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Women's Festival Steps Up

by Mara Math



Ms. Shepard at one of WFI's many yearly events. photo CineSource

Starting small to fill a pressing need, the Women's Fest has grown with good programming

Scarlett Shepard likes the direct route. After she discovered, as a film student, that San Francisco State was not teaching any women directors (in 2004!), Shepard didn't write a letter or organize a demonstration: she founded a women's film festival. Now in its sixth year, the San Francisco Women's Film Festival and its parent organization, the Women's Film Institute, have recently moved into new quarters at the Ninth St. Independent Film Center. This year's festival, April 7 - April 11, will be held mostly at the Roxie Theater.

"We'll always do some events with the community centers," Shepard says, "but this is a step up for the festival." In its second year, it was held at the Women's Building, in a room with a 30-person capacity; the third year, it filled the Audre Lorde Room there, which seats 90; and the next year the festival moved to building's the auditorium. "I'm proud of that," she adds, "It takes a lot of tenacity

and patience to wait while you grow to that level, and we've reached a real milestone to have the majority of our screenings at the theater."

Asked about trends in submissions, Shepard says, "The majority are about women being under represented, certain stories not being told." She is particularly proud to premiere "Orgasm Inc.: The Strange Science of Female Pleasure," directed by Liz Canner. "This is a doc about a woman uncovering a bunch of companies racing to patent the first Viagra for women. I think that this is a dangerous line in terms of the pharmaceutical companies and their corporate marketing, how female sexuality may be defined or redefined."

The WFF 6 will pay special tribute to documentarian Judith Helfand ("Blue Vinyl") on April 8 for her activist and environmental justice filmmaking. Helfand's pivotal doc, "A Healthy Baby Girl," about DES, a drug that causes cervical cancer, will screen along with excerpts from "Blue Vinyl," its Sundance-award-winning sequel, and her short "Ek Velt."

Helfand, a Peabody Award winner, will also teach a master class in "effective, entertaining, and activist filmmaking," as well as a workshop on applying for grants. She will join a half-dozen-plus other women filmmakers, including Lynn Hershman ("Strange Culture"), director of the SFAI film program, and Gail Dolgin ("Daughter from Danang"), out of the Fantasy Building's documentary cohort, on an evening panel to discuss "How Story Leads to Action."

The festival offers several other significant documentaries, including "Sin by Silence" by Olivia Claus, about women, jailed for killing their abusers, who are now helping others avoid similar; "21 Days to Nawroz" by Canadian director Michelle Mama, which follows the lives of three very different women in Kurdistan; Amanda Pope's "The Legend of Pancho Barnes and the Happy Bottom Riding Club" about the first female stunt pilot of the 1920s; "Code Name Butterflies" by Chilean documentarian Cecilia Domeyko, which traces the Mirabal sisters' founding of a secret resistance against the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo; and "The Heretics" by Joan Braderman, the

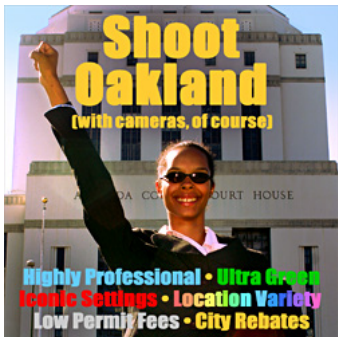


'Hidden Truth,' directed by three of the women filmmakers of Samfya, a Zambian group trained to make films promoting social justice.


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inside story of a feminist art collective whose magazine "Heresies" revolutionized the 70s art world.

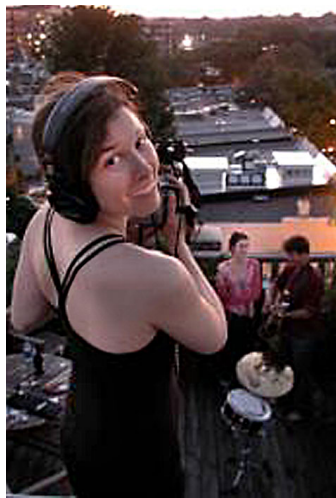
It took Braderman three years to make the film as she tracked down the collective members, now scattered from California to Venice and Mexico. She was inspired to do it, she says, in response to being overwhelmed by "the steady diet of horrible news" from the Bush administration. "I just had a hunch that I'd able to tell a story with those minds and those faces, so varied and so committed; we'd be able to do some history that corrected the distortions of what feminists supposedly were," Braderman says. "I wanted to show a bunch of older women who are beautiful and not playing mother or grandmother, and they're not dieting or having plastic surgery, they're BUSY!" Indeed, all of the collective members are now renowned in their fields, including (among others) filmmaker Su Friedrich, critic Lucy Lippard, painter Pat Steir, and installation artist Joyce Kozloff. One of the pleasures of the film for viewers will be seeing so many women work in such very large formats, from Harmony Hammond's wall-size paintings to Kozloff's "Targets" installation; another will be the uniquely accurate way in which Braderman has captured the spirit and energy of the feminist movement at a time when change was imminent and achievable.

Some of the changes wrought by "Heresies" and the feminist movement can be seen in the SFWFF's "Making Herstory: Young Women in the Director's Chair." All of the work in this program was created by girls in nonprofit filmmaking programs, including the Bay-Area based Conscious Youth Media Crew, Tilt at 9th St. Independent Film Center, Frameline's Generations, BAVC's The Factory, Digital Storytelling in Berkeley and Seattle's Reel Grrls.

Other shorts programs in the festival include a Jane Campion retrospective, a narrative collection, lesbian-themed program, children's animation, and this year's LUNA Fest, a roving fundraising fest underwritten by Clif Bar.

"My passion was always for independent filmmakers," explains Luna Fest program director Suzy Starke German, who cofounded Lightstream Animation and did PR Lucas Films. "I witnessed first-hand the struggle of women filmmakers. We did work on some films by Jodie Foster, but most were still made by men."

LUNA Fest travels to different communities and 85% of the proceeds go to the local women oriented nonprofits (like battered women's shelters) and 15% to the Breast Cancer fund but with SFWFF hosting for the first time, Shepard has asked for 100% go to breast cancer.



Liz Canner takes on the strange science of female pleasure in her witty doc, "Orgasm Inc." photo courtesy L. Canner

rap. It's all the same core value: We all want to be heard, to be respected, to be treated well. If you look at history, women have been left out. Even today when people think we're beyond it-I mean, look at Kathryn Bigelow, I'm so glad [she won Best Director and Best Picture Oscars], but that's one woman in an 82-year history! I hope her win will be a breakthrough that means more women get to tell their own stories and make their own movies." Posted on Apr 03, 2010 - 12:15 PM

One of two feature-length narratives in WFF this year, Jen White's "Between Floors," was a hit at SXSW, combining five separate narratives of the occupants of five different elevators stalled mid-floor. The other, "An Everyday Black Man," which writer/director Carmen Madden based on the murder of journalist Chauncey Bailey (Mis en Scene, Feb10 CS), enjoys its Bay Area premiere at SFWFF. Madden is one of the first African American women to found and run a small feature film studio, which is located in Oakland, California...

"I had just been writing for years and wanted to get my work out there, and I could see that it was not going to happen the Hollywood way, and I was getting older, so that was going against me, too, so I just decided to do it myself."

In a post-feminist era, why should anyone of either gender come to a women's film festival? "Story is universal, anyone can relate to it," Shepard responds. "Feminism has gotten a bad

