

## beverly shaffer

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From McGill to Boston and "Zoom" and back again to Montreal and Studio D at the NFB was not the route that Beverly Shaffer ever imagined would lead her to Hollywood. But her straightforward look at one of Canada's children did the trick. Below, she speaks about her techniques and Tom Waugh reviews her film, *I'll Find a Way*.

# touching people

by Alexandra McHugh and Susan Schouten Levine



Beverly Shaffer looking dreamy with her Oscar.

"The show was pretaped. I went back to my hotel room and there was a bottle of champagne and some cookies waiting for me. I sat down in my room still dressed up and turned on my TV; and I said, "Gee, I'm a really important person!" Here I am drinking champagne and watching myself on TV."

Beverly Shaffer, April 1978

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The show was "90 Minutes Live". Beverly Shaffer was there because she had, the week before, won an Academy Award for her NFB documentary *I'll Find A Way*. A Montreal native, graduate of McGill (in Religion), and former high school teacher (of History and English), Beverly Shaffer became determined in 1968 to join the lucky one percent who manage to earn their living in a more enjoyable way. She earned her Master's Degree in film from Boston University, presenting for her thesis a "very simple film" based on the Laporte kidnapping crisis of 1971. The film is a one-actor drama in which a man in a jail cell talks about how he came to be radicalized. The camera moves closer and closer. The next five years she spent at WGBH TV, "the best place to be working in Boston", while living in Cambridge. Two and a half years ago she returned to Montreal to work in the just-formed Women's Unit at the National Film Board. **Cinema Canada** spoke with her last week:

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**Beverly Shaffer:** My most important asset as a filmmaker is that I am a really good interviewer and am genuinely interested in people. I'm not that much of a talker myself but I can get people talking about themselves. I ask very specific questions which a lot of people are dying to know but they're afraid to ask because they're too polite.

Last week I was in Toronto with a girlfriend. She was curious to know about Hollywood; she asked certain questions. Then we went over to her brother's. Her brother asked about a million juicy, detailed questions: who'd you see? what was he wearing? what did he say? what did you say? and my girlfriend said to her brother 'Wow, you are a fantastic interviewer. I wanted to know all those things but just didn't think to ask.' Well, I ask all those things too, little detailed questions and personal things. A lot of people would have been afraid to ask Nadia (the child in *I'll Find A Way*) direct questions about her handicap and about people looking at her and calling her names. I knew that I could ask her those questions without offending her; and after the filming she wasn't distressed at all...

I feel I have learned a craft. I documented Nadia's life. One person who saw the film *Benoit* (the latest in the Children of Canada Series) said, "It's Beverly's Benoit," and I said, "Of course, it's Benoit as Beverly sees him; you don't make films about a person objectively, you make films about a person as you see him."

I'm imposing a structure. I like to set a lot of situations up. In a documentary I feel I'm documenting from my point of view.

I had a whole talk with the cameraman who felt that I was too closed-minded, knowing too specifically what I wanted. I don't feel that's a danger. I like to do my research very, very carefully, and if something good happens unexpectedly, that's great but I don't go hoping for the unexpected. I go hoping to get what I want.

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*Alexandra McHugh is a Ph. D candidate in Communications at McGill University and Susan Schouten Levine is a filmmaker and teacher at Concordia University.*

*Would you ever make a spontaneous, unplanned film?*

I'd be too nervous. The night before I would stay awake and say what am I going to do tomorrow. For a cameraman, it's not so satisfying to be told specifically what to film but for me the product is important, and I know specifically what I want all the time.

*You seem able to decide very quickly about what you want.*

Yes, but if you had met Nadia you would have said, 'that girl's good', and if you'd met her neighbors you would have said, 'they'd be good'. There was only one scene that was straight off the cuff. I wanted to do one scene to show Toronto, and one scene with Nadia and Craig to bring out their humor. At the last minute I said, "The CN Tower", and that was kind of frantic, calling the Tower and saying we'll be there in two hours. I really don't like to work like that at all but I knew I had that afternoon to film a sequence and I wanted another scene in the film. Everything else was planned quite carefully, the time and the place and how long it took and everything.

*Are you ever surprised?*

Sometimes I get excited. "Ooh, it looks so good," I'll say.

I have a general idea of what the finished film should look like since I bring in the narration with the material. Of course 'my name is' is at the beginning. Sometimes I don't know the exact order of the scenes but most of the time I do. Who was it who said that you know you have a film when you know the opening scene, the closing scene and the first shot of every scene. I do know that.

*Did you learn this when you were at school or is it just part of the way you are?*

It's my personality type. And when I was working at "Zoom" I remember the executive producer would say, "You have to have a focus and every scene has to relate to that focus." There's a certain theme in each film and I would hope that each scene comments on it.

*Did you start getting interested in children at "Zoom"? (WGBH TV's program for children).*

Yes. I was finding kids who would be subjects for five-minute films from all over the states, doing the research.

*Would the director at "Zoom" pay attention to your suggestions?*

I was always disappointed in what I saw. It wasn't that the films were bad on "Zoom" but the kid was so much better. I felt like I got more out of the kid when I did the research than what we saw on the film. I also thought the idea would be dynamite for Canada.

*How did you find the little boy for Beautiful Lennard Island (one of the NFB's Children of Canada Series)? The people in one audience were overheard saying he would grow up to be Prime Minister and asking "Who was the genius who found this child?"*

It's very arbitrary. I was going to British Columbia because I'd never been there and I tried to think of what kinds of lifestyles I could look for and one idea I had was of a kid who lives on a lighthouse. Also I wanted a kid who doesn't go to

a regular school but who does correspondence. So the coast-guard gave me the names of three families on lighthouses who had kids the right age and I went to see all three at one shot; the coast guard was kind enough to take me in a helicopter. Steven was the best. When I literally dropped from the sky this guy started talking right away "I'm Steven Thomas Holland" and he shook my hand and he had so many stories to tell me. He's more of an adult's kid than a kid's kid. I just stayed a half hour that time.

*It sounds very simple, as though anyone could do the same thing; but no one seems to be that logical about it. And the children all seem to be very exceptional.*

I'm looking for articulate ones. I don't like to deal with middle class families since they get enough exposure in the media. All my kids are working class. None of the kids are the smartest in their school. They're very interesting kids; that's the quality I'm looking for. The point I want to make about Nadia is that although she is crippled, she is like other kids. She just happens to be more articulate. I like to pick kids who are a little bit different, but I want to show that they're really the same as everyone else.



Shaffer in a well organized office.

*What do children think about the children in the films?*

Kids really love it. How many times do they have the chance to be spoken to by another kid in the media? I think it's having the effect I want, which is to expose them to other ways of life and show them that the differences aren't so bad. I hope it minimizes discrimination. As a filmmaker, you want to have some effect on the people who watch your films, you want to make a statement.

*Why did you use the framing device in I'll Find A Way, so the women's crew could be seen at the beginning.*

It is, in fact, a male cameraman who shot the film, but everyone else is a woman. I wanted to leave children with the subliminal impression that women can make films. Also, in the film, it shows a progression in Nadia's coping with the crew and reveals another side of her personality.

*Anne Henderson (an NFB editor) says it's fantastic to edit for you because you are one of the few people who has a film sense and when you choose things, you choose them in terms of how they're going to look on film. Some filmmakers don't care.*

They're very heady, intellectual. I see the film in my mind. In the film Anne edited (**Benoit**) there is a dodgeball game. I filmed that scene to introduce the whole family. I told the cameraman to hold on each person long enough for a voice-over introduction on every person there. That's all I needed from that scene. I give the editors pretty well-structured material.

*Do you have a formula for the Children of Canada series?*

Yes, they are formula and that's why I'm getting tired of them. I found a formula that really works and so I could do variations but I need to do other things.

*Do you think Canada is a better place to be than the States for you?*

Is it better to be a big fish in a little pond or a little fish in a big pond?

*Do you feel loyalty for Canada?*

I do. I do. But I feel that I want to learn in the States. They know it better... if you like my films it's because of my experience in the States. If you get trained in a TV station you work efficiently and faster. And you're not horrified when someone imposes some kind of limitation on you because you're used to it and you don't make a big deal about your artistic integrity. You do a job.

*What did you do at WGBH specifically? Did you direct?*

I worked on all sorts of programs there and learned both television and film. I was always an assistant, either an associate producer/researcher or a production assistant. Of all the people at the TV station I floated the most. I worked on quite a lot of programs. I worked there for five years but while working there, I submitted the proposal to the Film Board for the children's series. The key is not to look for a job but to sell an idea. An idea is outside me and if it is rejected, it isn't me being rejected. I am not the kind of person to say that the films are fantastic but the idea is, I think, the most fantastic idea, isn't it? To make films about children narrated by children so that Canadian children can learn about other Canadian children is the most brilliant idea.

*It's also very simple.*

Yes. Anyway, a lot of people did not see the merit of the idea. It sort of languished. I was treated politely all the time. I would call up and finally I sent three excellent Zoom films. On one of my visits I was told there might be a women's studio opening and if that happened they would just hand on the proposal. Then, three months later, it was established and I called Kathleen (Shannon, head of Studio D) and she said to come to Montreal. I went to the Film Board and I showed the films and there was just fire in their eyes. In February I took a leave from Boston and came to Montreal and researched and shot the two pilot films. Then I went back to Boston; eight or nine months passed and then Kathleen said, "I can't guarantee you forever but I think you should come." So I moved back. I've made six films since.

## IF YOU'RE DYING TO KNOW...

*What do your parents think of the Award?*

They're really proud. My mother wants me to bring the films home to show to her Hadassah club. But I won't. I know what she has in mind — maybe one of them will have a son.

*Where do you buy your clothes?*

I don't buy very many but I needed a whole new wardrobe for Hollywood so I went to factories. You know how it works with factories. You have to know someone who knows someone. I was on TV a couple of times and it would have been a horror show to go and buy an outfit every time. So now I can handle any kind of social occasion at the drop of a hat. I have the respectable clothes for it.

*Do you think you have a particular philosophy of life that comes out in your films?*

I wouldn't call myself a nonconformist because I'm not eccentric but I have never conformed to the norm in terms of my attitudes. I'm Jewish and that's been part of my identity. Most of my friends don't have that strong an identity and it sets me apart a little in my outlook.

*Do you have brothers and sisters?*

I have three sisters. I'm number three.

*Were you the odd one out in your family?*

I was the sick one, the physically sick one. Not very sick but I had terrible allergies and was hospitalized; that's how severe they were. That made me a little bit different, being the sick kid.

*Are you quite religious?*

Not that religious, but I'm kosher, for example, which is not the norm. There aren't too many kosher filmmakers. I have a little bit of familiarity with being different, not very different, just a little bit and knowing that it's not a big deal.

*Are you a Zionist?*

Yes. I was one of the people who booed Vanessa Redgrave.

*Did other people realize you were booing her and turn around and look at you?*

I wasn't the first person. When she started talking there was initially a gasp from the audience and then people started booing and I was one of them.

*Do you think that because you work so hard that you end up not being interested in material things?*

I don't work that hard. Really. I'm productive but the secret is I'm not editing. Editing really gets you down. So I work hard for two or three weeks and then I don't work hard and then I work hard. So I cannot say I work hard.

*Do you watch a lot of films?*

Quite a bit. I never was a film nut. I just happened into film because I thought it would be fun. But really — and I'm not being excessively humble — just because I won an Oscar doesn't mean that I'm a great filmmaker. It was a nice little film that happened to touch people and, thank God, the NFB had the judgement to submit it to the Academy. The only thing, I feel that sets these films apart from some other children's films is that these films are not condescending. They deal with the kid as a person. I don't really consider myself an authority on children. I know pretty well how to make a good portrait film of a kid and probably of an adult too.

*What was it like to go from Beverly Shaffer, filmmaker, and to walk through the doors of the Film Board with your new label?*

So far everyone that has congratulated me has done it so genuinely. I have been made to feel that people are happy I won the Award. But I was cautioned first of all by a friend who has some experience in life and he said, 'Beverly, be careful. People are going to be jealous.'

At the Film Board they had a party and I was surprised at the way it was organized because they had a little stage and we were presented as celebrities. None of us wanted to go on stage but we were pulled up and had to stand there. It was terribly embarrassing.

In the outside world, it's the director's film but at the Film Board, they know it's not that way. I've been at the Board two and a half years, and there were people like Mike Rubbo and Donald Brittain standing there... I feel very lucky that this film won, but it's ironic and crazy.

*Even if documentary is the filmmaker's creation, everything comes from what is real. That is its advantage over drama.*

Yes. For example, I know that if I had been making a film about a crippled kid that was a drama, it wouldn't have been as good as Nadia because what could be better than the truth and the real. But it may be different for historical films. I think it's important right now to learn more about unions. I'm hoping that I have an uncanny ability to come up with a

good idea at the right time. You see, often the true genius comes up with an idea too far ahead of his time. What I hope is that I can just come up with it at the right time.

*It sounds like you're efficient enough so that if you get an idea at the right time, it'll be done while the right time is still in existence.*

I don't know if that is true about myself but I hope it is because that makes successful films.

*Do you think you would have accomplished what you have right now had you stayed in Boston?*

No. If I had stayed in Boston they would never have made me a director. It's unfortunate that whatever level you enter an institution at it determines your future. I was lucky enough to enter here as a director. If I hadn't, I never would have gotten my chance.

*Do you think the women's unit (at NFB) offers women this chance?*

Absolutely. I think Kathleen Shannon put herself on the line. It was one of the first projects she approached the program committee with for approval and she must have said "If you have faith in me, you have to trust my judgement." So they said OK. And I think the women's unit is going to attract more and more people now. Somehow it is a little bit more comfortable, not so high-powered. There aren't only women in it now, there are some men too.

For me the Film Board has given me the chance to make the films I want. There's nowhere else in the world like it. At that TV station you couldn't make any film you wanted to make. But here, with the right circumstances, you get an idea and you can make the film. And you can make it as long as you want it and you can finish it more or less when it's ready to be finished.

That whole film (*I'll Find A Way*) was shot in five days and it was quite a low budget film. I know exactly how to

make these children's films in the most efficient manner and I think I could teach people. But if you're making a film about kids or with kids you really should be enthusiastic and you can't be enthusiastic for a lifetime. So it's better to leave it and come back when you feel like it.

Now I'd rather do dramatic films for adults; I'm going also to be working on the Commonwealth Games, which is a challenge.

*What's your role?*

Paul Cowan is the director and he has four directors working with him and I'm one of them. Here we'll see if, in fact, the female sensibility is different from that of the male. I'm the only woman director and I'm going to be following one or two athletes.

*So you have a suspicion that it is different, that sensibility?*

I think so, although a lot of people get angry when you tell them that, especially men. Women are more interested in feelings. That's why *Nadia's* such a good film, because she talks about feelings and she talks about what hurts her. I think that if more women start making films, the films will be different. I know there have been excellent films made at the Film Board that tell you everything about a situation but they don't have that feeling, they don't touch as much. For me, that's what makes a good film, a film that deals with emotions and can touch you.

*Did you ever think of winning an Academy Award?*

Never. Would you think of an Academy Award? I have a healthy fantasy life and everything, but that was never a part of it.

*Once you've done that, what is the next?...*

The next is... well now it's a part of my fantasy. I'd like to win another one. □

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## I'll Find a Way

d: Beverly Shaffer, ph: Hideaki Kobayashi, asst. ph: Joan Hutton, ed: Ginny Stikeman, re-rec: Jean-Pierre Joutel, sd. ed.: John Knight, sd. rec.: Ingrid M. Cusiel, m: Larry Crosley, Administration: Jane Kenderes, exec. p.: Kathleen Shannon, p: Yuki Yoshida, p.c.: National Film Board (1977) col: 16mm, running time: 23 minutes, 20 seconds.



Nadia with her parents.

fer's *I'll Find A Way* really deserves the Oscar it has just received. It's embarrassing the way the NFB publicity people have reacted to this latest accident of Beverly Hills politics with such unprecedented hype, and have made 10-year-old Nadia di Franco the hottest new Canadian media star since Craig Russell.

Fortunately for all concerned, however, the Oscar couldn't have happened to a nicer film.

I suppose it's being a poor sport to interrupt the celebration by pointing out the unerring stupidity with which the Academy has systematically ignored for the last thirty-six years the best documentaries from the best documentary studio in the world. The last and only NFB documentary ever