

LADIES FIRST: LADIES' FIRSTS

Part of a Six-Set Historical DVD Collection from the Winnipeg Film Group

Curated by Carole O'Brien

It's true. The Winnipeg Film Group is not teeming with women filmmakers. Hardly surprising given about 90% of the film industry is still dominated by men. But despite their low numbers, the women at our co-op have always managed to keep up with their male counterparts, artistically and technically. Until the late eighties, however, few of them made their own films, and those who did made documentaries. Public policy and the democratization of filmmaking technology is now changing the production landscape. For the past 15 years, a distinctly female voice can be heard. Out There. And at the Film Group, that voice is getting louder.

This program of women's films diverges from the others in the series; no criteria for selection were imposed at the outset. I could select from the entire catalogue, spanning the three decades of the Winnipeg Film Group. In all, forty-nine films made by women. Fictional, documentary and experimental. Every one inventive, every one personal and thought provoking. Which to choose? Where to start? As I viewed the wide variety of films and genres, I could see that the women at the Film Group enjoy the same license as the men to make the films they want – a theory floating around, states that what separates the Film Group from other co-ops in the country is an absence of a dominating aesthetic or ideology. But the women's films I was watching had something even more different. Of course... but what?

Ten years ago, when preparing the 20th anniversary collection, Gilles Hebert wrote that what united the films made by men at the Winnipeg Film Group, is their presentation of protagonists who don't fully understand the consequences of their actions, or are totally incapable of perceiving anything at all. Well... that's not the case in women's films. Their protagonists perceive their environments and their situations very well, thank you. This clarity is remarkable even in their first attempt at making a film; instances where the female gaze could turn on itself, creating empowering atmospheres for revelation. Unfortunately for the community, many of these potent voices became silent, as only a few of the women at the Film Group move on to make other films. So I decided to see what would happen if I narrowed my search to these personal 'First Films'. As it turned out, I found many good first films made by women. As a criteria, it also resolved the issue of leveling out the field with the women who did go on to make subsequent films.

These eight first films by women, are as diverse as any program can be, and a wide range of production values are on display. They are, however, united by one thing: their subject matter. Whether set in a real

or a fantasy world, these films are firmly rooted in notions of love and desire, and all exhibit a keen understanding of their conflicting natures. L-O-V-E, either waiting for it, musing about it, examining its many possibilities... and *Desire*... sexual, yes, but also its politics, its potentials, and its disappointments. These characters are driven by a need for understanding; some find it, some don't. But one thing is for sure, it's not always what they, or you, expect.

Our romp into the distinctive psyche of women filmmakers, begins with the whimsical and hilarious *The Arousing adventures of Sailor Boy*, by Jennifer Bisch, a tongue in cheek look at desire for sailor boys, the stuff of dreams in the prairies. The dream continues with *The Flight*, by Zarah Laszlo, the story of a women waiting and dreaming of a lover who never shows up. A pain we can all remember. And do you remember when talking about sex was taboo? Probably not, but Kathryn Martin's dreamy *Victorian Beach* takes us into the cold and pristine Victorian era, for a frank talk about sex. In my film, *The Piano Lesson*, I invite you into another world, the budding sexual world of a young girl whose illusions about lasting love and sex are shattered by her elderly piano teacher. Another elusive illusion follows with *The Elusive* by Lissa Desbarats. A visual poem, this experimental film juxtaposes memory and reality and asks us which is real; a question the doctor in *Exquisite Corpse* by Cindy Murdoch refuses to consider, so caught up is he in his lust, and for anatomy. *Under the Rocking Horse* presents another fantasy world, as we follow a young girl's summer frolics. Tricks and treats for everyone, especially for the two women in Maureen Devanik's sexy little number, *Dames*, a smoke filled conspiracy to kill the film noir's female stereotype.

An eclectic and unique program to be sure, and one that exposes a wide range of genres and production values; but these first films also go a long way to show that regardless of these differences, women's films share much more with other women's films than with the films made by men. After 30 years, Ladies may not be first in numbers at the Winnipeg Film Group, but they are when it comes to their first films.