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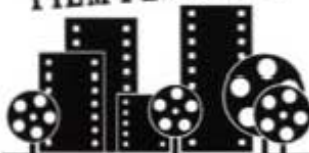
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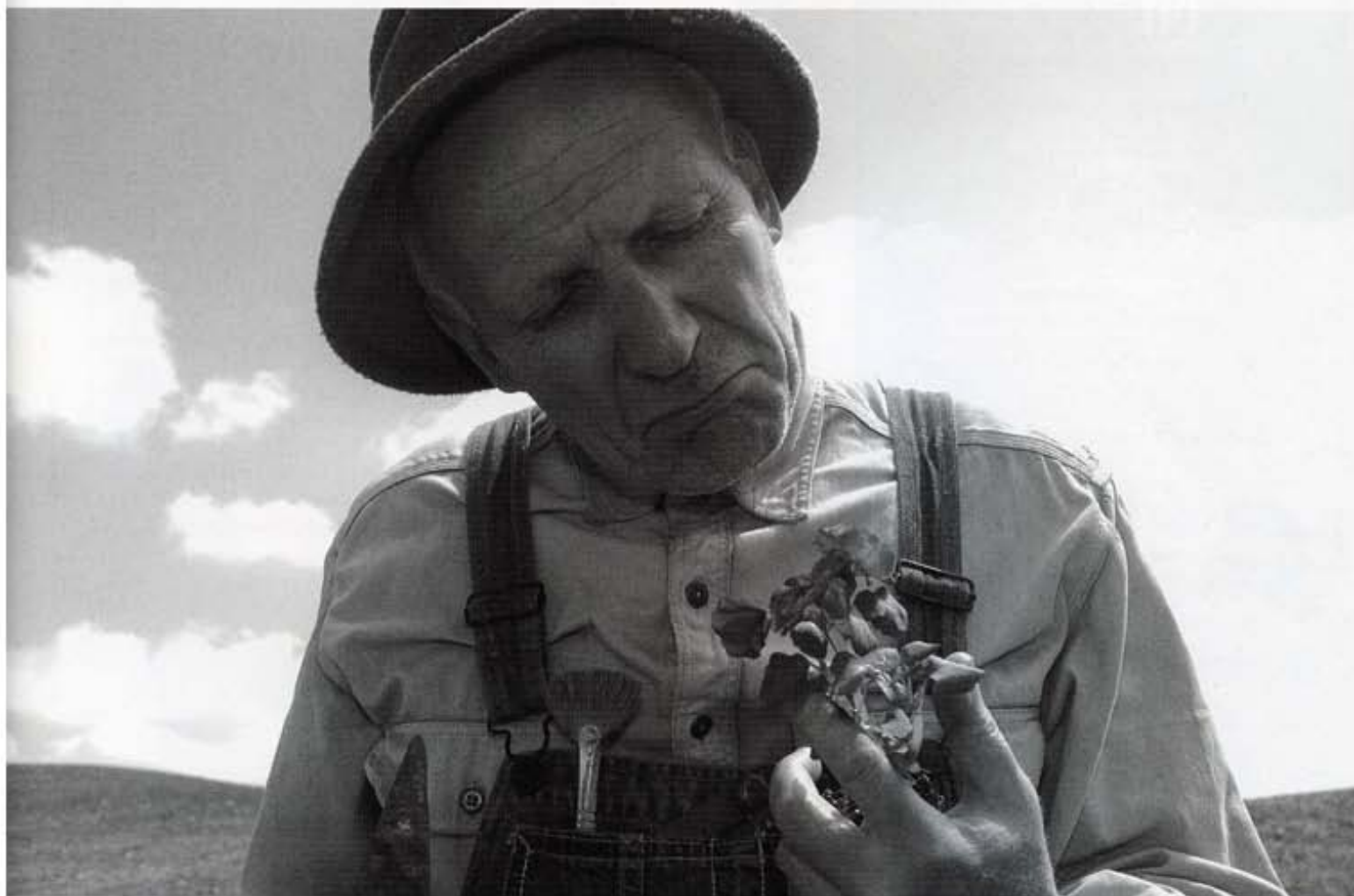
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Production still from Gloria Kim's
Rock Garden: A love Story

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filmprint



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The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto is a non-profit charitable organization that provides Toronto's vibrant independent filmmaking community with affordable access to production equipment and post-production facilities, educational services, film screenings and much more. For over two decades, LIFT has played an integral part in advancing and promoting the art of independent filmmaking in Toronto.

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EDITORIAL



We are all connected

I'm sitting on the subway at about 7 in the morning and the girl in seat across from me is knitting. She's in her 20s or something and she makes purling and yarn wrapping look so bloody chic. God, I want to be her or at least be her admiring friend. It's funny how you see people and in an instant you want something they've got. They seem to shine a light wherever they go in whatever they do.

But this early in the morning, I feel like something the cat dragged up. Then I wonder, "Hey, maybe someone in here is looking at me thinking, 'That girl looks pretty cool!'" I look around the train carriage. There's a guy banging away as his PlayStation. Nope. Couple of peeps reading the *Metro*. Nope, not them. Four construction-worker types dozing. Nope, nope, nope, and nope. Okay, slim pickin's, but I can still hope to inspire others, right? I think this issue just may provide you with some much needed inspiration.

This month, it is was my great pleasure to meet Simonee Chichester who has this fabulous get-up-and-go spirit. Not waiting for funding to be fully in place, this first-time filmmaker jumped on a plane not only to make her documentary, but also to see her father for the first time in 23 years. On page 16, she talks about cash, completing her work and meeting the first man she ever loved.

Another first-timer is Chris Ross. Read "Wooooo! I'm a beginner!" on page 4 to get insight on how she finally got her cameras rolling.

The festivals are gearing up again after the frenzy of the holiday season. Images, Hot Docs, Mpenzi and more. Heather Richards's gives us the low-

down on the emerging Mpenzi Black Women's International Film and Video Festival (p. 23) while Forbes Campbell goes behind the scenes at North America's largest documentary film fest Hot Docs (p. 8).

Finally, we introduce what is arguably the world's first mail-order film. It's fun, easy, and you don't need a camera. Find your piece of film (supplied with this issue), read "No Camera? No Problem" on page 10, and we leave the rest to you. Be sure to send the film back to LIFT for us to splice the pieces together. We'll screen the mail-order film at a later date.

Helen Hill proved that filmmaking was accessible to all. It is to her we dedicate this issue.



Filmmaker Helen Hill (1970 - 2007)

Contributors



Chris Ross who wrote "Woooo! I'm a beginner!" (p.4) is currently in preproduction on her next short film and is hard at work on her third attempt at a feature length screenplay, which she says is hardly crappy at all.



Independent producer and filmmaker **Josie Massarella** has a Bachelor of Arts in film from UBC, and a postgraduate certificate in Advanced Film and Television from Sheridan. Josie is currently editing a documentary. She interviewed Gloria Kim for this issue's "The Super 8" on page 24.



Glen Wylie is a Toronto-based consultant, writer and aspiring filmmaker who enjoys long walks on the beach and movies that make him cry. Check out his interview with Michelle Messina "When Patience Bears Fruit" on page 6.



Forbes Campbell shed his skin and moved to Toronto in the fall of 2006 to learn more about film and the production process by just getting involved in them. He discovers the inner workings of the upcoming Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival.



Dannis Koromilas is a Toronto-born screenwriter who has spent several years working abroad in New York, Los Angeles, and Australia as a gun for hire. He has co-created the police drama *The Bridge*, currently in development with Barna-Alper and CHUM TV. His essay on John Cassavetes (p.18) is his first for *FilmPrint*.



Daniella Newman is a Toronto-based freelance writer who covers a wide range of topics. She is thrilled to be a repeat contributor to *FilmPrint*. She promises making your own cameraless film is simpler and far more fun than even baking a Betty Crocker chocolate cake. See page 10.



Heather Richards is a freelance writer who also works in Environmental Health. Her production company, The Production Line Films, focuses on science-based communications.



Lucas Martin is a regular contributor to *FilmPrint*. This issue he snapped shots for "No Camera? No Problem" and this month's "The Super 8" subject Gloria Kim.

WOA I'M A BEGINNER! O!

"Okay guys, we're running out of film so try and get this in one take! Ready? Go!"

BY CHRIS ROSS

Okay, I admit it! I'm an absolute beginner! Or at least I am when I see the poster: "Guerilla Filmmaking in Super 8 for Absolute Beginners!"

I stare at the bold letters advertising this workshop that includes everything you need to make a film. I had been dreaming of making a film. Actually more than just dreaming as I'd recently completed my second feature-length screenplay. Although it wasn't quite as crappy as the first, I had to admit it wasn't going to be made into a film anytime soon or ever, really. I read the poster again. Why is it so difficult for me to acknowledge the truth? I'm a beginner and I could use some help. I sign up for the workshop the next day.

Just the idea of actually shooting film liberates me from my self-imposed feature hell, and I feel incredibly inspired. Is this how beginners feel? I write a script for a short film about a woman who becomes obsessed with her organic delivery man. I write with my friend Fiona in mind for the lead and my

It's three days before the shoot when Tom realizes I'm counting on him to be part of the crew. Actually, he is the crew...

house in mind for the location. I marvel at how much less work it is than writing a feature.

Rick, an incredibly knowledgeable and passionate filmmaker, teaches the first part of the workshop. I'm surprised by how much I learn in six hours and by how much I enjoy it. I can't wait to begin my film! I'm a beginner! After checking to make sure Fiona is free, I book a camera for the following weekend and take stock of what I still need: another actor, a few crucial props, someone to help me and my partner, Tom. "Excuse me?!" It's three days

before the shoot when Tom realizes I'm counting on him to be part of the crew. Actually, he *is* the crew until the day before when our friend David agrees to help. A chance meeting on the street produces a timely contact for another actor; meeting Tim for the first time, I'm relieved to see he looks perfect for the part. Tim flips through the script. "So what kind of a delivery guy is he?" I frown, and repeat it again, slowly, "He's an *organic* delivery guy." Tim looks at me strangely. On the way home, I realize he was asking what kind of character he is, not what kind of produce he delivers. I feel like an idiot and think about what a beginner I am.

The first day of the shoot arrives and everything has magically fallen into place. I've made detailed storyboards and notes, and I'm ready to go. We start with all the shots of Fiona opening the door. After a few takes, I realize my first mistake, and it's a doozy. I didn't buy enough film. I start tightening up wherever possible, and release the camera trigger the instant the shot is done.

Everyone looks up in alarm. "Are you sure you got that?" I mask my inner beginner with confidence. "Absolutely!" I say. "Let's move on!" I feel like Ed Wood, but the shoot goes smoothly. Tom moves lights, checks focus and filters, and fills in like a trooper wherever he's needed. David is the master stylist, looking after all the food, props, and Fiona's hair (which for one crucial scene is styled to look like the CN tower). Fiona and Tim each perform brilliantly and with tremendous grace under pressure after I fill them in on what's happening: "Okay guys, we're running out of film so try and get this in one take! Ready? Go!"

A few weeks later and we finally see the footage: endless shots of Fiona opening the door, rapidly followed by pretty much one take of everything else. Surprisingly, it doesn't look too bad and some parts actually look quite good! My exhilaration mixes with resignation as I realize this is it; this is what I have to work with. So I begin: I cobble together a rough version of the film. I record Fiona's voice over in the studio at LIFT, after rewriting it to accommodate the strongest footage. I ask my friend Mike to do the music and he agrees. Now I'm ready to play the ace up my sleeve; another friend Joe is a talented filmmaker and editor, and he has agreed to edit the film in his fancy studio. Fantastic! The only catch is the studio is in Montreal and everything must be ready for the final cut as I can only afford to make one trip. Unfortunately, this means the music must be finished before Mike has seen the final picture edit, which even a beginner like myself realizes, is not the ideal way to score a film.

Mike and I talk about what the music should sound like. At least, we try. Not being a very musically minded person, I realize I don't really know what the music should sound like. I have one idea and I lay it on him. "Can you make it build somehow and then, you know, get really crazy at the end?"

For some perverse reason, Mike won't let me hear what he's working on before it's done. I even offer to "help" in the studio while they're recording. "Nah, I think we're alright... I hope you like the music," Mike tells me in his off-hand way. I hope so too as I'm picking it up the night before I leave for Montreal and there will be no time to make any changes.

Incredibly, the music is perfect. It's not at all what I was expecting, but I love it! I realize my idea of "getting really crazy at the end" is yelling, and hitting pots and pans. Mike, however, has imagined it as breaking down and falling apart and it works beautifully. The music is in fact the easiest piece of the puzzle to work with as we edit the film over three intense days in Montreal. My biggest mistake in the shoot is now our biggest challenge; it's a struggle to find creative ways to shape scenes out of the tiny amount of footage. Joe points out shots that don't match. "You know, that's a directing problem," he says.

I learn a lot from him and enjoy the editing process immensely. The film comes alive in a shocking way when we add the sound effects. Suddenly the characters exist in their own little world. We finish the whole thing with no time to spare, and on the train back to Toronto, the film's soundtrack continues to play in a demented loop in my head.

Clocking in at four minutes and fourteen seconds, **Deliver Me** is longer and better than I expect it to be. In fact, it's astonishing that though the film changed at every stage in the process of making it, the intention and spirit of the original script are still there. I'm so impressed by the efforts of everyone who helped create it and feel proud of our little film. We have a screening at home for cast, crew, and friends, and I'm surprised by how nervous I am. Everyone laughs though and tells me later how much they like it. I exhale and think about what a truly amazing experience this first film has been, and how

much I've learned in the process.

I apply to different film festivals and play my beginner card often. "This is my very first film! It was made with love! And no money! Any chance you'll waive the entry fee?" Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I apply to some of the bigger short film fests for fun and some of the smaller fests as well. I watch for programs curated around "organic" themes. I hope **Deliver Me** will play on a big screen here in Toronto, and maybe go to a couple other festivals in North America. I know, however, that this is a beginner film. The competition is stiff and, often, has much bigger budgets and slicker production values. In the not too distant future, I'll post the film online and tell everyone I know to check it out.

So, what comes next? Marginally experienced? Well, whatever it is, I'm no longer an absolute beginner! In fact, I'm a filmmaker! And I can't wait to make my next film. ■

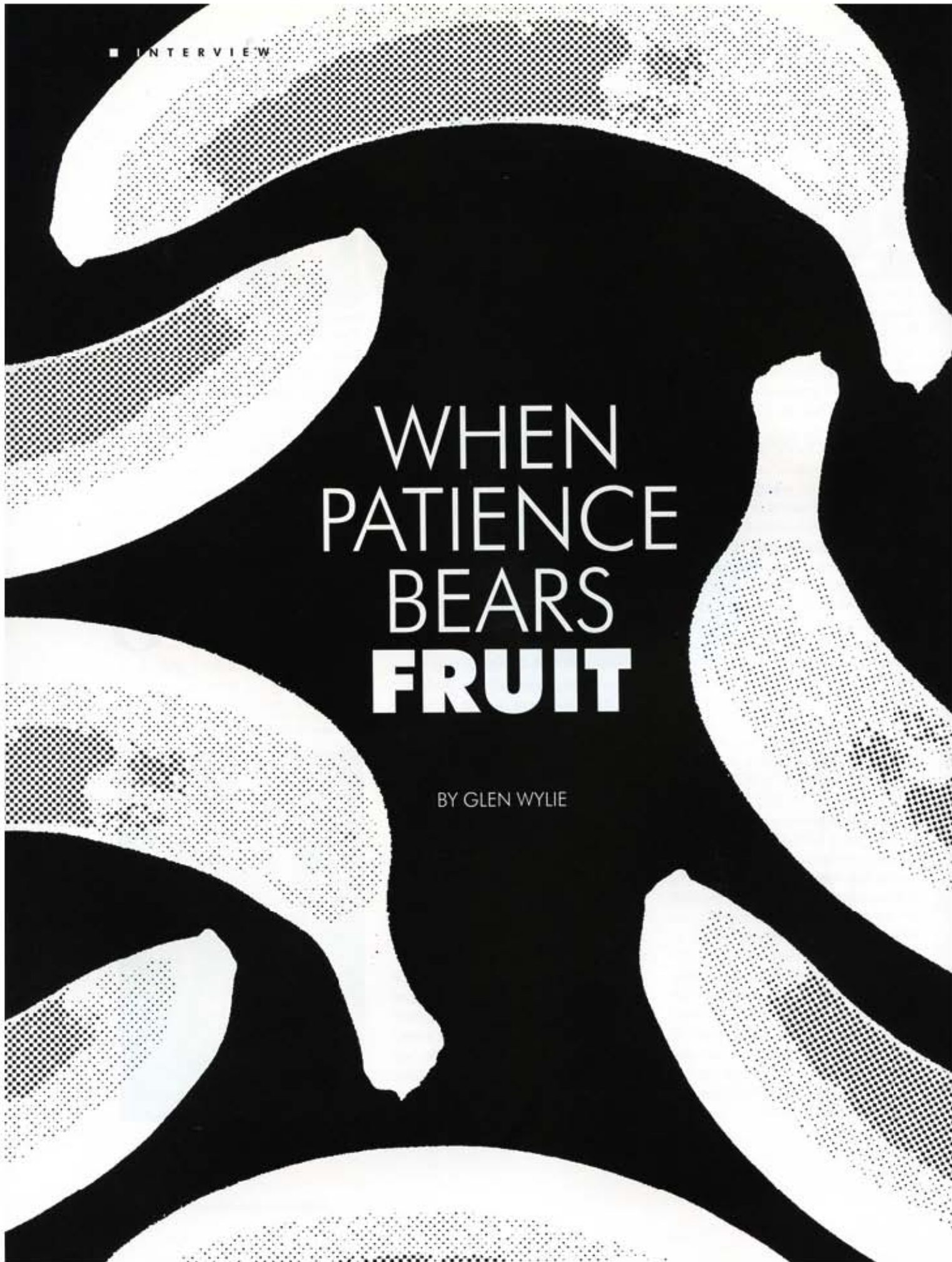
David Grenier fashions Fiona Walker's hair into CN Tower-style 'do for **Deliver Me**



■ INTERVIEW

WHEN PATIENCE BEARS **FRUIT**

BY GLEN WYLIE



When Michelle Messina made her stop-motion short film about a banana and an orange falling in love and getting married, she never thought she'd have to face off against the multibillion dollar corporation Fruit of the Loom. It seemed that the honeymoon was, indeed, over.

Mr. Banana and Miss Orange have patiently waited for each other all their lives. The waiting ends with a true Italian-style wedding and a honeymoon of fruitful sex. This is the way the story goes in independent Toronto filmmaker Michelle Messina's film **Fruitful Sex**. And who would think that such a whimsical movie would raise the ire of big biz? But it did just that and until recently, Messina was embroiled in a bitter battle with Fruit of the Loom. She fought for six years for the right to use the term she trademarked "Fruitful Sex". Her recent victory against the corporation has shown how important it is to be patient, stand up for what you believe in, and not sell out — values that are echoed in her film, the related merchandise, and her way of life.

How would you best characterize the last six years?

Michelle Messina: When I created **Fruitful Sex** many of my close friends thought that it would be impossible for a short film to be as successful as it was; I was traveling to several film festivals in Canada and the US for the film. Moreover, I would have never have thought in a million years that a multibillion dollar company such as Fruit of the Loom would threaten me to never allow me to make a line of **Fruitful Sex t-shirts**. In 1998, I believed in the idea enough that I trademarked the name in hopes to work with the film for a few years and make it into a feature. [A few months later, Fruit of the Loom opposed the trademark approval.] When they contacted me, Warren Buffet the second richest man in the world at the time did not own the company, but a year later

he bought the company for \$835 million dollars cash. At that point, I figured this legal matter would dissolve, but it didn't. They went full force and after a year-and-a-half I fired my lawyer and contacted other attorneys who said it would be too expensive to fight.

I was not going to be bullied so I resented myself for five years. When an opposition such as this is presented, both parties must reveal everything. So I had to find invoices, Medallion transfer receipts, and dated proof of my idea. This stopped all the plans I had and found myself full-time at Osgoode Hall Law library.

What was your initial reaction after hearing the news that you had won the battle against Fruit of the Loom?

MM: I cried and thanked God.

Did you ever think about giving up the fight?

No, I am not a woman not to be taken lightly!

What are your thoughts on why Fruit of the Loom withdrew their opposition to your trademark?

MM: Bullshit! They stopped my plans for over six years. In that time **Veggie Tales** came out, which they probably copied, considering their trademark and film came after mine. So, do I spend another six years fighting them as well? I really wanted to document how uncalled for this opposition was and for them to back out at the eleventh just proved it. But when I gave it a second thought, it was "Hey, I won! Hurray!"

What is the most valuable thing that you have learned about intellectual property rights?

MM: It's a serious business! Big business will try to protect what is theirs and even go over the boundaries of what isn't theirs.

After one-and-a-half weeks of shooting and 4,753 shots taken to create Fruitful Sex, were you sick of fruit for a while?

MM: Fresh, juicy, sweet, firm. Oh, I am getting excited, please send me some cherries, oranges, kiwis and persimmons! I am ready to make that feature.

Has there been any interest from distributors now that your film has no legal liabilities associated with it?

MM: I had interest in 1999 from a few distributors, including Francis Ford Coppola's business partner, before this opposition happened. Since the win, I have been busy creating a line of **Fruitful Sex t-shirts**, which are online at www.fruitfulsex.com. My visit to New York for Fashion Week was a big eye-opener and I want to compete against Fruit of the Loom to recoup my seven-year loss and let them know that they have awakened a tiger. I am considering a package deal of a t-shirt, DVD and workbook. The main thing I want is to keep it fun and wholesome. There is enough media in the world making women seem like their only attribute is sex. It is time for women to take back their power and not give it away so easily, especially teens. Why risk it? Be safe and wait and that is what I also intend to do to find the right distributor. ■

REVIEW



DRIVING DOCUMENTARY FORMAT **FURTHER**

BY FORBES CAMPBELL



Thousands of submissions stream
in to Hot Doc's offices

It's the second week of January, kids are back in school, and all the offices are once again filled with the bustle of refreshed workers. The offices of the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival are no exception. The air is filled with a quiet hum as the staff gear up for the 14TH annual installment of the festival. The hum is made up of the clicking of fingers on keyboards, telephone conversations, and the sliding of filing cabinet drawers.

A glance in a corner room reveals four members of the programming team hard at work opening mail and cataloguing submissions. Their desks are surrounded by bins which look somewhat like the harvest horn of plenty; however, they overflow not with fruits and vegetables, but rather a bounty of cased computer disks containing the

Toronto International Film Festival. His job has been to tweak the programming structure, while helping to further define the artistic requirements of the festival. The majority of the screening duties fall on him, but there are also six others helping to sort international programming, and two others who are devoted solely to looking at Canadian content entries.

Next, you have to take into account the curatorial bent of your festival. According to Farnel, Hot Docs is meant to be a survey of the year's documentaries, and obviously an opportunity to promote the art of documentary filmmaking. As for the content, there are no boundaries, though naturally certain topics are on filmmakers' minds more during a given year. For example, the war in Iraq and environmental concerns like global warming were the subject of

added pressure on Farnel and the team to stoke and feed the large public demand in the lead up to the festival. Part of their strategy has been to sponsor Doc Soup, a monthly double screening of new international documentary features at the Bloor Cinema to keep appetites whet.

Though the number of venues in Toronto is proportionately small — even when compared to a much smaller city like Copenhagen — the array of successful film festivals here is amazing. This diversity of festivals exists because a strong film industry has meant that a pool of people with the ability, knowledge, and interest in organizing such events are in close proximity to a savvy festival crowd. Together, these factors have helped to ensure that Toronto has one of the most highly developed cinema cultures in the world.

As far as 2007's Hot Docs, Farnel says that the two national survey programs "Spotlight on Central and Eastern Europe" and "Made In Brazil" look very strong. "Spotlight" is particularly exciting because it shows the emergence of what Farnel calls a "new wave in documentary filmmaking." This new wave is in part the result young filmmakers moving away from this region's great tradition of art film. These artists are increasingly choosing the documentary format as a way to examine the profound social and political changes that have been happening in their countries; they address issues like poverty, the emergence of the European Union, the move away from old socialist models and more.

For the future, Farnel sees the festival's challenge lie in increasing its capacity to find funding for new documentary makers. If the festival's popularity and clout continue to grow as they have been, there is no doubt that Hot Docs will be able to meet that challenge handily. ■

As docs continue to gain ground with mainstream audiences, the Hot Docs's team works on the highly anticipated next installment of North America's largest documentary film festival

work of thousands of hopeful documentary makers.

The festival's start date, April 19, is still three months away, but after chatting with Hot Docs's director of programming Sean Farnel, it's clear that there is no time to waste. The programming team has to screen approximately 1500 – 1700 submissions. Beyond this, Farnel and several others must also travel abroad to other festivals, like Sundance, to scout 200 – 300 other possible entries.

When you combine the physical volume of documentaries to be screened, with the need to consider the material each film presents, programming such a festival becomes a task of near Herculean proportions. So, how do they do it?

First, you put together a good team. Farnel was hired only last year after working for several years with the

many submissions last year. However, those selected were more than just straight information. "If it's just reportage, it isn't interesting enough," says Farnel. "Chosen entries explore the complexities of issues in unique ways. That's what we are looking for."

Another important aspect is ensuring that the viewing public is engaged. Farnel feels that today documentary filmmakers are helping to fill a void in the quality and breadth of coverage on certain issues. These filmmakers are capturing stories that are not even on the popular media's radar. Nobody knows this better than the faithful audiences who — hungry for fresh perspectives — show up to see documentary festivals like Hot Docs.

The proof is in the numbers. Last year, attendance shot up by 25 percent and this year Hot Docs is expecting to admit over 60,000 viewers. This means

NO CAMERA? NO PROBLEM!

It's inexpensive, messy and — at first glance — cameraless filmmaking (also known as no-budget filmmaking) is totally insane. But you can create a work of art with no crew and no cash. Daniella Newman met with experimental filmmaker Madi Piller to learn the basics of handmade filmmaking. Piller is president of the Toronto Animated Image Society and her works have screened in North America, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Spain.

CHOOSE YOUR CANVAS

Various types of film strips — Super 8, 16MM, 35MM, and 70MM — work as different canvas sizes. How do you decide the right format for you? Start by considering the venue and your budget. Super 8 and 16MM are more common. 35MM is a beautiful format, but presents difficulties when it comes to screening at smaller venues, which might not have the projector you require. When choosing your film, consider the possibilities for the end result.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SIDE

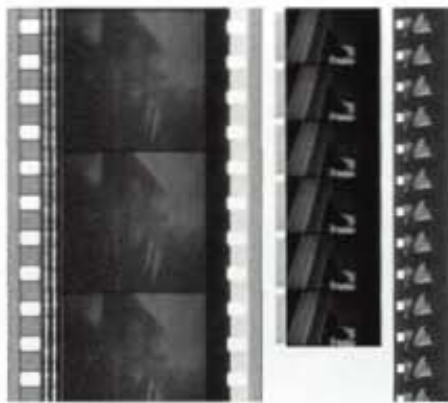
Examine the filmstrip. One side of the strip is slightly shinier. The other side is stickier because it is composed of several layers of emulsion — this is the side you'll be working on. Touch both sides to your lip to decipher the difference in stickiness or scratch it to see if any emulsion is removed. Get the side right and the sound area is always on the left. A black strip is exposed and processed. Yellow and green emulsion layers top a transparent base, which makes it look black. Think of your strip as an object that you can both deconstruct and construct. Understanding the raw material allows you to consider treatment; specifically, the ways in which chosen materials support a theme.

Get a light table or a piece of white paper. A piece of white paper placed under the filmstrip will allow you see what you're doing as you work. An inexpensive light box, which looks like an Etch-a-Sketch, works just as efficiently as a visual aid.

GATHER YOUR TOOLS

Pretty much anything goes: China ink, permanent markers, paint and water colours are great for marking the film. Apply paints and ink with brushes, sponges, rollers, stamps, Q-tips and more. Rough up your work by scratching through the emulsion layers with sandpaper or any sharp object. The depth of your scratch will bring up the various emulsion colours.

Using scotch tape, you can attach



Variation: You can also work on transparent film or found footage. Bleach out the shot image on found footage then build-up using various tools as you'd be working on a strip with no emulsion to manipulate into effects.

From Left to Right: 35 MM, 16 MM and Super 8



Some useful tools for handmade filmmaking:

- | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| 1) Cotton gloves | 5) Exacto Knife | 9) Oil Pastels |
| 2) Ruler | 6) Permanent Markers | 10) Splicer |
| 3) Watercolours | 7) Paint Brushes | 11) Light Table |
| 4) China Marker | 8) Magnifying Glass | |

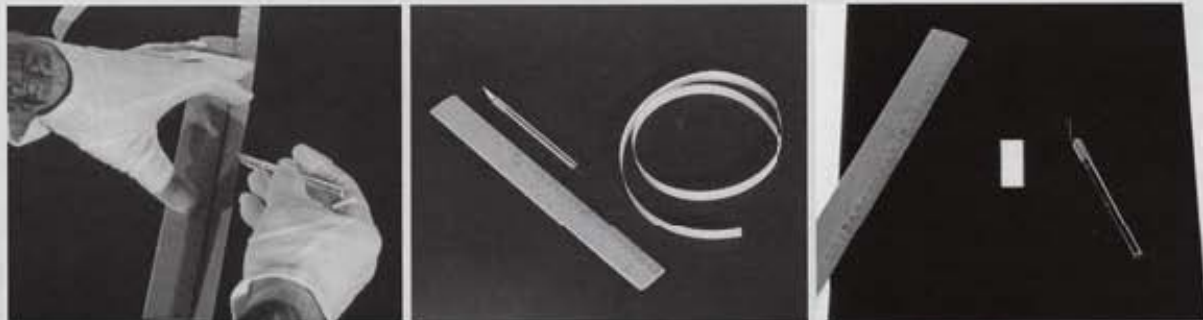


Paint directly onto film stock



Scratch through the emulsion with a sharp object

TIP: Cut a piece of black cardboard into a square that matches the light box in size. Cut out the center to match the width size of your strip. You will now have a black square with a cut out center in an elongated rectangular strip shape that is lit up from beneath the cardboard. Place your strip over the now lit center and just move it along as you work. This system lights up your strip, enabling you to better see what you are doing.



TIP: If you're taping cut-out images onto your strip, you can use a splicer to clean up. Place the image on your strip and tape across carefully. Put that section of your strip across the splicer, then shut and release the splicer. You are not cutting your strip; placed across properly, using a splicer ensures that your ends are smooth, all hanging bits of tape have been cut off, and your sprockets aren't compromised by tape or sticky material.



printed pictures, transparencies, photocopies or any image on a material that isn't too dense to let the light shine through. To bleach through your own work or shot footage, mix a few drops of bleach with some water, otherwise it is too powerful a chemical agent.

Visual guides help maintain consistency when repeating images. For a measuring guide within each frame employ a piece of used testing film a.k.a. testing pattern or any one of several patterned film leader (these include numbers, crosshairs, arrows). Since the testing strips have a pattern, when placed beneath your strip, it provides a reference to where you are within each

frame. It's like working on a piece on tracing paper under a notebook. Create your own guidelines using anything that provides visual borders and spatial markers.

DO SOME TESTS... IF YOU WANT

Play with short strips to see what effects catch your eye. Let a drop of paint run down your strip and then manipulate with movement. You may prefer the harsher patterns created using rollers, Q-tips, or fine brushes. Bleaching and scratching carve out the emulsion. The scratches appear much larger when projected. How deep you carve will determine if you hit yellow, green or the

transparent bottom layer. Boiling a piece of colour film (not black and white, which only curls in boiling water) detaches the emulsion from the base. This causes the colours of the emulsion to separate and come to the surface so the strip isn't all black. As soon as you pull the film from the water, the film is especially malleable. Manipulate pieces of the boiled strip and attach them to your strip using tape for visual affects. Boil in a pan of water on an electric pad outside as the fumes are overwhelming and toxic.

All that said, Piller reminds that the fun of this art form is in the aesthetics of interactive spontaneity: "You don't

TIP: When you are intensely handworking film stock, you will probably want to work in short lengths, and splice the lengths together later. Using a splicer is a simple process — just follow the steps on this page.



1. You can trim the ends of your lengths if needed with the guillotine on the right-hand side of the splicer.



2. You want a straight, clean edge on the end of both pieces you wish to join.



3. Thread the sprockets of the film into the grooves on either side of the taping mount, so that the ends meet.



4. Pull tape across joint.



5. Close splicer over taped joint and press lever firmly.



6. Remove filmstrips, now taped together on one side, reverse and re-thread the sprockets on the reverse side. Repeat steps 4 and 5 to make a double-splice, with the strips taped on both sides.

need to do the tests; the magic is in just seeing what comes.”

DECIDE HOW YOU'RE GOING TO PLACE THE IMAGE

A filmstrip is made of conjoined frames. Try applying images within each frame. The various types of film have different frame lines in relation to the sprockets. Alternately, try free painting through the lines. Working within the frame creates a structured look, while drawing, scratching or painting through the lines produces a more abstract look. Experiment by mixing styles. How you apply materials determines the look and feel of a piece.

CONSIDER THE TIMING

When considering images and tempo, remember it's 24 frames per second. How long do you want an image to appear? Is there a motif you'd like to create at timed intervals? Weave a theme using repeated imagery at a timed rhythm by keeping track of your frames. Do not write something different in every frame, it will be unreadable. Likewise, an image in a few frames appears as a blip. Timing is less of a concern if your work is more about movement and abstract aesthetics.

Tip: Try optical printing your film to create more frames of an image.

KEEP THE SPROCKETS CLEAN

Whatever you apply to your strip be sure to keep the sprockets clean. Dirty sprockets can cause the film to rip, which not only damages your work, but can totally bugger the projector.

SIZE MATTERS

When applying layers to your film strip, don't over do it and let the layers get too thick. The projector gate has metal plates and carelessly built-up layers could cause damage both to the projector and to your film. ■

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Earlier days: Simonee and Edgar Chichester

BITTERSWEET ABANDON

When Simonee Chichester meets her father for the first time, documenting the reunion is both a trial and a triumph

BY BUNMI ADEOYE

Her journey began with a phone call to her Toronto home from the Canadian consulate in Brazil. They were reporting her homeless, alcoholic father's failing health. Her father, Edgar, had been living on and off the street for 23 years and she hadn't seen him in that time. When the call came, Simonee Chichester knew that not only did she have to see him, but also she had to document this reunion.

And she had to act fast. With her father's health deteriorating and her need to find answers to crucial questions about being abandoned, she got on a plane first to her father's birthplace Guyana to interview and meet with her extended family and then to Sao Paulo, Brazil, where her father had been living

for years. "When this came up with my father, I had to decide whether I wanted to meet him or not," she explains, "because it seemed as though the issue of mortality all of the sudden took centre stage. Even if it wasn't going to happen right away, eventually he wasn't going to be around, especially given the circumstances of his life. All of the sudden I was looking at it a little bit differently. I decided I wanted to meet him before he died. Documenting it? Believe it or not, very little thought went into it; it came naturally."

She had always pitched **Chichester's Choice** as a documentary of a father gone wrong, but deep down Chichester knew that this was her story. However, she had some misgivings: "It felt really arrogant for me to think that I could do

a film about my life. I think I started doing a documentary about my father and his life and what a charismatic man he was. How does this person with so much promise and talent end up on the street? Eventually, it became a film about me and my journey. It became a search for identity. It wasn't about my dad's journey and it wasn't about his history. It was about my history."

Before her departure, she conducted phone interviews with her extended family in Canada and abroad. She also had extensive conversations with her mother, Neusa, about the past in preparation for what was to come. She had secured some funding for the film, but she decided she couldn't wait for the rest of the funding to come through, if indeed, any more would come at all.



Simonee Chichester

Chichester doesn't regret her decision to continue with her plans despite still having to hold charity events to raise cash for the film. The last event she held was in December 2006. "I think that was smart to go and I would do it again. And I would tell any filmmaker that they're ridiculous to think that they are going to have their financial structure in place [once shooting begins]," she says. "I want to get my projects done. I just did it because I was ignorant and I didn't really know there was another way. I didn't even know what a financial structure was at the time. But I'm really glad that I didn't wait because I would still be here."

Shot on DV, her cameraman had captured tense moments with her Guyanese relatives, the frantic search for her father in Brazil, and the emotional meeting — and inevitable parting — of father and daughter.

She returned to Toronto with 80 hours of footage and the monstrous task of piecing together a story. The first edit of the film wasn't what she had envisioned so she went back to the drawing board, assembling a new team to craft the film that she wanted. She's philosophical about the whole experience: "[The first editor] was really involved in

sifting the story out. The new team saw the old cut. They saw something really special and there *was* something really special there. It just wasn't what I wanted to release. It would have been easy for to say, 'I'm done. I've done my first feature film. I've done my project. Here you go.' A lot of people do that. That was hard for me to say: 'I'm starting over.' Holy shit! It's so horrible and I have no money and I'm starting over... That was very, very hard, but you know what? It didn't take that long after..."

Chichester continues to take risks and she searches for funding for the film. She has submitted the film to several festivals in North America and in Europe. **Chichester's Choice** has garnered some mainstream buzz, but there's still work to be done. She hopes for the film to eventually be picked up by a broadcaster or distributor. She's started work on a short film script and she would like to work on another documentary, one that's "a little bit easier". Personally and professionally, Chichester experienced a sort of rebirth during the month-long shoot; a quickening that was captured through the camera lens. "I see somebody different," she says. "The physicality, my facial expres-

sions, everything seems different than it is right now. Life happened and this particular story happened and it changes people. I can't even pinpoint the change in me. It's just interesting to see that, to have the visible proof of it."

To meet her father and share that story, she put her heart on the line. It was also her way of drawing a line in the sand. "It's my life story. It's part of who I am. Why it's important for me personally [to tell this story] is different from why I wanted to put it in a film. I was left by the first man I ever loved and there were issues to address with that. To me it was a no-brainer. I can honestly say that with my dad I don't have any baggage anymore. Everything's been dealt with. Even though it wasn't a happy ending, I don't have any baggage, you know what I mean?" ■

For more details about **Chichester's Choice**, visit www.myfriendsimonee.com.

THE ORIGINAL INDEPENDENT

THE WORK OF
JOHN CASSAVETES
DEMANDS TRUTH AND A LEAP OF FAITH

BY DANNIS KOROMILAS

I fell in love with movies in the late 70s and then studied film in the early 90s. While living in New York, I felt quite daunted by the sheer number of screenplays being written and shopped around all over North America. The limited development funds of production houses, especially in Canada, have created an almost impossible gauntlet to pass through with an original story intact. I began working as an assistant for several revered writers and directors. I spent a year working for director Peter Bogdanovich (*The Last Picture Show*, *Paper Moon*, *Mask*) where I had the privilege of discussing my cinematic heroes with him.

For me, one of the few icons that I embraced early on was actor/writer/director John Cassavetes. If you have ever been stirred by the work of Martin Scorsese or Sean Penn, then you owe a little something of your cinematic reverence to Cassavetes. Cassavetes is still regarded as the master of a generation

of filmmakers and audiences who subsequently ushered in films like Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise*, and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*.

No one in his time straddled the line better between acting in Hollywood films and parlaying his acting pay towards his visceral vision of personal filmmaking. While he devoted most of his time to making his films, he continued acting as a means to keep his deeper works alive. Cassavetes held his own with the likes of Lee Marvin, Donald Sutherland and Charles Bronson and was nominated for the Oscar for his performance as Victor Franko in *The Dirty Dozen*.

Born of Greek immigrants in New York City in 1929, Cassavetes began as an actor, but ultimately realized the power paradigm on a studio-run film set. He simply picked up on the gaping holes in a standard studio shooting day and cultivated a dynamic method of procuring stunning performances in the

most desperate of circumstances. When you hear or read about Francis Ford Coppola mortgaging his house, the bankers had already experienced the precedent of Cassavetes's financial leaps of faith.

His first film *Shadows* touched on race issues in America years before Norman Jewison's Oscar-winning *In The Heat Of The Night*. In the racially charged film, set in Beatnik-era, jazz-soaked New York of the late 50s, the loose, rambling *Shadows* tries to keep up with the dreams and struggles of aspiring musicians and lovers. Film reviewer J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* confirms what many film fans knew to be true: *Shadows* is arguably the founding work of the American independent cinema. The film had a budget of \$25,000, was shot on 16 MM black and white stock, and electrified film critics on both sides of the Atlantic. It received British Academy Award nominations for Best Film, Most Promising Newcomer, and Best Director.



He had called out and tangled with social themes from under the heavy cloak of black and white film and shaky, nervous cinematography. His terse panning between actors gave viewers the feeling they were witnessing a daring and potentially dangerous home movie erupting before their eyes: Performers come in and out of focus, the camera barely keeps up with their twitchy energy and spradic movements.

In the editing suite, Cassavetes was even more manic. If Scorsese crafted onscreen experiences that corresponded with the way we breathe, then Cassavetes performed mouth-to-mouth on lost scenes, endless footage and troubled productions. With *Shadows*, the entire film actually was born out of 30 hours of workshop rehearsals. Because he demanded his actors to delve beyond the simple reflexes of conventional acting, they usually found themselves way outside the realm of a straightforward scene. The improvisations led to surprising results, but there was a twisted maze to decipher: Where did the rehearsal end? Where did the acting begin? Where — among the blurred lines of intimacy and reality — did the best takes lay? Cassavetes was drawn to this kind of exploratory performance.

By the mid-70s, audiences had already witnessed two *Godfather* films directed with majestic sweep and rich, deeply saturated cinematography. In his *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, the meandering and sometimes digressive flow of the film feels distracting. The faded, fuzzy worn out look of Cassavetes version of a mob film doesn't look like the real thing compared to Coppola's. But the grit and desperation of the main character Ben Gazzara in this film is steeped in the hanging-on-for-dear-life reality of a gambler who is flat out of luck.

Cassavetes was driven to make his films, and hustled and gambled like his creative life depended on it. He was notorious for turning fellow actors and crew members into family, drawing out of them a solidarity and commitment to

his vision unheard of in a studio picture today. Although it sometimes took years, true to his word, all who participated in his films were repaid their deferred salaries.

His *Woman Under The Influence* garnered an Oscar nominations for his wife, Gena Rowlands, for himself for Best Director, and evoked rave reviews. Peter Falk and Rowlands basically unraveled on screen, with rage, power and confusion so raw that perhaps their performances can only be repeated today in a film not worried about test audiences. But before the Oscar nods and the rave reviews, no distribution company stepped up to take on the film. Cassavetes literally went door to door with his film cans under his arm. He caught a break when close friend Martin Scorsese used the leverage of his *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* release to help his former mentor secure his first screens. The film's reputation spread from theatre to theatre from Long Island to Los Angeles. This was the last time word-of-mouth about a film really was word of mouth.

There is a slight irony that some of his most important work probably could have gained bigger audiences with some better production value. Cassavetes was a director completely turned off with fabricated loose ends tied up neatly before the credits roll. He knew better than that and felt more honest in the shaping of his films. Not a lot of characters walked away unscathed on his screen.

While much of his directing dealt with getting the shots he needed with scarce budgets, the legacy he left is not about doing it for cheaper, but doing it with truth and original expression. Cassavetes aimed for capturing it while it's there. Cassavetes believed human emotion did not need pageantry or the incredible build-up on a massive set to trap it. It lay in the moments. Actors dug for them. He dug with them.

Fifteen years after I recognized and followed my own passion for writing and working on films, the Hollywood

three-picture deal is still elusive. Well-paid film work has dwindled through this winter, as is always the case. This past November, in a concerted effort to re-ignite the appetite for new ideas and images, I joined *LIT* and saw dozens of startling new works by filmmakers that have been sacrificing and toiling towards their art. It was fortifying to reenter a realm of film that has not been steamrolled into product.

I was transported back to a one-way AMTRACK train arriving in Manhattan in 1991, where I had gone searching for stories and experiences just like some of my heroes had decades before. Cassavetes's films offer the aspiring, embattled filmmaker solidarity and solace; beckoning artists to tell their story in the truest way, regardless of the familiar constraints. There is always a way. ■



LUCK OF THE DRAW

■ Mpenzi Film Fest's misses and a hit

by Heather Richards

Black. Female. Lesbian. In the genetic slot machine, landing on that particular combination could mean the odds are stacked up against a person. It may not appear to be a winning combination. But who decides? It is not a fair assumption. Logically, the human jackpot winnings cannot be determined by three exogenous factors alone. Human existence delves into a world that is way more complicated than that.

This reality is on display in film courtesy of the 3RD annual Mpenzi: Black Women's International Film and Video Festival, which took place last month. The stories present themes that link us together and shape the human experience.

Filmmaker Erika Morris's short film *Post Paradise* offers a simplistic model of the descent into the danger zone. Simplistic because it only scratches the surface of the issues of peer pressure and adolescent assimilation by following the life of a young black male character. In each coarsely shot vignette, the film attempts to take the viewer through the tragic missteps that make and shape young criminals. Having seen this theme play out time and again in real life, the film ends at a pivotal moment. The film falls short of letting the drama unfold on screen. The plot doesn't appear to have been fully formed, the relationships between main characters are, at best, vague, and the film's conclusion is not entirely convincing.

Desperate for Love, a short film by Angel Brown, explores another univer-

sal theme: the search for love. The real heartbreak is that the film had the opportunity to make a more profound statement. Unfortunately, this film misses the mark. The female lead is tempted and betrayed again by an ex-lover. As she begins her search for a partner, there is an opportunity for the filmmaker to make an impact, but the key moments are lost to clichés.

Tamika Miller's *Sarang Song* is a beautifully rendered piece of cinema that reintroduces us to the seventies and the struggle those involved in the Black Power Movement faced. And as the political war erupts, there is also a parallel struggle for survival of the relationship between two women attempting to build a life together. Despite its short length, this film does what the other films failed to do. *Sarang Song* is engaging from beginning to end. It successfully offers a tender-hearted depiction of a difficult time in history.

Despite the fact the choice in films that were screened as a representation of the Mpenzi were not all gems, the films attempt to focus on events that make us think and move us emotionally. The necessity for yet another film festival could be called into question, based on the fact that black+female+lesbian combo has been cruelly maligned, an education is in order. Films can facilitate that learning curve, but Mpenzi still has a ways to go; it must rise to the occasion as teacher because the students are prepared to learn. ■

Tamika Miller's *Sarang Song*

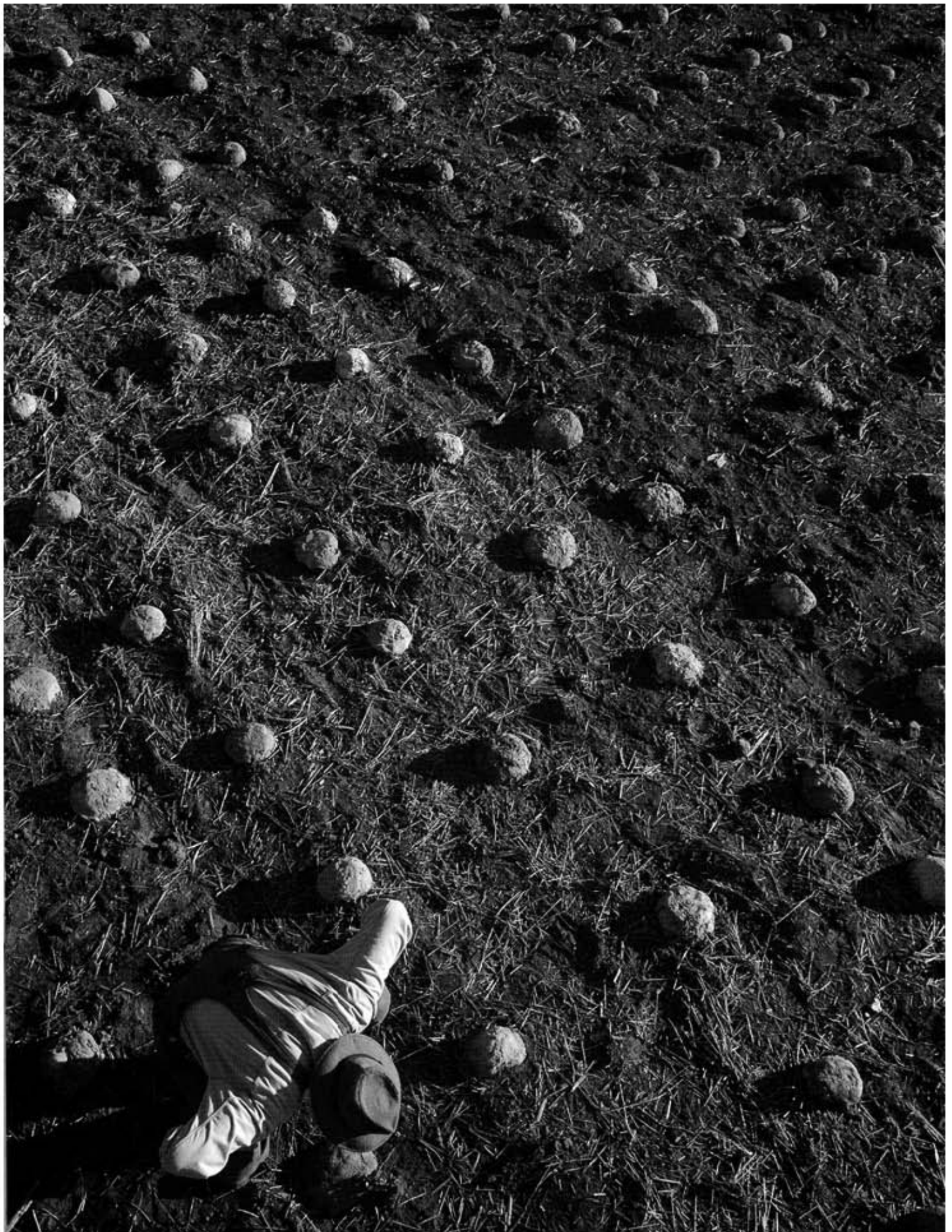




GLORIA KIM

Rock Garden: A Love Story is award-winning director Gloria Kim's latest project. Creating this eye-popping fairytale was down to good ol' fashion communication and teamwork.

- 1.** **What was the inspiration for your story?**
I initially dreamt the story. In the dream was my friend as a super-model. She was undergoing a transformation because of these flowers that were appearing in her life. I woke up. It was really early in the morning and I just ran to my computer and I wrote it down. I thought it would be more interesting with a second character so I wrote the second character in. And I thought it would work if the second character fell in love so that was kind of my inspiration.
- 2.** **What are some of the themes for Rock Garden?**
I see it as learning to accept one's self, learning to love one's self, learning to be true to one's self. Here were these two characters and they lived this kind of hard life. They grew rocks, which symbolically, I thought, they were doing something kind of hard, and not particularly beautiful. That was like their surface; they thought they had to be these hard, emotionless types of people. They're both kind of lonely too. They live separate existences and their only connection is their rivalry. So this is a story about how if you learn to love yourself for who you are, you can find love. [Laughs] It's so corny, right?
- 3.** **You touched on the symbolism of the film. Can you talk more about that?**
The rocks are about a certain kind of existence. The flowers are the softening of that [existence], like the other side. The rocks are like the hard work and the day-to-day, the non-questioning, and then the flowers are like the blossoming, the softness. When Farmer Ugg becomes a woman, he becomes the softer, feminine side. This is where you get into gender as a spectrum, just as much as sexual orientation is a spectrum, right? So the flowers were just that latent side of him that he always had, that he was always in denial of, and that he finally just let himself embrace.



4. **What about format? You shot this on...**
On 35. A whack of people suggested I shoot on HD when I told them what I wanted. I just said no. It's just not an HD project, right? I like HD — don't get me wrong — but if I had my druthers and the money, I would always shoot on film. I just thought because of what I wanted, and just the depth of colour that I wanted, and you know, just the smoothness and the look and the refinement that I wanted and the texture, I just thought 35 was the way to go. Fortunately I was able to get people to believe in me enough — like Kodak — to donate a good chunk of the film. I was pretty lucky.

5. **What's your directing style?**
With **Rock Garden**, my directing was more about the actors. I really took the time to work on motivation and objectives and back stories — and learning to talk to people — because I think a lot of directing is learning communication styles. And because I had people that I really trusted and I wanted to work with, I was able to focus more on working with actors and that was a tremendous joy. I loved it.

6. **I was wondering about the use of colour in the film...**
My DP, Joshua Allen, had a romantic quality about his work. I thought he had a very tender sort of eye and I really needed that for this sort of work; it's like a fairy tale, but it's also like a trannie love story. That's what I communicated to him. I was very definite about the colours I wanted. We talked a lot about colours and I did a lot of visual research and sent him pictures and said to him, "I see really, really blue sky — sky so blue that it hurts your eyes and really, really dusty ground, and the men are in these kinds of grey-bluish." I worked with my costume designer. I talked about it thoroughly with my art director. I said to him, "I want warmth inside, kind of like a warm glow, like a cocoon, like a womb almost". I said to the DP, "I want the light to reflect that as well" so you felt kind of bathed in warmth inside and on the outside. I wanted it to be as clear and as piercing as possible. So those were my parameters, and people just made the magic that they made.

7. **How did you finance your film?**
We started applying to the arts councils first, then NFB's Filmmaker's Assistance Programme. They came in — they were really awesome — and we started getting replies back, and it was like, yes! So we applied for the CBC/WIFT Canadian Reflections Award and then

applied for BravoFact and got that. My producer had this vision where everybody got paid for everything. Of course, we didn't get all the money, but we got a good chunk of it.

8.

What about the music? What was the process like?

It was awesome. When I went into the film, I thought that what I wanted for the music was something more ethereal sounding and I didn't anticipate any humour. The woman that I ended up working, Rosalind Mills, injected this humour into the music that I totally didn't expect. I was just completely blown away. She just made something really incredible — just like everybody else on this film — I gave them my version and then they went and ran with it and made something incredible. ■

— Josie Massarella

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