

Studio D founder Kathleen Shannon dies at 62

Originally from Balfour, Shannon changed women's roles using film

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Kathleen Shannon of Balfour, founder of the National Film Board's Studio D, died in a Kelowna hospital last Friday of cancer. She was sixty-two. Her list of professional accomplishments is rivaled only by her contribution to the struggle for gender equality in the workplace and in Canadian society in general.

Kathleen Shannon was born in Vancouver in 1935. Her youth was spent in remote areas of Manitoba and Ontario as well as in Winnipeg, Vancouver and Ottawa. In 1951 Shannon made a career decision which would shape her professional life and, three decades later, the face of film making in Canada. She decided to learn about the industry from the bottom up. In 1956, after a variety of film industry jobs, she was invited to join the National Film Board of Canada. At the NFB she worked as a sound editor, picture editor, producer and director until 1974.

The patriarchy of many government institutions was being challenged as a growing movement, feminism, was bringing issues to light which previously had not been given much room for public discussion. The 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women increased public pressure on federal institutions to allow more women to assume positions of responsibility. The National Film Board had also discovered that

there was a huge audience for women's films. Kathleen Shannon states in an interview in the magazine *Herizons*: "At the same time, there was an increasing pressure on the institution by women: more women asking for jobs; more women bringing forward film proposals; and more women identifying themselves as women instead of trying to remain

invisible as 'just one of the boys.'"

Kathleen Shannon rose to prominence in 1974 when she co-produced and directed an 11-film series, "Working Mothers." The films dealt with many societal contradictions faced by women by raising such issues as access to education, pay equity and affordable child care. The series remains relevant today.

become successful in their own rights. Terre Nash's "If you love this planet" (1983) won an Oscar and was banned by the U.S. Department of Justice. Bonnie Sherr Klein's "Not A Love Story: A Film About Pornography" was acclaimed around the world but was deemed too provocative by the Ontario Censor Board, which refused to allow it to be screened publicly.

Kathleen Shannon stepped down from the leadership of Studio D in 1986. The studio continued to produce films of the same high quality and social relevance until, by the

time it was disbanded in 1996 during a time of "downsizing and shifting priorities at the NFB" it had earned more than a hundred international awards. Shannon, too, continued to produce and direct films until her retirement in 1992.

In 1986 Kathleen Shannon was awarded the nation's highest civilian honour, the Order of Canada, in recognition of her work in the women's movement through Studio D. In 1984 Queen's University bestowed upon her a Doctor of Laws degree and in 1996 she received a Doctor of Letters from York University.

Kathleen Shannon returned to her native British Columbia in 1992. The dream of her retirement was to establish a retreat centre and guest house for women who are exhausted, in recovery from abuse or addiction, or who just want a break. Her dream was realized when she moved to Balfour and created Hestia's - The Women's Guesthouse in the Kootenays.

Shannon was further honoured when, shortly before the dissolution of Studio D, the National Film Board produced a film depicting her work and life in the Canadian film industry. Many of the film crew had thrived under her mentorship in the Studio D organization and were paying personal tribute to the woman they had known and loved as friend, co-worker and guide. With wry humour and quiet intelligence Shannon speaks of the joys and struggles of a professional life led by the steady fire of her convictions.

For more information about the NFB film about Kathleen Shannon call their toll free number at 1-800-267-7710.



PHOTOS BY URSULA HELLER



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The success of "Working Mothers" and the public support generated by the series inspired Shannon to establish Studio D, the Women's Studio of the NFB. It was the first publicly funded feminist film production unit in the world. The next two decades were marked by enormous success and notoriety. Studio D became famous for its frankness, its courage, its challenging stance and its production of controversial films. This courage also resulted in the earning of three Academy Awards, a higher percentage of Oscars than any other NFB studio.

As Studio D's Executive Producer Kathleen Shannon gave many aspiring film makers the platform to express their passions and