren't all politically committed to hating, distrusting or antagonizing men. Hell, some of us have even managed to work with you! But I suspect too many men are too locked in to the old silliness and believe the stereotypes. And of course, the bad filmmakers in the country don't want anybody showing them up as bad filmmakers.

I hope, for all the mistakes, misunderstandings and fumbings that there is a feminist film festival in Vancouver again next year. I will not sit on the jury, I will not donate hours of time and nearly ninety dollars to the festival and I will not sit on a panel that doesn't really happen. I'll just go, pay my money and see some films.

Maybe the only people who can ever enjoy a film festival are those who didn't have to work to make it happen!

And I hope that in future, as we find out more about our own history and see and hear more from people like Barbara Martineau, our prickly discomfort will start to diminish and we'll stop being so antagonistic and so quick to create a con-

frontation. I think there is more place for a *Woman's Film Festival* than a *Feminist Film Festival* because I think I am not the only person in the world who is no longer sure what the word *feminist* means. There was nothing happening that I could see that would have made a man feel welcome at that festival. If feminism means segregation by sex, then I am not a feminist. I have two sons and it might come as one hell of a shock to the several women with sequin'ed messages on their jackets, but my sons are human beings too, and as decent as their sister. And I refuse to live in a world, however *feminist* where my sons are not welcome. Radical anything makes me uncomfortable. Shrill screaming and deliberate impoliteness make me angry. And anybody who sets up a confrontation situation with me has just found all the confrontation they're apt to be able to handle! We don't have to be impolite, mouthy and deliberately insulting. Surely to god their is room still for good manners, pleasant faces, smiles and even a small touch of humour. I know there are a lot of men who have not yet learned the first thing about equality but we aren't going to teach them by making them so unwelcome and uncomfortable that they don't show up to see the films!

There isn't much future in talking to already listening ears; especially if what you're saying is closing some of those ears. And mine aren't as open as they were a few months ago.

But I still think there is room for women oriented film, for film festivals showing the work women are doing, and room for all the encouragement we can give to young women who want to work in film.

It's all this damned militant radicalism makes me agree totally with F/A that it's time to leave, the party's getting rough. □

