

Cynthia Scott and *The Company of Strangers*

An Interview by Patricia Watson

Beautiful, moving, haunting, unconventional, darling, hilarious, exhilarating, uplifting, glorious, a revelation, a masterpiece, the best film of the year!

This is how critics in London, Toronto and New York have described National Film Board director Cynthia Scott's first feature film, *The Company of Strangers*, which premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 1990, won the Grand Prix at the Mannheim Festival, and the Prix du Public at the International Women's Film Festival in Creteil, France. It has played commercially in Canada, the United States, England, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden and Australia to charmed audiences, and is about to open in Japan, Spain and Hawaii. It is undoubtedly the most popular film the National Film Board has ever released. And perhaps the simplest.

A group of elderly women are stranded miles from nowhere when their bus breaks down. They take refuge in an abandoned farmhouse, improvise beds, forage for food, relax and get to know one another. We get to know them: Constance Garneau, a beautiful, aristocratic woman of 88; Mary Meigs, 71, a lesbian writer and painter; Alice Diabo, 74, a Mohawk from Kahnawaki; three English women—Cissy Meddings, 76, Winnie Holden, 77, and Beth Webber, 80; Catherine Roche, 69, a Catholic nun; and Michele Sweeney, in her late twenties, their bus driver. Michele, a jazz and gospel singer, is the only professional actor in the group. The others are non-actors playing themselves. Being themselves. And audiences everywhere—men, women and children—adore them. But perhaps none as much as Cynthia Scott herself:

"I loved them all in different ways. I adored Cissy from the first moment I saw her. She was like something out of child's fairy tale. You'd find a little cottage in the middle of the forest and she'd invite you in for cookies ... Beth stood for all the burden of being female. That whole youth thing and beauty thing and the pain of earlier generations who felt they had to make it in a man's world ... I love Winnie's style, that sense of her just keeping at life. She came from a very poor environment and she never complained. We didn't know Catherine was a nun when she arrived for auditions. This gung-ho character just turned up as much as to say, *Whatever there is for me to do, I'll take it on*. I loved that. We think of that as being male. Alice is certainly one of the pleasures of the movie. She was so shy in the beginning, even though I sensed she was strong. But I didn't know how much her strength would permeate the movie. Mary had a wonderful way of gently getting to know Alice. She was a major contributor to the chemistry and grace of human relations in the movie. When Constance was up and happy she was the most beguiling, entertaining, bright, interesting woman. She could be so lyrical, so moved by beauty. But I loved the tough, hard I-won't-hide-from-the-truth side of her. I felt they were all movie stars, they all had star quality. I wanted to look at them.

"On a very deep level I had been thinking of this film for years. I wanted to make a movie that was some kind of homage to my parents, a thank you to them. Something I could give them. Of course our generation are now contemplating not only our parents getting old, but ourselves getting old. We're closer to being old now than to being teenagers.

"I had become interested in doing a

dramatic film and was really interested in the work John Smith and Giles Walker had done in the alternative drama program. They used real people as performers and every once and a while there would be a scene of such magic that whatever was happening on the screen was *more* than what was happening on the screen—it seemed to be a combination of the real humanity of the people and something happening because they were participating in a creative act which was the making of this movie. So I was interested in trying my hand at making one of these movies using real people as the actors.

"The subject matter came to me when I was casting a little film in which I needed some older women to be extras in a number of scenes taking place in a hospital ward. I went to a golden age club which has a drama program for older people to see if any of them would be willing to play senile old ladies. I opened the door and this wall of noise and heat and energy and life hit me. It was nine o'clock in the morning and there was a teeming mass of humanity inside. I was just so moved by that sense of *my God they've been through it all, they've seen it all and look what life is in them*. And I thought, *somebody's got to make a movie*. Not about the plight of the elderly, although I did do all the research and the burden of that almost stopped me—their poverty, their loneliness and powerlessness, their invisibility, especially people who are poor and alone and perhaps incapacitated. It isn't that the system isn't trying to take care of them, but they aren't part of society anymore, they're flung in corners. At best some nice nurse or social worker is trying to jolly them up. We see this all the time in documentaries. That's not what I wanted to do, I wanted to do something more positive.

"My first idea involved men as well as women. I wanted to do a chamber orchestra touring the countryside and getting stranded for no other reason than I wanted to have lovely music in it. I've had a fantasy since I was nine or ten of being in the countryside with people sitting beside me playing musical instruments and maybe if I got myself together – one of those *one-day-I'm-going-to-learn-the-cello* daydreams – I'd be one of the people playing under a pine tree. The movie has lots of my own fantasies.

"Another idea did deal with the poor and weak and disempowered. It was based

on a woman I found in a foster home. In Montreal there are more old people than children in foster homes. People who can't totally look after themselves on their own. I met this incredible woman in one of them. She was about 85, a hilarious, wonderful spirit, furious about not having any power, at having to be in this place. She had to spend most of her time in bed. Her room wasn't even private, there was just a curtain dividing her space from the next. The other people in the place were senile, so she had no stimulation whatsoever. To keep herself functioning she kept up a lengthy correspondence with relatives in

Newfoundland. Over the years she had accumulated a small collection of tiny animals and ornaments and one quite large stuffed animal, a bedraggled white Polar bear she named Sam. Sam wrote all her letters. He referred to her as "you know who." He reported the weddings, and births and deaths – the daily soap opera, in effect – she devised for her little creatures, and he commented wryly on her life within the foster home. It was as if the creation of Sam allowed her to describe her life with wit and humour – rather than the rage and mortification she felt. Once I met her, I started getting letters from Sam too. She was amazing. We tried very hard to persuade her to become the lead in a fictitious story. That was a way of dealing with darkness. But she refused. She didn't want to be seen poor. *People are going to recognize me, she told me, even if it's fiction.*

"By then we were auditioning. In my bones I didn't want to look for actors. Even a great actress would still be giving a great performance and I didn't want that. Hundreds of people answered our ads, men as well as women. Over the age of 70, there is one man for every five women and they showed up in this ratio. But I discovered to my horror that if there was one man and three women, the women would immediately defer to him and lose their personality and the man would think it was his gentlemanly duty to run the scene. It would have ended up a comedy of sexes – which wasn't what any of us wanted to do. Most of the women were women who lived alone, under the poverty line. When they were alone you felt they were immediately there and accessible. I didn't want to watch them dealing with men.

"The women we chose had one thing in common – they had a kind of honesty, you felt who they were. They weren't necessarily good actors: they were good at being themselves. And they were strangers. None of them knew each other before the movie – although May and Constance had met briefly. We had encountered half of them doing our research and encouraged them to come to auditions. They would come back two and three times. It was something to do, it was fun. But then came the phone calls: *Winnie, we'd like you to be in the movie. Cissy we'd like you to be in the movie. Mary we'd like you to be in the movie. Silence at the other end of the line, then Oh no. No,*



Winifred Holden and Cynthia Scott



Cissy Meddings and Winifred Holden

Photo: Ron S. Diamond

no, no. Mary had reasons. It was going to interfere with her creative life. With the others it was lack of confidence. Why would anyone want to make a film about them? What were we going to do to them? I had to make several visits, plead and beg and cajole. I couldn't bear to give them up. They finally agreed: it was an enormous act of courage. They were nervous and shy. But within a day they were starting to have fun. They worked wonderfully as a group, and it must have been as interesting for them to meet each other as it was for me. Most of them had never met a Mohawk Indian before. A lesbian. A person like Constance. And the coming together gave them strength. It wasn't one little old woman alone staring at the camera. Their confidence grew on a daily basis. They got very serious about what they were doing and worked hard at it.

"There was a script, a working document to fall back on, but we never showed it to them. They just knew the outline of the story. I would say, *tomorrow you're going to try to catch fish with rocks or something*. We knew that we were going to do a bird-watching scene; we knew we were going to do a scene with Mary telling someone that she was a lesbian. We decided Mary and Cissy were a wonderful combination. I knew that if Cissy asked, *Are you married?* that would be all Mary needed to discuss that she was a lesbian. Other scenes were prepared more intensely, but I never ever told them what to say. We always thought of it as a work of fiction, but the reality of them was so wonderful I became more and more beguiled on a daily basis just being with them; the script got left behind. We gave up on the story stuff. The only reality that was interesting was these women. Cissy in reality had recovered from a stroke. Winnie in reality had been working since she was fourteen. Alice really said of her husband, "How much I loved him in the beginning, that's how much I hated him at the end." Constance in reality was fighting a terrible depression. She had the youngest mind of any of them and the absurdity of death and body rot was haunting her. Although she would never have thrown away her pills, that was fiction.

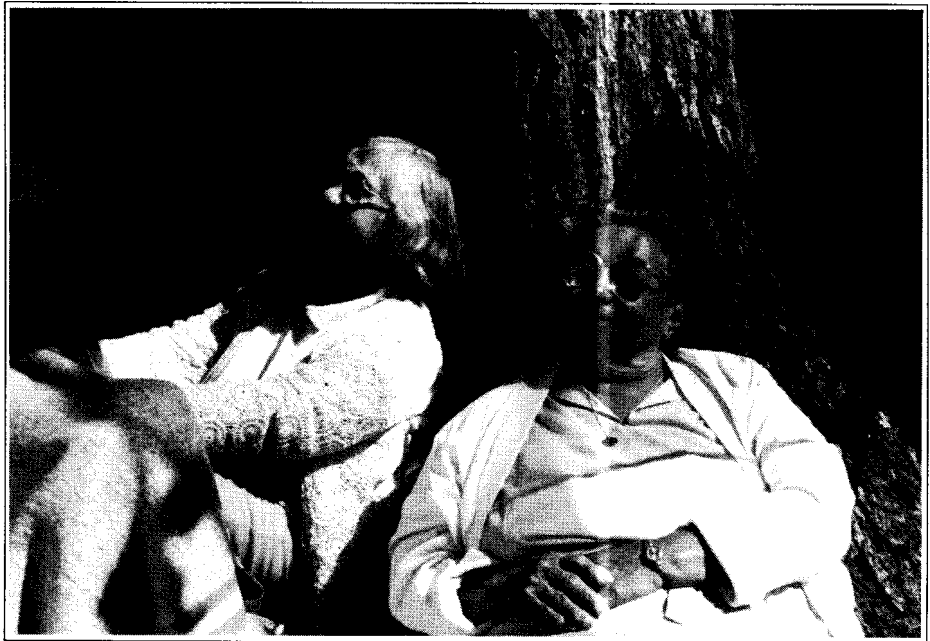
"What I found amazing was the way in which they could have a one-minute conversation about work and somehow work and its effect on your life had been dealt with. And love and sex and marriage and war. It is I guess because of how long

they've lived.

"They had a wonderful time doing it. They had a job to do and they were important, they were the only thing that counted. Living in a hotel, being fussed over, everyone telling them they were terrific, genuinely. And they were being paid. And they very much liked being with each other. Critics have said there's too much harmony, people wouldn't be that nice, there would be dissension. But there wasn't. I don't know if it was because they were feeling so good, but they weren't nasty, ever.

"I often felt — whether the film would

work or not — we were in a state of magic or in a magic place. I felt something wonderful was in the air. Life or the soul of life. These women were so moving, and the place was so beautiful. Nature was part of it. I felt all the time, *my God this movie is operating on so many levels*. Symbols were just flying out of it. Each scene seemed to be steeped in so many meanings and layers. But I never allowed myself to do anything but feel it, like hearing music or a beautiful chord. I felt if I allowed myself to become conscious of it, it would become arty or pretentious or just awful.



Cissy Meddings (left) and Alice Diabo

Photo: Alison Dyer



(l to r): M. Sweeney, W. Holden, B. Webber, M. Meigs, A. Diabo, C. Garneau & C. Meddings

"I didn't think much about death, although it's there more than we realized. We all knew that Constance was afraid of death and we discovered that Mary was too. Then Cissy talks about her fears, and Alice talks about her sadness at not living to see her grandchildren grow up. One of our fictions is Constance accepting her condition. I felt that was a kind of prayer. We all loved them so much we wanted them to be happy, we wanted Constance to find a sort of serenity. But death is not acceptable. And the more I grew to know those women, the more unacceptable death became.

going to let them see the movie itself until it was finished but then Cissy had an aneurism and I thought *what if someone dies before it's finished*, so I showed them the cutting copy (which is hard enough for a film maker to judge). They were polite, said *it's very nice*, told each other they were wonderful. But Constance was horrified. She couldn't stand herself in the film. And Winnie later confessed she had been shattered. While they were making the film I think they thought, *this is just us, she must be doing something we don't know about and when the film comes together it's going to be something else*,

with nothing but old faces, audiences would stop seeing them as old and start seeing them as full human beings. The movie is in honour of old people, but I don't know if it's for them. I mean *they know who they are, it's us who don't know who they are*. And they are us. The only difference is the decay has set in more deeply. For me the liveliest review I read was by P.K. Page, who wrote, "So this is human existence, we say to ourselves as the credits roll. How wonderful it is. How valiant we are. How beautiful." Then she wonders what kind of film it would have been if I had chosen seven old men. I'm

By the time film was over, although they did have more wrinkles than I did and I had to respect the limits of their physical stamina, I had lost all sense of them and us, all sense of them being old.

"I guess the whole movie is a kind of unconscious fantasy. An idyll, a dream poem, rather than real. I loved being in their company, there's no question. The pleasure of being with them and seeing what they would do, or imagine what they would do and then see them doing it. I was comfortable and happy with them. We were all women and we had the power in our hands.

"By the time film was over, although they did have more wrinkles than I did and I had to respect the limits of their physical stamina, I had lost all sense of them and us, all sense of them being old. But Mary, who has written a beautiful book about the movie [which is reviewed in this issue of *CWS/cf*], talks about them and us, she feels that there was no way we young people could know what it was like to be them. They were older and knew something and were in a place that was different from where we were, so there were things about them we could never know about them.

"While we were filming I told them if there was anything that bothered them, I would show it to them and if they wanted it out, I would respect that. I thought Beth might be worried about the scene in she takes off her wig — that was a really tough thing for her to do — but she never said anything about it. I told them I wasn't

it's going to look like a Hollywood movie. But it didn't and they didn't look like Lauren Bacall. Two months later they saw a test print with music, in a theatre full of family and friends and strangers who all adored the movie. It started to dawn on them that they were good and they became more and more proud. *As actors*. Whether it has dawned on them that it's them as real people and their lives that audiences are applauding I don't know.

"I had promised them it would open at the Montreal Film Festival, then we heard that Venice was asking for it, so I asked them *what do you think?* They thought it was a great idea. It's a pity there wasn't money to take some of them there. They would have been the stars of the Festival; they would have just been mobbed. But they heard it was a success and I was able to take three of them to Toronto. By then Constance had begun to get reviews from friends in Europe. And then it was much more a success than any of us expected. And it's gone on. In a way they're still living on it. It was a gift. It doesn't happen to old people — starring in a feature film.

"And of course the women in the movie give us an enormous gift. I think the film affects anyone who isn't there yet, in terms of our attitude to growing older and of how we treat people who are older. Our hope was that if we populated the screen

not sure it would have been all that different.

"I don't know if older people feel affirmed by the film, although that certainly was one of its goals. I get mail from older people saying *thank you very much* and lots of people have talked to me about looking at it with their mothers and how much they enjoyed it. I've heard stories of people taking it to nursing homes, but I haven't heard how they reacted. I don't know what the film feels like to a group of people who are institutionalized. They all live alone except Alice who is the revered elder of her family and lives in the arms of her children, like a traditional third world grandmother. I know Mary receives letters daily from her friends who have seen it; she says they all love it, they float out of the movie theaters in a happy daze. Someone asked her if she thought the film had empowered them and she said, "Well it has certainly empowered us and I think that will go on for a long time. Constance, who is now 92, is happy just thinking about it."

"They have all kept in touch with one another. Winnie goes to tea every Saturday at Mary's. Mary and Constance visit. Alice we only talk to on the phone; she's not that far but can't travel on her own. Cissy is chair-ridden now. Beth visits her. As Mary developed her book, she did long

interviews with them, then gave them their portions of the manuscript in order to see if anything bothered them. I hope that doesn't fade. I feel I'm going to be involved with them forever.

"A terrible irony is that Gloria Demers, who shared my affection for these women, who wrote the script for the movie, who worked with me on it from the start, died just before it was released. We had an amazing friendship. We fought tooth-and-nail about everything, always, including how the film should go, but we always had enormous fun together. We were like tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee, or as Mary said, like certain French puppets who could be seen beating each other with our bats every day. Intellectually, Gloria was a tough-thinking feminist lesbian. Through quirks of fate, I have ended up living in a very male world. My husband, John Smith, has two boys and we have a third — there are no daughters around. But I could count on Gloria's wit and humour and humanity always overriding everything. Her spirit is very much part of the film. I miss her terribly — as a person, as a workmate.

"I think all of us have a parent or an uncle or an aunt that we see as complete human beings. It's older people *en masse* that give us trouble. For whatever complicated reasons, Western culture seems to have such difficulty with aging and death. *What is it?* Do our elders fill us with fear or embarrass us in some way, so that we have isolated them, blocked them out? We only see what we're presently interested in — which is youth and power — so we're not very interested in old people, except in a sentimental way. Old people don't have power. Mind you, there are more and more old people, so I guess they are going to be getting more power. One can start playing fantasy games. What if our society were constructed so that only the elderly had positions of power, so that seniors were running everything? It's certainly wonderful to think what society would be like run by that group of women.

The film is available from the National FilmBoard on video cassette. Mary Meigs' book, In the Company of Strangers, is reviewed on page 114.

HEATHER SPEARS

Poem: on first hearing herself described as "feisty"

On first hearing herself described as "feisty"
the poet
having never been interested in Feminist Linguistics
is now understandably concerned
about the linguistics of age
and wonders
when she will become
"spry"

Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature

Edited by Holly A. Laird



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