

Leading ladies will never be the same again

By WARREN CLEMENTS

It's difficult to review films by women directors without overcompensating for the problems met by the women themselves during production.

It would, after all, be simple enough to excuse the slack editing, poor camerawork, loose scripts and technical defects, and to concentrate on the sensitivity of the approach to women and a healthy change from the traditional male image of the "leading lady". But unreserved praise would be unfair to potential viewers and damaging to women's films in general, which would ride into the theatres on the crest of critical love letters and have to face the bleak reality of low box office receipts and competition from slicker, shinier products on view at the other theatres.

But let's first consider the problems women have had breaking into a male-dominated film industry. Eleanor Perry, co-writer of *The Swimmer* and *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, succinctly outlined the situation in a letter to *Take One Magazine*:

"Whenever a woman, involved in some other aspect of filmmaking, ventures to tell a man that she'd like to direct a picture, the reaction goes something like this:

"My God, you'll lose your femininity? You'll turn into some kind of butch character. A director has to be a father-authority figure. Do you think all those guys on the crew are going to take orders from a woman?"

"What if you're not feeling exactly terrific a few days every month? What if something goes wrong? You can't solve it by bursting into tears, you know. Listen honey, come over to the set and watch for a while. I'd like to know what you think of the leading lady's hem-line. I mean, are skirts going to be short or long when this flick gets released?"

The purpose of last week's women directors festival, organized by students Debi Magidson and Jennifer Hodge, was to introduce York to films which have fought the anti-woman barrier and arrived, if not at your local theatre, at least in an arena where their merits might be appreciated.

"Apart from the fact that these are women directors," explained the organizers, "we consider the films shown at this festival to be outstanding examples of experimental, documentary and feature films." And the films they picked, if not outstanding, at least provoked a few interesting discussions following the screenings.

ALL-WOMAN SHOWS

Sylvia Spring, appearing to discuss Mireille Dansereau's film *"La Vie Revee"* and apologizing for her own *"Madeline Is . . ."*, delivered one of the more pertinent comments: "I think it's important for women to make films by themselves, to get a sense of their own ability, power and talent. It would be a positive difference.

"I had a chance to make a \$1 million film, but I told the Canadian Film

Development Corporation that I wanted an all-woman crew. They said, okay, just as long as they're the best, and I answered, but I'm not the best!

"I want to be with people on the same level as myself. I don't want Fellini's cameraman, I'd be intimidated, afraid I was fucking up — I'd rely too heavily on him."

Tanya Ballantyne McKay, appearing with her hour-long National Film Board study of a poor Montreal family, *Things I Cannot Change*, said in contrast that being a woman probably helped her at the Board; she was able to receive assignments because she could handle them from a woman's viewpoint.

She also mentioned that a lot of women

are "hidden in Canadian film-making, at the CBC, NFB and ETV."

Writer Kay Armitage, speaking for Dansereau, quoted the Quebecois director as saying "she was not aware of herself as a woman. She was trained to think of herself as a filmmaker first, person second, and international human being third. After the film, (*La Vie Revee*), she was able to think of herself as a French-Canadian woman film-maker. It's a nice transition."

And one of the final words on the subject came from *Take One's* Susan Rice, reviewing Agnes Varda's short *L'Opera Mouffe*, a surreal vision of the psychological states of pregnancy, screened at the festival: "Although it is by no means a motion picture milestone,

L'Opera Mouffe may be a classic in an unexpected sense — were a "woman's film movement" to develop. It is a film that could only have been made by a woman, in that it is refreshingly chauvinistic and meaningful to other women, in that it is marked by a keenness of vision, an intellectual rigour and an originality of point-of-view that will hopefully characterize 'women's films' in the new sense of that phrase."

MALE WRITER BAFFLED

Sharp-eyed readers may detect a certain reluctance on the part of this writer to dive into a firm commitment on the state of women's films. I could explain this by a reference to Vera Chytilova's *"Something Different"*, a Czechoslovakian feature contrasting the lives of a gymnast and a miserable housewife, which totally baffled me.

Perhaps because of a male bias — and I expect some readers are angrily wondering why a man was sent to review this festival — I couldn't understand why the housewife in the film chose to stay with her bastard of a husband and obnoxious little kid, both of whom were making her life miserable. The girl sitting next to me told me that the wife wanted "security" — and that the Olympic gold medal-winning gymnast, who I thought was extremely happy as a gymnastics teacher, apparently wasn't fulfilled at all; she wanted to go abroad and travel, and the film's title, "something different", was really an ironic joke.

Gradually a pattern emerged in the films. Men were either the heavies or mere shadows in the background. After years of aunts, Gal Fridays, sweethearts and vamps, women were moving to centre stage and men were retreating to supporting roles. In Barbara Loden's *Wanda*, a poor and inarticulate woman from a Pennsylvania mining town is used, and cast off by men, only to wind up as a bar-fly in a shoddy inn. In *La Vie Revee*, two women reach out for each other using the man as a go-between; the climax comes when they rip down the commercial posters and magazine photos which have exploited their fantasies and shaped their dream lives. Revelation.

Perhaps the whole problem facing women directors can be summed up by a story Armitage told about Dansereau:

"The only shot in *'La Vie Revee'* that Mireille didn't like was the one set up by her male cameraman. It was a scene in which one of the girls races out of a building and through a field, a long scene of her cutting through the tall grass. Mireille set the camera angle and then left for a while. When she saw the rushes, she realized that the cameraman had re-set the angle, and the whole focus of the scene — which couldn't be cut because of continuity — was the girl's white panties under the flapping back section of her dress, exposed by the new, lower angle of the camera."

It's April and countless essays are due

By MICHAEL FORMAN

The essay extravaganza is on.

It's spring, and York students must produce countless essays before the April deadline. Topics range from Groucho to Karl Marx and desperados are willing to beg, borrow or steal research library books and finished essays.

Cafeteria conversation reflects the prevalent mood: "How many essays do you have due?" is the favourite question of the misery loves company crowd. Among eight students interviewed this week, a total of 35 essays were due by April 1. All these students had at least one final exam to write, but in a total of 17 exams, only two were worth more than 50 per cent. The majority were worth from 10 to 25 per cent.

Grading emphasis has obviously shifted to the essay. Yet

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on to other things. The unfinished situation is the awareness of the alienating nature of the essay in particular, and the university in general. The bother is that the conscious part of the self has abandoned the situation — not only because it was too painful, but because it was insoluble. Thus, there is no prospect for finishing the problem off, and consequently no apparent way to overcome the problem of inability to concentrate.

Ultimately, the essay usually gets done. But while the university remains what it is, essays will remain forms of torture, not forms of liberation. And 'free' courses will remain caught up in the morass of their own contradictions. But in this, after all, they are no different from the educational experiences to be had in any course in the university.

none of the students interviewed were satisfied with exam pressures being replaced by the ordeal of essay writing. Four students even suggested they would choose future courses that were more exam oriented.

For the student who feels he cannot write his own material, these are the classic avenues of escape. The favourite is the borrowing of old essays for re-submission. Essay borrowing has become so popular that rumour has it two dozen original essays have geometrically blossomed into thousands. Of the students interviewed, only two had never submitted an old essay. Both of them were considering doing so this term.

If a student can or will not obtain some used material, there are still some devices left. Family deaths and other natural disasters rise dramatically around deadline time. There are even some students who have inflicted personal injury on themselves as a last resort to avoid the essay grind.

Many professors are just as disenchanted with the essay factory. But alternatives are few and far between. The unfairness of final comprehensive exams have made them an almost taboo, and guarantee a class petition early in the year with a call to remove them.

Judgment of tutorial performance is criticized by some students as too subjective; a disadvantage to the bright but quiet student. Whether students should be (or can be) measured at all is another question all together. A major part of the faculty's role is to assign marks to each student and if essays are not a fair measure, then what is?

The essay trauma is a real problem. Psychological surveys show there is a noticeable increase in student suicides as the end of the academic year approaches. Though this anxiety rarely results in such tragedy, many students suffer stress, because of year-end work loads and a feeling of not being able to cope with it. Two of the persons interviewed by Excalibur

were seriously frightened they would not be able to meet what they called unbearable demands. One woman even suggested she might drop out of school.

None of the students interviewed suggested alternatives, but all of them agreed that essays were not only a pain in the writing hand but in other parts of the anatomy as well.

An independent study program is not an escape from the essay ordeal. Still, for the student who is deeply interested in a particular theme, it is an alternative to a restrictive regular program.

Independent study is available to any student entering his/her third or fourth year carrying at least a C plus average. The program allows a student to choose calendar courses in combination to emphasize study of a particular interest.

Humanities professor Leon Leeds directs the program, which now has an enrolment of 45 students. Leeds pointed out that the program required a self-discipline that many students lack. For the program to succeed the student would require "an overwhelming question, a desire to learn from the inside" as opposed to "education imposed from the outside", Leeds explained.

The brochure describing independent studies warns any student graduating from such a program that he/she may find it difficult to flash credentials with as much ease as a student graduating from a regular program. Leeds emphasized the point: "Such students cannot be so easily identified." He suggested that the program was valuable not only as an alternative to regular programs but as an alternative to the role of the university as a licensing commission, something he feels it has become.

For more information on the program contact Leeds in 202 Winters College, 667-3226.