Louise Tiranoff, The Women’s Movement, and The Archive in My Closet

I want to start with a story:

It’s Monday May 22, 2000. It’s millennial moment, a different world. It’s the first semester I’m teaching Women in the Directors Chair at Tisch School of the Arts and I’m taking my students to see Reel Models: The First Women of Film a benefit for New York Women in Film and TV’s Women’s Film Preservation Fund. I’m ecstatic and giddy as I lead a line of students through Chelsea into the packed Clearview Theatre. We sit behind two women who speak as loudly as if they own the world. We’re all awkwardly listening to their conversation as the lights dim and the moderator begins an introduction to the Preservation Fund. She’s describing their mission and the work they do when suddenly-- mid-sentence--she calls out into the audience, to one of the loud sparkly women in front of us, “I mean, Martha? Do you even know where Not a Pretty Picture is?” My students and I eye each other with glee. We’ve been eavesdropping on Martha Coolidge, director of Real Genius and Valley Girl: films that we grew up watching over and over, before we paid attention to the credits or learned that we were a minority in our field. Of course, although we’d read about Not a Pretty Picture, Coolidge’s 1976 experimental documentary about her own rape, we
hadn’t seen it even if we’d tried. “I know exactly where it is.” Coolidge quickly retorted.

“It’s in my closet.”

Now I’d like to play a game.

I think this is likely to be the most literate audience I’ll ever get for this game, so I don’t really know what to expect, but I hope you humor me for this little experiment. We’ll call it NAME THAT DIRECTOR:

She most recently directed, *Julie & Julia* (2009). She’s perhaps most known for *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993); and for writing *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *Silkwood* (1983). She also executive produced Sarah Kernochan’s *All I Wanna Do* (1998) **Nora Ephron**


Currently in production on *Breaking the Girl*, she’s most recently directed episodes of *United States of Tara*, and *Mr. Sunshine* (2010-11). She’s perhaps best known for her debut feature, *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999). She was also script supervisor on Alex Sichel’s *All Over Me* (1997) **Jamie Babbit**
She most recently directed episodes of *The Goodnight Show* (2010). She’s perhaps most known for directing *Blue’s Clues* (1999-2006) and the movie *Blue’s Room* (2006). She’s been nominated for 5 Emmy Awards and has also directed a documentary *Chandas Go to India* about arranged marriages in her family (2000). **Koyalee Chanda**


She’s perhaps most known for her innovative translations and subtitles from the Godfather II (1974) to Metropolitan Opera Live in HD (2008). She’s an academy award nominated documentary director/producer with multiple Emmy and Cine Golden Eagle awards. She began her career as a company writer for MGM. **Sonya Friedman**

Known for her documentaries *BrotherMen* (2002), *Conjure Woman* (1995), and *Mama’s Pushcart: Ellen Stewart and 25 Years of La MaMa ETC* (1988). She was “one of four black women directors out of the 9000 members of the DGA” in the year 2000. She also worked on grant proposals with Leslie Harris for *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992) **Demetria Royals**
She’s an Emmy nominated director and director of photography, who’s worked in news, children’s programming, and documentary. Her film Milt & Honi, narrated by Gregory Hines, documents the friendship between American jazz giants, Milt Hinton and Charles "Honi" Coles. For the past 10 years her company GeneticaLens has specialized in visually mapping difficult to diagnose disorders and pushed the boundaries of new technologies. She is also the founder/co-director of The Fearless Theater Company comprised of young people with and without disabilities. **Louise Tiranoff**

What do these directors have in common? Other than finding themselves female in a male dominated field, what these directors share is that they each agreed to be interviewed by a student filmmaker for the *Women in the Director’s Chair Oral History Project* originally created by Louise Tiranoff… Which brings me to the archive in my closet.

The Women in the Director’s Chair Archive (pictured above) includes interviews with around 66 filmmakers conducted mostly between 1998 and 2002.

When I proposed this paper on Louise Tiranoff who has a thirty-plus year career as a director, producer and camerawoman, I thought I would draw on the work of Karen Ward Mahar, Alexis Krasilovsky, and maybe Mark Garrett Cooper to reflect on the structural powers, sociological patterns, and collective actions that have influenced Tiranoff’s career. But when I got started, I realized a better place to begin would be in Louise’s closet. Ten years ago, as an Associate Producer for Tiranoff’s company, I had occasion to go into the huge back closet in the basement. Pushing open the door, I was greeted by that musty
smell of old paper and found myself surrounded, eye-high, with boxes, old film cans and loose ephemera. I wanted to excavate and even gingerly lifted some papers to reveal a pile of film tins intriguingly labeled “A Woman Is…” But I knew I was taking too long to retrieve whatever it was I was looking for, so I found it and closed door behind me. Unfortunately when I got back to the closet just last week, it was bright and clean. I discovered it had been cleared out to make room for the company’s server. “Oh no,” Louise said in her characteristically meandering voice, “I must’ve put them out in the casita.” I followed her out through the little Brooklyn yard and we peered into the shed.

“I don’t see them.” She said. “I don’t think they’re here.” I pointed out a box that says “A Woman Is Files.” She nodded as she replied “but that’s not the tins. I must’ve put them in the closet upstairs.”

At 20, when I finally screwed up the courage to ask her about it, I discovered “A Woman is…” was a documentary series Tiranoff shot and directed for NBC/WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. She told me as the result of a lawsuit [NOW v. WABC, FCC and WRC-TV], the stations were under a great deal of pressure to hire women and actually represent
their experiences and point-of-view. With an all woman crew they shot 30 episodes, including the first full gynecological exam shown on TV.

What I’d like to share with you now are just a few stories from the interview three of our students conducted with Louise Tiranoff in the fall of 2000. The first story takes place right after she got the job to shoot and direct “A Woman is…” which got her into the unions. The Directors Guild was no problem, but IATSE (the cinematographers union) local 644 proved more difficult: VIDEO # 1: WILDCAT STRIKE. The next clip actually takes place earlier, on the first day of one of her first jobs before she got into the union:

VIDEO # 2: PIN-UPS.

There’s a third story that I really wanted to be able to show you because it made such a huge impact when Louise told it to me. I remember telling the students who interviewed her to make sure that she told it on camera, but when I watched the video of the interview it wasn’t there. Last week, I tried to prompt Louise to tell it to me again, but she didn’t quite remember it. Apparently, I’ve told it more often than she has. She looked pensive for a moment nodding and said “there was something about the bathroom wasn’t there? We had to go the basement to use the bathroom.” The “we” she’s referring to is director Leigh Sutherland who was the only woman directing at NBC-channel 4 at that time.

As I recall the story, whenever one of them felt like she was going crazy because something sexist had been dismissed as routine, or because she was made to feel she was being too “sensitive” to such things, the other would remind her that there was no women’s bathroom on the production floor. They had to go downstairs to the floor where the secretaries worked
to use the bathroom and they used that as a kind of a reality check for each other – that what they perceived was not just in their heads, it was actually built into the architecture of the station. It may not have been until I heard that story that I really understood the term *structural inequality*. I recounted my memory of the story to Louise, and she laughed, shaking her head as if it would shake-up memories she hasn’t thought of for awhile. “I trust you on it,” she said. “I’ll have to call Leigh and see if she remembers.”

Stories get lost when they’re not told.

One of the strengths of the *Women in the Director’s Chair Oral History Project Archive* is its diversity – which comes from the diversity of the students who took the course and produced the projects.

Each of the directors included in it is also self-selected, in a way, because many directors who were approached for this project refused. One student, Teressa, in her oral history of Sarah Jacobson says, “At first I thought there was no hope. I was rejected by every woman I called.”
So this is a very special group of people, who volunteered their time and wisdom with no expectation of return. It was a privilege for me to eavesdrop on these interviews – which were sometimes very candid conversations. It was more of a privilege years later to be able to return to them and to read them as a collection, at a time when I needed encouragement and inspiration that I wasn’t getting. I know the power of the stories in these boxes and that they do what they’re supposed to do. The deaths of participating filmmakers Loni Ding and Sarah Jacobson have also reminded me of the importance of making this archive accessible.

I’m working to preserve, contextualize, and publish this collection (hopefully across multiple platforms) so that these documents can be available to future filmmakers and scholars. The project reminds us of our own collective and individual responsibilities of remembering and imagining publicly. The weight of the archive leaves us with the overwhelming realization that there is “no-one-path,” but the reassuring evidence that there are many models to follow and that the possibilities are up to us to envision and enact. I hope the directors, scholars, and stories included in it will embolden a new generation of filmmakers and theorists to question the status quo, stretch conventions to their breaking point, and to tell their stories their way.

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