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Movies

The celluloid ceiling

Female filmmakers in Winnipeg fight against sexism in screen trade



By: Jen Zoratti

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Local female filmmakers and videographers on the rooftop of ArtSpace.

In October 2015, Jennifer Lawrence penned an open letter to Hollywood, questioning why she made less money than her male co-stars.

A month later, the New York Times ran a feature on women in Hollywood, in which Maureen Dowd interviewed more than 100 women about the pervasive sexism that holds them back -- and keeps critical perspectives and stories off-screen.

Those two pieces sparked renewed discussion about an age-old problem: the lack of representation of women in film, whether onscreen or behind the camera.



photos by Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press
Envelope-pushing local filmmaker Freya Bjorg Olafson got her start as a dancer.

This disproportionate representation isn't just a Hollywood thing. Women in View, a Vancouver-based group that studies women's participation in Canadian film, released a sobering study in October 2015: of the 91 feature films financed by Telefilm Canada, only 17 per cent were directed by women. Of the 84 television directors helming English dramas, 14 were women.

But women are making moving pictures -- they are just finding alternative means to do so.

In Winnipeg, an independent film and video scene that is populated by a diverse group of dynamic, adventurous women, is trying to tell women's stories while adding female representation in filmmaking.

These women do not always get the recognition, the accolades and the funding, though. But they have two tireless champions in Jennifer Smith, who leads the distribution department at Video Pool Media Arts Centre, and Monica Lowe, who heads the distribution department at Winnipeg Film Group. Their organizations provide several supports for local female film and video makers, including the Women's Film and Video Network, which offers women the chance to connect with one another.

Both are energized by what they see in the Winnipeg scene.

"Women are messing things up -- they are doing what they want, especially in video," Smith says, pointing to groundbreakers such as Freya Bjorg Olafson and Divya Mehra as examples.

"You have Danishka Esterhazy making prairie gothic narratives, and Michelle Elrich translating her poems into film and Leslie Supnet doing these wonderful film experiments and hand-drawn animations," Lowe adds. "Then you get into the doc makers, like the Rahman sisters and Janelle Wookey, who are really telling the stories of their culture. It's really varied."

Winnipeg's arts scene is known for its scrappy resourcefulness. It's precisely that DIY ethos that has made Winnipeg a hotbed for female creators.

Few people exemplify the collaborative spirit better than pioneers Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. They've been working together on feminist performance-art pieces, videos and films since 1989. (The award-winning *A Day in the Life of a Bull-Dyke* and the music video *We're Talking Vulva* are but two of their greatest hits.)

Both say the film industry remains a sexist and hostile place for women, forcing them to adjust. "As a result, I think we end up creating our own work environments," Millan says. "Even if we do decide to make a feature-length film, we often do so outside of normal venues and avenues."

"Winnipeg's art scene is pretty good, as a rule, about just doing things our own way. We just go ahead and make the work we want to make. It's a great place to make work and not get hung up on conventional notions of success and to express our visions on our own terms."

As Millan points out, women don't have to do -- or be -- just one thing here. Olafson is proof. The artist works with video, audio, painting and performance to address "representation and the gendered body as informed through the machines, technology and lens of the camera." Her works have been shown internationally, and she's unveiling a new performance work called CPA (Consistent Partial Attention) at the Asper Centre for Theatre & Film Feb. 18-20.

A classically trained dancer, Olafson found new homes in Graffiti Gallery and Video Pool when she made her transition into film. She found her artistic voice in those spaces. "I learned you can have autonomy, and that there's interest in what you have to say."

And these points of view matter. Representation and visibility matter. It's as Dempsey says: "It's very important to see oneself in one's culture, to feel validated and a part of that culture." To be made to feel like you exist.

"We've always made funny, feminist films and videos that show our reality," she says. "Because we look around pop culture, and we don't see women who look like us. We don't see women who have the same life experiences we do -- and there are a lot of us. In many ways, we made moving images for ourselves as a way to see ourselves -- and as a way to create better endings for women."

Indigenous filmmaker Sonya Ballantyne also knows what it's like to feel invisible in popular culture. The 30-year-old grew up near Easterville and Grand Rapids and searched for role models wherever she could. "It got really bothersome that there weren't girls like me on TV -- or native people in general," she says. North of 60 was pretty much it, and even then, the people in positions of power were white and the show smacked of what Ballantyne calls "poverty porn."

So, like Dempsey and Millan before her, she decided to make her own media. In 2014, Ballantyne won the RBC Emerging Filmmakers Competition at the Gimli Film Festival. She used the \$10,000 prize that went along with it to make *Crash Site* -- a comic-book-inspired film about two sisters and a superhero who unites them.

A lot of her work focuses on combating negative stereotypes against indigenous girls and women. "I don't want people to see those red ties on the bridges and have that be their only interaction with native culture," she says of the memorials for missing and murdered women.

Likewise, she doesn't want news stories about the missing and murdered to be the only stories about indigenous girls and women. "Native girls need to feel awesome and strong."

Ballantyne is pursuing narrative film, an area in which women are chronically under-represented. No one knows this better than Winnipeg filmmaker Shereen Jerrett, who is also a professor at the University of Manitoba.

Jerrett, 52, has been working in the industry since she was 17, and has seen her share of sexism -- from being told her voice was too squeaky to be taken seriously to being met with laughter when it was announced to a crew that she would be the showrunner.

She's frustrated by the chronically grim statistics when it comes to women working in directing and technical roles, but what angers her is the fact women are blamed for the problem. "It's easy to gaslight women into thinking this is their fault... that they aren't good enough or working hard enough.

"It's not just women who have to create opportunities for women," she said. "People should be saying, 'This energy is missing. This perspective is missing.' "

Streaming sites are revolutionizing how we get our media, but they also have provided opportunities for women - - check out how many Netflix original shows are led by or are starring women.

Vimeo, the video-sharing website, recently announced its Share the Screen initiative, which will help fund and promote the projects by female filmmakers. *Darby Forever*, by Saturday Night Live cast member Aidy Bryant, will be Share the Screen's debut.

Locally, both the Winnipeg Film Group and Video Pool have also created opportunities for women. In addition to the Women's Film and Video Network, the film group also established the Women's Mosaic Film Project, which assists women of indigenous or diverse cultural backgrounds in producing a first or second short film.

Winnipeg's Saira Rahman is a past recipient of the Women's Mosaic Film Project, and along with her sister, Nilufer, are local documentary filmmakers whose credits include a feature-length doc, *Arctic Mosque*, as well as a number of shorts, including Saira's Mosaic film *Not Just a Funny Girl* and Nilufer's *Letter to a Terrorist*.

They credit the mentorship opportunities that exist in Winnipeg with keeping them energized and inspired.

"There are some really intelligent, powerful, experienced women producers in Winnipeg that are so helpful," Saira says, singling out the women of Buffalo Gal Pictures, Merit Jensen-Carr of Merit Motion Pictures and Elise

Swerhone at the National Screen Institute.

"These women are still our mentors," Nilufer adds. "They are very supportive. That's been a great support for us and continues to be as we continue along our path."

jen.zoratti@freepress.mb.ca Twitter:@JenZoratti