

Beverly Shaffer's  
**To a Safer Place**

In Toronto this year, a woman lost custody of her son and daughter to her ex-husband, even though it has been proven that he was sexually abusing both children. She was judged an unfit mother because of her lesbianism. Obviously, a parent's sexual orientation raises more indignant eyebrows than a parent's sexual abuse.

Linda Turcotte was raped by her father. Her fingers trace the air, outlining the deformities of the child she gave birth to as a teenager. Charges were brought against her father but the court ruled in his favour. Shirley Turcotte recalls being unsupportive of her sister and calling her a sleazy bitch. Neither women can remember a time when they were not being sexually abused by their father.

Shirley is the focus of *To a Safer Place*, produced by the National Film Board's Studio D and directed by Beverly Shaffer. The hour-long film is a series of confrontations and confessions as she visits her mother, her siblings and her past, trying to find some sense in the shock and pain.

Her parents separated after the court case. Linda was allowed to live with her mother, but Shirley (then age 8) and her brothers Wilfred and Larry were forced to live with Dad and his new wife on a farm near Winnipeg. The basement was their territory and their prison; they were not allowed upstairs. The children do not remember ever being loved or cared for. Even today, they have no idea what their father did for a living. They think he may have been an entertainer. Says Larry, "He never talked to us about anything, he just simply used us."

The film does not fall into the trap of overlooking incest on the whole just because



Shirley Turcotte and her mother

Shirley's experiences are supposedly 'extreme'. Abuse is abuse is abuse, neither the courts nor the neighbours thought it was much to worry about.

From the comfort of their living room, 20 years later, the couple who used to live next door to the Turcottes tell Shirley what she was like as a child: "Grubby, nondescript, you would just disappear... you had no sparkle to you at all." Shirley wonders if they would react differently today, if they would intervene. The woman thinks she would at least be there to listen. Her husband is not so sure: "You can't just walk in and say, 'What's going on here?' You'd have to

ask the father. He's at the top of the hierarchy... I would want to hear what he would have to say about it." It is the only scene where Shirley hints at her anger. Her voice cracks, "But about the children - why not ask what they have to say?"

Shirley visits with her mother, now 56 years old and living with her son Wilfred. They talk about this man who was her husband. She couldn't leave him, "There was nobody to turn to, nobody... not even the police. They'd tell me to go home and solve it." Her daughter asks her what she did with her anger. "Bury it."

*To a Safer Place* explores the debilitating effects on the family of sexual and physical abuse: a

warped violence that, while killing the family, paradoxically, is protected by it. "We were so isolated," says Shirley, "But what children aren't? What family isn't? Incest destroys the bonds children have with each other, and with their parents. In the center of these conflicting negative forces is the father. Says Shirley, "He took so much away from her (mother), even her children. She didn't protect me but she couldn't even take care of herself. She was afraid of him too."

Gerry Rogers, co-producer of *To a Safer Place*, says that the filmmakers wanted to create a film for adult women incest survivors, women who may never join a support group, who may never see a therapist, or even speak about it. It is a film just to say, "You're okay."

In her search for herself, Shirley discovered she was not alone, there are "millions of us, made to feel ashamed and guilty, especially if our bodies responded." When she visits the basement of the old farmhouse she remembers when "he took me until there was no me left."

*To a Safer Place* is a documentary without experts, without 'data'. It is a film about the world from the point of view of one person, about a war as told by a woman; about being torn to pieces. "I always felt a part of me had been missing" says Shirley Turcotte, "But in that basement I recovered the child that had been hiding in the wall. She was the survivor in me. She makes me strong."

Leila Marshy •

**TO A SAFER PLACE** d. Beverly Shaffer with the collab. of Shirley Turcotte ed. Sidonie Kerr Narr. Shirley Turcotte, Gloria Demers d.o.p. Joan Hutton cam. assist. Gillian Stokvis loc. sd. Lorna Rasmussen add. loc. sd. Aerlyn Weissman sd. ed. André Galbrand, Danuta Klis orig. Loreena McKennitt m. ed. Julian Olson re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel p. Gerry Rogers, Beverly Shaffer exec. p. Kathleen Shannon, Barbara Janes, Ginny Stikeman, Rina Fraticelli. Produced by Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada. Distributed by the National Film Board of Canada. colour 16mm, 3/4", VHS, Beta. running time 58 min. 13 sec.

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