

FIREWORDS

by ELLEN REYNOLDS

Through the voices of three Quebecois feminist writers, director Dorothy Todd Henaut presents a world of inspiration for women. *Firewords/Les Terribles vivantes*, her most recent film, is exactly what the title says — the firewords of Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard.

The film itself allows the creative energy and genius of these three visionary women not only to shine through but to explode. It's difficult to classify *Firewords* as a specific type of film but Henaut calls it "a documentary with inserts of drama".

Louky Bersianik begins the film with an excerpt from *L'Euguelionne*, her novel about an extraterrestrial being who comes down to "the planet of men" where "one man out of two is a woman". Louky's use of words and intellectual spiralling is exciting and empowering. She discusses with Nicole and writer Gail Scott the political importance of language (both in English and French). "Changing language means changing the world," says Louky, who gives examples of how she is changing the world with words. Our language can't adequately describe a woman's sex, so Louky creates her own words, such as "clitorivage", 'clito' from 'clitoris' and 'rivage', the French word for "the shores you alight upon". Changing the language is only part of her empowering feminist vision.

"When women become visible," Louky says, "they are like giants." Patriarchal society reacts to this visibility with fear, and women need courage and the support of other women to combat this fear. Louky also talks about the difficulty of bringing up a son in our society: "We bring them up saying they are *all* and tell them they are only half."

In the setting of her hobby-farm home in the country, Jovette Marchessault tells of a difficult

early life. At age 13 she worked in a factory and, after being exposed to a variety of cultures, became a "cosmopolitan" woman. A self-taught painter, sculptor and writer, Jovette "had to prove first I was an artist with sculpture and painting." Depressed and without money, Jovette felt writing was her only option because it didn't require much equipment. The use of theatre is very important to Jovette as are the powerful images of women presented in her plays. In *Firewords*, her monologue *Night Cows* is performed with passionate energy and strength by Pol Pelletier.

Jovette lives away from the city, close to nature, with her animals in a women's world which she



Dorothy Todd Henaut

says "is gentler... violence comes from men and that has confirmed my love for women."

In contrast to Jovette, Nicole Brossard is in her element in the city and by the sea. She has "always intended to be disturbing" in her writing to spur courage in women to face the fear and defeat it. "Women," Nicole says, "have been fragmented by the patriarchy." She uses the spiral shape to show how a woman-centred perspective may come about. Positive images of women

such as amazon, witch and feminist are rare in our society and must be reclaimed.

In the group discussions and each separate interview, the three women present a visionary feminist view of the world which includes the essential solidarity of women and men as a part of nature. This feminist view which spirals into positive images of women and women's spirituality reflects much of Henaut's own perspective. "It's absolutely my own interpretation and I didn't hesitate to select and highlight what I liked."

Since 1969, Dorothy Todd Henaut has produced and directed many films. She has been with the women's unit of the National Film Board, Studio D, since 1977. In 1981, she produced *Not a Love Story (C'est surtout pas de l'amour)*, the well-known film about pornography.

Besides bridging the gap between French and English women in *Firewords*, Henaut wanted to give people the rare opportunity to listen directly to women talking about their loves and hates.

Both Nicole and Louky also talk of the powerful effect men have had on women's lives and how men must not abuse their power either intentionally or unintentionally.

Nicole reaffirms writer Gail Scott's statement that once she stopped thinking of a male critic or male audience, she was much freer and more confident in her writing. Louky makes an analogy of women in the bottom of a bowl of molasses and the men at the brim looking in who proclaim, "Look, all they can draw is molasses." The change in society must come "not just (from) outside tasks. It must also come from within men."

Henaut includes in her feminist vision "celebration of men's visions as long as they aren't harmful — and asking questions to find out if we



Actor Pol Pelletier. "My mother is a cow and that makes two of us."

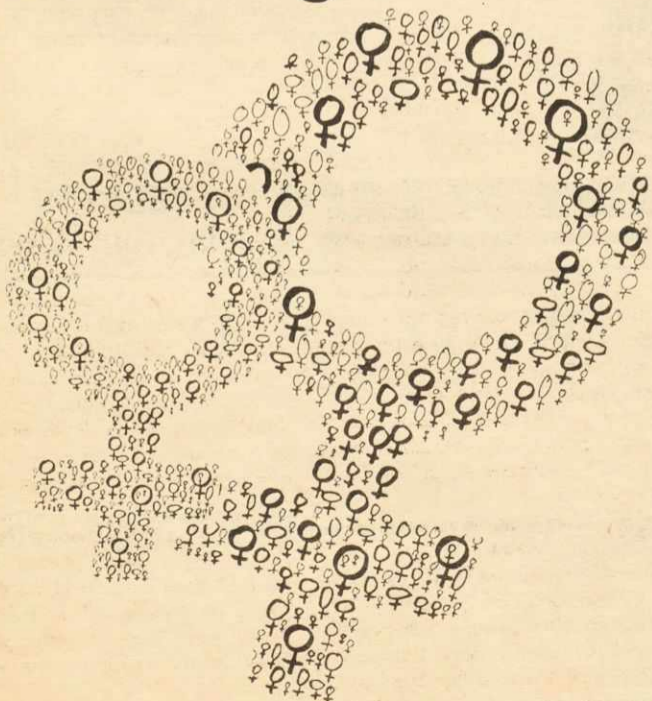
(women) are harmful or not... My vision of a feminist world is not confrontational, but it's cooperative and collaborative." Henaut's feminist approach to filmmaking means "respect of the people on the screen," celebrating their diversity and remaining "Absolutely faithful to the women." This involves much communication and feedback, which is reflected and strongly evident in *Firewords*.

Henaut is now working on her next project, a film celebrating the strong desire for love between mother and daughter.

As for *Firewords*, Henaut sums it up with all the energy and courage reflected in her film...

"I love to make a film where the audience at the end of it says, 'Hey, if they can do that, so can I.' I like to not only caress the women in the audience but set a firecracker under them!"

sisters sounding off



By ERIN GOODMAN

Sisters are doing it for themselves on CKDU 97.5 FM, bringing a new awareness to listeners through music.

Beth Cumming, Liz Bozma and Andrea Currie are the women behind the microphone during *Sister Sounds*, a show featuring female artists heard Sundays on CKDU from 7-8 pm. "We play women's music," explains Liz, "but in a feminist context."

Beth and Liz are concerned with the needs and tastes of female listeners that aren't being met by the male-defined radio industry. Through their show, they hope to introduce other women to broadcasting, and dispel so-called female "technophobia". They also wish to demystify the music industry, by emphasizing the messages contained in the music, often lost in the hype and glitter.

"We've started from an audience's perspective," says Beth. The DJs depend heavily on material borrowed from friends and roommates, and make an effort to honour listener requests. They developed a format based on weekly themes, such as women in

blues, women and work, and their most recent venture, women and sex. The themes allow them to emphasize the music's content, rather than glorifying the artists behind it.

"You get away from that building people up to be 'larger than life'," says Liz, who is concerned with the images portrayed by mainstream rock artists. "Most music is (written) from a male point of view," she comments. "You always have a guy pretty well masturbating over his guitar."

While rejecting sexual stereotypes common to the music industry, Beth and Liz readily play the music of glamorous pop artists such as Madonna, described by Liz as "a pre-packaged male fantasy". Beth explains that the context of the show prevents the powerful messages conveyed in the music of Madonna and Janet Jackson from being misinterpreted. "Our whole point of the show isn't to react to men."

Music has always played an important role in Beth's life, and she is currently interested in pop and reggae. Liz's musical tastes lean more towards new wave and

soul, and she cites favourite bands as being the Raincoats, Sweet Honey in the Rock and the AuPairs.

One complaint the DJs have is with the limited selection of alternative feminist material in the CKDU record library, partly due to thefts. Alternative feminist music counters the belief that women must be thin, blond and white to succeed in the business. Liz is particularly impressed with singer Deborah Iyall of *Romeo Void*. Deborah's large size has generated criticism, and many feel that the sexual feeling and opinions expressed by her music are inappropriate and distasteful. The singer once remarked, "What's it to me if some jerk can't get a hard-on? I'll dance to that!"

Perhaps inspired by Deborah's positive outlook, Liz shares insights about hosting the show. "Now I feel a lot more confident," she says, "and I even think I'm feeling a bit more raunchy." Adds Beth, "It makes you realize that media is just a bunch of people... it's not infallible."

Women wishing to become a part of *Sister Sounds* are encouraged to phone Liz at 422-3785.