

Filmmakers Robin J. Hood and Penny Joy

BY HEATHER TUFTS

Heather: I am pleased to be sitting in the home of Robin Hood, with her colleague, Penny Joy. We are going to talk about their work as documentary filmmakers. First of all Robin, how did you become involved in film production?

Robin: In a very round-about circuitous route. I trained as an anthropologist and resource geographer. I worked in international development for many years in Central America, coordinating development projects. I found myself, as part of that work, always documenting things; always making records — be they slide records or photographic records. I had always intuitively felt that to record what one was doing was an important part of reflecting upon it, and that the educational quality of some of the work we were doing in these development projects was invaluable, both for reflection upon how things had gone and how they might be improved. Also as a way of explaining to people in Canada exactly what it was all about. I came back to Canada and worked as a resource planner, an interpreter and an educator with the parks system. In that position I had to develop many educational interpretive programs using still photography, and then slide-tape shows. At the same time I continued my interest in documentation and also in international development, because the areas I worked in, El Salvador and Guatemala, were plunged into deep and painful war. I felt very deeply committed — many friends that I had worked with in the 1970s had been killed — so I went back to do human rights work and to do some documentary work as a photographer. And then I began to realize the real power of photography as a means to communicate the reality of war and of struggle, oppression, poverty and the attempts of people to change these — in a visual format. So that's how I've evolved into working in video and film.

Heather: It sounds like the art form for you is a very deep personal outlet as well as a form of communication. What would you say is the primary message that you would like to communicate through your art?

Robin: I'm interested in acting as a vehicle for people who don't have access to expression through a traditional medium. I'm concerned that many people have powerful stories to tell, and no means of telling them. I'm concerned with the stories of the poor, the oppressed, the lonely — the forgotten ones — the ones who don't have a voice. I think by observing and sharing experiences with those people and being sensitive to their needs and their desires, one can, in fact, assist in providing different faces to the world with important stories to tell.

Heather: Before we explore that in more depth, I'd like to turn to Penny for a moment. Could you tell us a little bit about your background?

Penny: I came from a very different route than Robin. I started off in the theatre in England. I joined a weekly rep company, which was a great training ground. I then joined the BBC television drama department when I was 19 and spent eight years gaining experience in television production, specifically drama production. After the BBC I decided that I no longer wanted to work in a large corporation, and, in fact, I didn't expect to continue to be involved in the media. I took several years out, traveled and visited my brother in various places around the world. He's an international development worker and so I got some understanding of what that work involves. When I came to Canada in 1976 I joined a community video group in Vancouver that was working on community projects to affect social change. I realized then that there was a whole other world than that which I had experienced in network television. There was small-format video equipment for starters, so you could take control of productions from start to finish. There were fascinating stories to be told and very often the people who had things to say had every bit as much ability, excitement, honesty and courage as some of the acting fraternity. I became involved in the excitement of these real stories, which is where Robin and I both connected with the work of Lina de Guevara, who produced a play in Victoria with five Latin American women called *I Wasn't Born Here*. A documentary called *Creating Bridges* was our first program as co-producers.

Heather: How does that experience contribute to your desires, and needs and outlets now?

Penny: Well it certainly gave me an empathy for working with people who traditionally didn't have much of a voice in the way that Robin was saying about the people in Central America. I've worked, since I've been in Canada, quite a bit with Native people, particularly Native artists. I find that the empathetic approach to documenting what they are doing has been helpful in allowing them to express themselves in a creative way.

Heather: You've been listening to Penny describe a working environment that has radically changed for her, and I'm wondering if you could follow up on that by describing your present working situation as you are working together.

Robin: We have finished *Creating Bridges*, which was the collective stories of refugee and immigrant women in Canada following a transformational theatre process. We work very much in a collaborative way. We discuss different approaches and there is often a creative tension. Penny comes from an artistic background; I come from a practical background in resource management and development work. So I tend to be interested in the social-political part of the story. Penny is concerned with the

validity and the power of art. So we work with these elements in a way that makes sure that both are represented. We try to be sensitive to the people we are working with, both with the women in Lina's theatre project and now with immigrant men in a similar type of transformational theatre project. We try to integrate ourselves with, in this case, the theatre project. We become part of it. We feel it is more valid to live the experience, and that also breaks down barriers in terms of bringing cameras and gear into a sensitive situation. You break through so that people don't feel that you are intruding, nor do they feel you are stealing their stories or taking something from them. I think we both feel strongly that we want to be sensitive to that and we want people to know very clearly that in fact it is their voice that we want to represent. Their story. And that we are just the tool for doing that.

Heather: Penny, please talk a little bit about the video productions that you have been and will be involved in. Could you describe some of the highs and lows of this kind of vehicle of expression?

Penny: The highs undeniably are being part of the creative process with the participants. We are not separate. This was very apparent in our work on *Creating Bridges*. On the first night of the show that we had been alongside all the way through its creation, we had our cameras backstage as the actresses came off stage, and it was truly magic. Because they were confident of who we were, and trusted us, we got some unique instant expressions from these women who had just gone through a real transformation. So those are some of the highs. The lows are, for me anyway,

the eternal scrabbling for funding. I really respect the collaboration with Robin because she is much more a nuts and bolts person than I am. I tend to get discouraged very easily. Sometimes I drop great ideas because I just can't find the kind of energy that's needed to persevere. We've got all sorts of responses to various fundraising attempts, like: "too personal," "too political," and "two women producers?!!" Somehow Robin has given me the courage to keep going past those sorts of stock reactions and keep turning up stones to find a way to make what we want to do a reality.

Heather: *Creating Bridges* seems to have been an important project for you. What did you learn about doing this project in a technical way and what did you learn in a more personal way?

Penny: I learned an enormous amount technically. One of the things was to pay more attention to covering shots, to reaction shots, to cut-aways, to material that you can use in the editing room as bridges between the stuff of the story. I found that we were really struggling with that. On a personal level I just loved working with Lina because her approach to working with theatre is very nurturing. It comes from a love and respect for the theatrical traditions, and yet a belief that everybody — or at least a large percentage of the population — has marvelous theatrical skills. Immigrant and refugee women have gone through extraordinary and sometimes terrifying and sometimes hilarious experiences. I believe that this kind of material really resonates with audiences, with viewers. Things that come from a heart-centred place are what real theatre is about.



Heather: What projects are you working on currently?

Robin: We're working on another transformational theatre project with Lina de Guevara. This time it's a project with a group of immigrant and refugee men. It's going to be a musical theatrical piece and we are documenting it, both as a model for social change and a transformational process with people whose stories haven't been told. Part of the process of this type of theatre is that the men collect a hundred stories of other refugee and immigrant men and then collectively put a story together that becomes a performance piece. Penny and I will be documenting that process — who these individuals are, how they came together. A little bit of behind the scenes and also what it means to them as individuals, and what the healing qualities are for them. We've just started. In fact we had the first shoot today. It was extraordinarily exciting to see the untapped depths that I saw starting to emerge with these men. I think that men have not often had the opportunity to participate in this type of project. Especially immigrant and refugee men. I said to Penny today, I feel like it's a sea of discovered riches. We're also in the research stages of a film to be called *Scraps of Life* which will be the testimonial stories of the mothers of the disappeared in Chile who formed workshops in Santiago after the coup to make *arpilleras* — the burlap tapestries of life that they embroider to support their families in the terribly difficult times after the coup. They are beautiful colourful tapestries that record and document everything from the disappearance of their husbands and loved ones, to their daily realities of having soup kitchens to feed their children, documentation of demonstrations they had when they discovered a large clandestine grave, to their hopes and dreams of a better future for their children. We are going to document the story of how a Canadian woman went to Chile, became profoundly moved by meeting some of these women and came back to Canada and started importing and selling the tapestries throughout Canada. This will be intertwining the role that the *arpilleras*, the tapestries, the scraps of life tapestries, play for the women. It is a collective art that has a healing quality about it. Also it has the element of women coming together to work for social justice and change in an alternative, positive, heartfelt artistic way.

Heather: It seems to me that your way of working is unique in that it is not often you find two artists who are working in this kind of cooperative way. I'm wondering what the secret of your success is. You both talk about a deep personal commitment to the message of social change that you are using through your art. Do you have any other secrets that you use for solving problems or conflicts when they arise?

Penny: I think one of the factors is that we are not competitive people. We rarely get into conflicts where it's a question of "I want" or "you want," or "this is my way and I have to have it my way." There is a give and take that we both work with quite comfortably. I think that we have an appreciation for each other's strengths and weaknesses and they are very complementary, so that I think we are beneficial for each other's creative process. We bring different mirrors into the process.

Heather: This visual medium — perhaps the medium of the 1980s — what is the value of this as a tool for social change?

Robin: Dante wrote that "beauty awakens the soul to act" and

I think that creativity is the source of the empowerment, and I think that politics can be transformed into an art of expression of the collective's need for change and action. You can preserve and celebrate history. Through art you can move into attempting to keep a balance and a harmony. You can show the possibilities that humans have before you. It's a very exciting time that we live in. It's a time of great possibilities to create an alternative future. If the destructive hierarchical aggressive and confrontational mode that the world seems to operate in right now — if it continues to be followed there will be no future. I think artists who are living in this age have a responsibility to try and open people up to some of the other possibilities before us, and that through documentary art we can tell some of the stories of the heart.

Heather: I know that it is difficult for video and filmmakers — amateur or professional — to gain viable copyright. How can you make a living from this?

Robin: With great difficulty!

Penny: Funnily enough, we were just talking about that before you came in. We suspect that there are lots of bootleg copies of *Creating Bridges* going around and being used in conferences and meetings, etc. On the one hand it is infuriating because we don't get any of the goodies, but on the other hand for me it feels like we've done what we hoped to do, which was to make a program that's useful and multi-faceted and that people really want to involve themselves with. But as far as how we survive: on a thread is probably the nearest description.

Heather: Perhaps at this point I could ask you a question — both of you — about future plans.

Robin: Hopefully we'll be off to Chile to work on *Scraps of Life*. We're also both involved in some other projects with Hilary Jones-Farrow and her company, Friday St. Productions. She is another woman film and video producer in Victoria. There are a number of other projects in the wings that we're collaborating with her on as well. Most of them have to do with social change issues. Some have to do with producing creative educational television programming specifically targeted for children. Some look at taking difficult environmental and ecological issues and producing them in a way that doesn't intimidate people. All of us, including our colleague and friend Hilary, are concerned that people aren't overwhelmed by the issues that surround us now, but are moved and excited and stimulated to action.

Penny: As far as specific projects go, the sky's the limit. I have a friend and teacher called Jean Houston, who maintains that the art of acknowledgment is probably the single most healing capacity we have as human beings. Really recognizing other people, whoever they are, whatever they're doing. Genuinely seeing them, recognizing them and celebrating them. That sort of healing can reseed the planet with caring people. That is what we need right now, and it is the focus of our work.

Heather: I'd like to conclude this interview with a very mildly philosophical question for both of you. How would you finish off the sentence "Life as a woman artist is ..."

Penny: "... not a bowl of cherries."

Robin: "... a challenge to participate in creating a world that must be a healthy, happy, inspirational one for our children."