

## Studio D's executive producer wins Order of Canada

# Kathleen Shannon: Goodbye to all that



by John Timmins

At the very moment when she might be expected to bask in the glory of achievement – Order of Canada in hand – Kathleen Shannon has resigned as executive producer of Studio D, the famous women's studio at the National Film Board of Canada.

Studio D with its 13-member, all-female staff is full of talent. Two Academy Awards in 12 years – *I'll Find A Way* directed by Beverly Shaffer (1978) and *If You Love This Planet* directed by Terri Nash (1982) – is not a bad average for any Canadian studio. And NFB rental and sales statistics eliminate any lingering doubt that this is where the talent lies. *If You Love This Planet* and *Not a Love Story* by Bonnie Klein are the two most often booked films in the NFB inventory.

Yet there are many insiders who will agree, nevertheless, that without Shannon's persistent efforts to develop not just a studio of women filmmakers but a studio devoted to creating a body of women-centered and issue-oriented documentaries, Studio D would be as obscure and shapeless in the public imagination as are NFB studios A, B and C.

June 1986 was eventful for Shannon. Early in the month she quietly announced her resignation, effective in June. Shortly after, it was announced to

her that she would be awarded Canada's highest civilian distinction – the Order of Canada – in October. The prospects inherent in both winning the Order and resigning from her job are equally important to Shannon. On one hand, she can now leave the studio to relax, reflect and write. On the other hand, the Order of Canada means greater recognition for the studio – to which she plans to return in a creative, non-bureaucratic role.

"I am really gratified to receive the Order of Canada but I don't consider it an individual achievement award. It is recognition of the collective body of work known as Studio D," says Shannon.

When Shannon was asked to establish the studio in 1974, she had already worked at the NFB for 18 years. As a sound and picture editor she has close to 200 films to her credit. In 1970 she was director/producer of the Challenge for Change Program, a directing debut which led to a number of films including the 11-part series entitled *Working Mothers*.

In those early days, says Shannon, nowhere in the world could one find a studio on which to model Studio D, not surprising given that the feminist movement in North America was just then finding its collective voice. What does require explanation, says Shannon, is that unless one takes a hard look at the woman's program established by the Australian Film Commission in 1984, Studio D continues to stand alone.

Shannon has an explanation. She says the success of Studio D has been determined no less by the integrity of its

filmmakers (who put as much effort into knowing their audience as they do into making a film) than by a female point of view brought to the screen and viewed as something intimately appealing to anyone who is at all honest with his or her self. Shannon says that this approach or female perspective on current issues of the day – Nicaragua, abortion, rape, pornography, the nuclear arms race – is too often discredited by prevailing male perspectives and attitudes.

That, says Shannon, is one explanation as to why Studio D stands alone. And it will be a source of reflection for her writing in the months to come.

"The thing is," says Shannon, "that what women do gets buried."

"We are constantly discredited. Because our films are different than men's films it is assumed that we are ignorant of the rules and don't know any better. The truth is that we see things differently. We make different kinds of juxtapositions. We see connections and things more in their interwovenness – which men call diffuse."

In putting down on paper what she perceives to be the reality of Studio D, so often clouded by the mutually exclusive views of the experts, Shannon hopes to be able to assist women who attempt the same sort of woman-centered undertaking as Studio D in other lines of endeavour. "I've been here all along and a lot of what I hear about Studio D is strange to me."

She is not worried about the future of the studio once she relinquishes the control of executive producer. It is

rather the future of the NFB that concerns her.

The NFB, she says, must remain as a strong source of funding for the "shoe-string private sector" – the small independents and co-operatives that need NFB support to make socially relevant films, films of dissent, or films that bring forth information otherwise not available. The danger, she says, lies in emulating U.S. trends towards solely economic objectives where vast sums of money are poured into mindless entertainment products to achieve the economic designs of a very few people. The sheer volume of violent or soporific escapist entertainment produced in the U.S. tends to alienate individuals from each other – and that is directly counter to the effect film should have, says Shannon.

"If we let hard-nosed commercial economic imperatives become our own, we've got a lot to lose. Where else in this so-called democratic society do we really get together with people we don't know to look at the things we have in common and ways to make our lives more felicitous? TV doesn't do it because we are watching it in isolation. I feel so strongly that we have to preserve that option."

Shannon says she gets the sense that this option is diminishing as the relative proportion of Studio D funding also diminishes.

"Studio D is the strongest card the NFB has. But it is not being played"

Why not?

That is what Shannon intends to devote her time to writing about.

John Timmins is a Cinema Canada staff reporter.