

# A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S FILMMAKING AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA INTRODUCED A PIONEERING GENDER-PARITY INITIATIVE IN 2016, ENSURING THAT AT LEAST HALF OF ITS PRODUCTIONS WILL BE DIRECTED BY WOMEN AND HALF OF ALL PRODUCTION SPENDING WILL BE ALLOCATED TO FILMS DIRECTED BY WOMEN.

IN 2017, THE NFB DEEPENED THIS COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS THE GENDER IMBALANCE ACROSS A RANGE OF KEY CREATIVE POSITIONS IN FILM—IN SCREENWRITING, EDITING, SOUND MIXING AND CINEMATOGRAPHY—AS WELL AS ANIMATION AND IMMERSIVE/INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING ROLES SUCH AS ART DIRECTOR, ART DESIGNER AND CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIST.

These new commitments are the latest for the NFB, a Canadian film industry leader in gender equality that made history in 1974 when it established Studio D, the world's first production unit devoted exclusively to work by women filmmakers.

But the NFB's work with women filmmakers also goes back to its earliest days.

When Canada entered WWII in September 1939, the newly created public producer was immediately tasked with making war-related propaganda. With so many men engaged in overseas conflict, women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers—and some would find work on NFB founder John Grierson's

moved rapidly into creative roles. Perhaps the best-known among them were Canada's first woman animator, Evelyn Lambart, who co-directed six films with Norman McLaren and also directed an acclaimed body of solo work; Jane Marsh, the only woman to direct films for the legendary *Canada Carries On* series; and documentary filmmaker Gudrun Parker, who would go on to run the NFB's Education Unit. Besides directing their own films,



EVELYN LAMBART

new team. A number of women came with prior experience and immediately started directing films, including Evelyn Spice Cherry and Judith Crawley. For the most part, however, the first women recruits were hired into junior positions as negative cutters and secretaries. Grierson was quick to recognize initiative, and some women

Judith Crawley and Margaret Perry were the first two women cinematographers to work at the Film Board.

With the advent of television and the NFB's move to Montreal in 1956, a new wave of French-Canadian filmmakers joined the agency. Monique Fortier was the first francophone woman

to direct an NFB film, *À l'heure de la décolonisation* (1963), while Anne Claire Poirier would emerge as a leading Quebec feminist and one of the most important filmmakers of her generation.

Poirier and Kathleen Shannon led the fight for more resources for women's filmmaking at the NFB, each creating a landmark series on the experiences of women for the NFB's pioneering activist film program, *Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle*.

Shannon lobbied tirelessly for a separate women's production unit, and in 1974, in anticipation of the United Nations' International Women's Year, Studio D became the world's first publicly funded production

would establish its own women's program, *Regards de femmes*, under the direction of Josée Beaudet.

Studio D would go on to make some of the NFB's most celebrated films. In its first decade alone, the studio produced three Oscar-winning documentaries: Beverly Shaffer's *I'll Find a Way* (1977), Terre Nash's *If You Love This Planet* (1982) and Cynthia Scott's *Flamenco at 5:15* (1984). *Not a Love Story* (1981), Bonnie Sherr Klein's controversial exposé of commercial pornography, became one of the NFB's biggest commercial hits. Later on came Gail Singer's pioneering look at women in comedy, *Wisecracks* (1991), while *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed*

Quebec's Prix Albert-Tessier for lifetime achievement in cinema, and Mireille Dansereau, co-founder of the Association coopérative des productions audio-visuelles and the first woman in Quebec to direct a fiction feature film for the private sector.

Working predominantly in the 1980s, Diane Beaudry directed a rich body of work documenting the experiences of women across a range of endeavours, including her 1986 film on women in politics, *Histoire à suivre....* Diane Létourneau is another prolific French Program director, whose work includes *Pas d'amitié à moitié* (1991), exploring lifelong friendships among a group of women.

Marquise Lepage has directed landmark works of women's cinema such as *The Lost Garden: The Life and Cinema of Alice Guy-Blaché*, her 1995 portrait of a tireless but largely ignored film pioneer, and the Gémeaux Award-winning *Hopscotch and Little Girls...* (1999), a powerful look at girls around the world whose dreams have been shattered by abuse, forced labour, mutilation and other injustices.

In 1981, the Canadian government launched the Federal Women's Film Program (FWFP), a coalition of federal ministries and agencies that produced and distributed films about the status of women in both French and English, which was administered by Studio D.

unit dedicated to making films by and for women, with Shannon as its first executive producer. Poirier, meanwhile, chose to stay on as an executive producer with *Société nouvelle*, where she believed she could make the biggest difference. In 1986, the NFB's French Program

*Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992), directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, brought LGBTQ issues to a general audience. In French-language production, the NFB has worked with such acclaimed documentarians as Manon Barbeau, winner of

Working outside Studio D, Cynthia Scott collaborated with screenwriter Gloria Demers on the acclaimed alternative drama *The Company of Strangers* (1990). Alanis Obomsawin directed such milestone films as *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years*



ANNE CLAIRE POIRIER

of *Resistance* (1993). Margaret Wescott, who had directed Studio D's *Behind the Veil: Nuns* (1984), explored lesbian history in *Stolen Moments* (1997). In *By Woman's Hand* (1994), Pepita Ferrari chronicled the influential Beaver Hall Hill Group of women artists, while Terre Nash would go on to adapt Marilyn Waring's pioneering work in feminist economics in *Who's Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics* (1995).

women, leading to such works as *Sisters in the Struggle* (1991), co-directed by Dionne Brand and Ginny Stikeman, a multi-award-winning look at Black women in community, labour and feminist organizing.

The groundwork laid by NIF grew into a strong commitment to achieving equitable representation of Indigenous and culturally diverse voices across the NFB, with films like the 1997 Indigenous documentaries *Tshishe*

American women in Islam, Elizabeth St. Philip's *Breakin' In: The Making of a Hip Hop Dancer* (2005), and Karen Cho's *Status Quo? The Unfinished Business of Feminism in Canada* (2012).

In 1996, two years after its 20th anniversary, Studio D was disbanded during a period



KATHLEEN SHANNON

In 1991, Studio D began to respond to demands for greater cultural diversity within the unit with New Initiatives in Film (NIF), a program to provide film training to women of colour and Indigenous women. Studio D head Rina Fraticelli worked with Nova Scotia filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton—co-director of the acclaimed *Black Mother Black Daughter* (1989)—to design a program that would attempt to address the underrepresentation of films by women of colour and Indigenous

*Mishtikuashisht - Le petit grand européen: Johan Beetz* by Joséphine Bacon and French Man, *Native Son* by Monika Ille; *If the Weather Permits* (2003), Elisapie Isaac's exploration of social change in Nunavik; and Tasha Hubbard's Canada Award-winning film on the Saskatoon freezing deaths, *Two Worlds Colliding* (2004).

They also include such acclaimed works as Zarqa Nawaz's *Me and the Mosque* (2005), on the place of North



PAULE BAILLARGEON

of downsizing and shifting internal priorities, leaving in its stead a commitment to women's filmmaking and cultural diversity that is now deeply anchored in the NFB's production studios across the country.

The early decades of the 21st century have been fruitful ones for women's cinema at the NFB, yielding a body of work that includes Sarah Polley's multi-award-winning *Stories We Tell* (2012), one of the most popular NFB theatrical documentaries of all time. Winner of Quebec's two highest honours for lifetime achievement in film, Paule Baillargeon wrote and directed the striking, autobiographical *Trente tableaux* (2011), while Carole Laganière's *Absences* (2013) is a story of loss inspired by her own experience of losing her mother to Alzheimer's.

Chelsea McMullan's artful profile of transgender performer Rae Spoon, *My Prairie Home* (2013), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, as did Sophie Deraspe's NFB co-production *The Amina Profile* (2015), winner of a Special Jury Prize for Canadian Feature at Hot Docs.

Other key documentary titles included Alanis Obomsawin's *Trick or Treaty?* (2014), which garnered the Audience Choice Award at imagineNATIVE; Ève Lamont's *Le commerce du sexe* (2015), a powerful exploration of the sex trade as a modern form of slavery; as well as Mina Shum's *Ninth Floor* (2015), which reopens the file on a watershed moment in Canadian race relations history.

Women have also had a profound impact on the direction of animated storytelling across Canada, especially in Quebec, home to the NFB's two Oscar-winning animation studios. Among the earliest animation pioneers was Evelyn Lambart, who started at the NFB in the 1940s, followed by a second generation of groundbreaking women animators in the 1970s that included such leading figures as Caroline Leaf, Clorinda Warny, Suzanne Gervais and Francine Desbiens.

More recently, Martine Chartrand portrayed the defining moments of Black history in the animated short *Âme noire* (2003), garnering Canadian and international awards including the Golden Bear for best short film at the Berlin International Film Festival. Creator of such powerful and acclaimed works as *Le Chapeau* (1999), Michèle Cournoyer was honoured in 2017 with a Governor General's



ALANIS OBOMSAWIN

Award in Visual and Media Arts for her body of work.

First nominated for an Academy Award for her 1991 paint-on-glass short, *Strings*, Wendy Tilby would partner with Amanda Forbis on two more Oscar-nominated classics: *When the Day Breaks* (1999) and *Wild Life* (2011).

Inspired by NFB animation to go into filmmaking, Norwegian-born, Montreal-based Torill Kove has since created her own celebrated, unique body of work at the NFB, beginning with the Oscar-nominated *My Grandmother Ironed the King's Shirts* (1999) and the Oscar-winning *The Danish Poet* (2006).

## RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

The NFB is working with a diverse roster of established, mid-career and emerging women directors and creators from across the country in documentary, animation and interactive works.

At a time when the financing model for feature documentary films in Canada is in free fall (despite the fact that feature docs are increasingly popular with audiences), the NFB has been an incubator for ambitious and creative feature docs helmed by women.

Marie Clements' *The Road Forward* (2017) is a musical documentary connecting a pivotal moment in Canada's civil rights history—the beginnings of Indian Nationalism in the 1930s—with First Nations activism today. In Tasha Hubbard's *Birth of a Family* (2017), four First Nations siblings taken from their family as part of the Sixties Scoop meet for the first time, while Alanis Obomsawin's *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016) documents a nine-year legal battle to secure equal services for Indigenous youth in Canada.

The NFB has been instrumental in providing filmmakers with the opportunity to explore long-form documentary cinema

for the first time. Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's *Angry Inuk* (2016) garnered the Audience Award at Hot Docs, the Alanis Obomsawin Best Documentary Award at imagineNATIVE and the People's Choice Award



TORILL KOVE

at TIFF's Canada's Top Ten Festival. Zaynê Akyol's NFB/Peripheria Productions doc *Gulistan, Land of Roses* (2016) received the Doc Alliance Selection Award, chosen by Europe's top documentary film festivals. Also making feature doc debuts were Tiffany Hsiung, with *The Apology* (2016), a powerful account of WWII sexual slavery in Japanese-occupied Asia; Montreal-born and Nairobi-based filmmaker

Anjali Nayar, with *Gun Runners* (2016); and Attiya Khan, with *A Better Man* (2017), co-directed by Larry Jackman and co-produced with Intervention Productions.

In auteur animation, *Me and My Moulton* (2014) earned Kove her third Oscar nomination. Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre's short animated documentary *Jutra* was a multi-award winner, receiving the Canadian Screen Award for Best Short Documentary, among others, while Diane Obomsawin's whimsical look at lesbian first love, *I Like Girls* (2016), added the Nelvana Grand Prize for Independent Short Animation at the Ottawa International Animation Festival to its list of honours.

Women animators have also led the way for the NFB at the prestigious Annecy International Animation Film Festival, with awards for Sarah Van Den Boom's *In Deep Waters*, Tali's *Bus Story*, Nicola Lemay and Janice Nadeau's *No Fish Where to Go*, and most recently, the Young Audiences Award for Eva Cvijanović's Bonobostudio/NFB co-production, *Hedgehog's Home* (2017).

As the digital media revolution continues to change how

content is created and experienced, the NFB is also establishing itself as a leader in new interactive and immersive formats for storytelling.

Women creators have played a pioneering role, including transmedia documentary director Katerina Cizek, who worked with the NFB on two multi-year, multi-award-winning projects, *Filmmaker-in-Residence* and *HIGHRISE*; and Leanne Alison, co-creator of the Webby Award-winning interactive documentary *Bear 71*.

Created in collaboration with the newspaper *Le Devoir* for International Women's Day, the interactive photo essay *24 poses féministes*, directed by Caroline Hayeur, explored how young feminists see the world, through the photographs of six young artists.

NFB French Program's 2015 Artist in Residence was Vali Fugulin, whose *Toi, moi et la Charte* won a NUMIX prize for best original interactive documentary. Her latest work is *I Love Potatoes*, an interactive docu-game for kids about social innovation, produced with Montreal indie game company Minority Media, that earned a Canadian Videogame Awards nomination.

## WOMEN'S FILMMAKING AND DIGITAL MEDIA CREATION TODAY

The NFB's landmark 2016 and 2017 gender-parity announcements are key parts of an inclusive vision for women in film and digital media creation that encompasses culturally diverse voices, Indigenous-led production, and emerging creators.

In 2017, the NFB introduced a transformative three-year plan aimed at redefining its relationship with Indigenous peoples, while the legendary

Alanis Obomsawin is completing her 50th film in the 50th year of a distinguished NFB career.

As directors and staff producers, culturally diverse women at the NFB have created many of its most acclaimed and popular works—bringing new stories and perspectives to the screen and, in the process, helping to reframe the national conversation around a range of issues.

The NFB is a place where emerging women creators receive the help and mentorship they need, and a vital entry point into professional film and digital creation, while mid-career and established artists have the freedom, support and resources to experiment, exploring new issues and creative approaches to treatment and story.

