

If it's August, this must be South Africa:  
Women Make Movies Thirtieth Anniversary World Tour  
By Debra Zimmerman

As the executive director of Women Make Movies, it seemed like a great idea to launch a worldwide tour in celebration of our thirtieth Anniversary. When WMM was founded in 1972 by Ariel Dougherty and Sheila Paige as a means to train women filmmakers, they never dreamed it would become the world's largest distributor of films and videotapes by and about women. But here we were, thirty years old.

For our twentieth anniversary, we organized a twenty-city theatrical tour in the US, and for our twenty-fifth we were honored with a six-week retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. An international tour would give us the opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of women filmmakers with an even wider audience by collaborating with thirty different film festivals, museums, contemporary art centers, and universities. From Arkansas to Singapore, from Brazil to Warsaw, we planned a solid year of screenings on every continent except Antarctica.

When I announced our plans at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2002, I was excited to think of all the places I and other WMM staff members would be going. In practice, though, globetrotting through more than one hundred screenings around the world, meeting hundreds of filmmakers and being interviewed by countless journalists was an exhausting experience. Battling jet lag, airport security and a seemingly endless winter tested the limits of my endurance. But almost 100,000 frequent flyer miles later, here are just a few of the highlights of my trip.

April: South Korea

My tour starts with a bang as a jury member at the fourth International Women's Film Festival in Seoul (WIFFS), in Seoul, South Korea. Seoul is full of energy, excitement and an exploding independent film scene. There are four or five different film festivals in Seoul each year, and the Pusan International Film Festival has quickly become the most important Asian film festival. What's more, there are four – count them, four – weekly magazines devoted to independent film, including a local edition of *Premiere*.

In 1997, when I attended the first WIFFS festival, there was only one independent woman filmmaker making films in South Korea, Byun Young-Joo, who made a trilogy of films about Korean “comfort women,” the first of which is called *The Murmuring*. Now, just five years later, this has all changed. During the fourteen years since democracy has been restored in South Korea, the blossoming of the film industry has combined with a burgeoning feminist movement to create an explosion in independent and feminist filmmaking. There are numerous women working in all aspects of the industry, directing and producing documentaries, features, and shorts. All of the Korean documentaries selected for the 2001 Yamagata Film Festival, widely considered the most important documentary festival in Asia, were by women directors. This year, *The Way Home* by

Lee Jeong-hyang was the second highest grossing film in South Korea, beating out *Fellowship of the Ring* and *Spider-Man*.

Here at WIFFS, there are almost twenty films by South Korean women and even a documentary on the history of women in Korean cinema, *Keeping the Vision Alive*. Another festival favorite, *Take Care of My Cat* by Jeong Jae-eun, a simple and touching coming-of-age story, was critically acclaimed when I saw it at the Rotterdam Film Festival. WIFFS is an incredible success by any standards. Most of the seventy screenings are sold out. Teenage boys and girls vie to be accepted as volunteers for the festival and wear their red-and-purple WIFFS T-shirts proudly. After dancing the night away at the closing-night party with some of Seoul hippest young filmmakers, I feel lucky that I have the opportunity to feel the excitement of a new women's film scene being born.

And the success of South Korean women filmmakers is mirrored in neighboring Asian countries. In Taiwan, Women Make Waves, a women's film festival named after Women Make Movies, is entering its sixth year. Women Make Waves has, in turn, spawned Women Make Sister Waves, a women's film and video festival which debuted in Osaka, Japan, in November 2002. In neighboring Indonesia, there is no women's film festival yet, but Nan Ache, the producer of Shanty Harmayn's feature *Whispering Sands* (one of the only Indonesian features produced last year) runs the Jakarta International Film Festival. And women filmmakers in the Philippines have achieved unparalleled success -- the top four box office directors in that country are women. I wish Hollywood executives who claim there's no audience in Asia for women's film were aware of what's actually going on.

June: Manchester, Vermont

When I finally arrive in Manchester, Vermont after a five-hour drive, my first thought is "What a strange place for a film festival." Manchester is probably best known for its outlet stores. It's too bad I hate to shop. But the next morning, over homemade pancakes at a country inn, I realize that Manchester, like the Hamptons, is a summer vacation community with local residents who are supportive of their new festival, the Manchester Film Festival. The festival is a four-day affair, full of panels, workshops and screenings with filmmakers in attendance. More than seventy-five films from two dozen countries will be shown over the four days. I am attending this festival with four documentaries from WMM, including *Mai's America* and *Senorita Extraviada*, which shared the IDA's Best Achievement in Documentary Award, and *Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema*.

I am, of course, pleased that the organizers have decided to devote a day of the festival to women, including a panel discussion on women and the film industry, but when I first look at the schedule I am a bit worried to find that we've been programmed against a full day of panel discussions devoted to digital technology. It's a bit like television execs scheduling *Crossing Jordan* against *Monday Night Football*.

But by the time I take my seat next to filmmaker Heather Rae, actress Ally Sheedy, and Eleanor Bergstrom, the writer/producer of *Dirty Dancing*, there are only a few seats left in the audience. Sheedy speaks passionately about the difficult choices she has made as an actress committed to presenting realistic portrayals of women. Bergstrom has the audience in stitches as she describes having to get up and “dirty dance” at pitch sessions in Hollywood in order to get her film made.

Later that afternoon I meet Gerald Levin, the former CEO of Time Warner, at an elegant reception on the lawn of his Manchester home. You can hear a pin drop when he tells me and the heavy hitters from Digital Day that he had attended the women’s panel instead of the high tech one. As we share a lively conversation about the challenges facing women in the industry, I am heartened by Levin’s genuine interest (as well as the industry geeks’ sudden curiosity) in the topic. In the bucolic hills of Vermont I realize that we have all something to learn about stereotypes. After all, I watch *Monday Night Football*. Maybe more men are watching *Crossing Jordan* than we think.

August: Johannesburg, South Africa

It's winter in Johannesburg when I arrive at the Jozi Summit Film Festival, which is being held in conjunction with the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development. "Jo'burg" is a fascinating, if difficult, city. White flight emptied the downtown a number of years ago, and the city is now made up of suburbs. There's almost no public transportation to speak of. The official conference is being held in Sandton City, a rich, white suburb in the north of the city, and the "people's forum" is at Nasrac, a dusty fairground in the south.

The festival is organized by the Film Resource Unit, South Africa's only independent media distributor, which began as an underground group during Apartheid. Mike Dearham and his staff have put tremendous resources into this huge event: eleven screens, more than a hundred films, and numerous panels and workshops. It's a great concept but it just doesn't work. Unfortunately, there's so much going on with the official and unofficial events that it is hard for anyone to focus on the film festival, especially since each event is taking place in a different part of the city.

But this sprawling event is an excellent opportunity to see African films and participate in panel discussions with African filmmakers. Carolyn Carew-Maseko, a South African producer, describes the groundbreaking work she is doing with *Lovelife*, a high-powered media campaign which has the goal of reducing AIDS in South Africa. Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima wakes up the audience with an eloquent speech about the potential of media in South Africa. As the only country on the continent that broadcasts outside its borders, South African television could be a major force in disseminating African-produced media.

For me, one of the most productive aspects of the trip is the opportunity to meet and network with Women of the Sun. Organized in 1998 at the Sithengi International Film and Television Market by filmmakers and film professionals from Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Trinidad, Women of the Sun is a media network and resource organization of African women filmmakers. Over the last four years they've organized a number of festivals and events, including a monthly screening series. During the Jozi Summit Film Festival, they presented an alternative film festival of films by African and non-African filmmakers, complementing the Women Make Movies screenings. Xoliswa Sithole's new film, *Shouting Silent*, a beautiful movie about the experiences of young South African women who have lost their mothers to AIDS, opens the day-long event. Charlayne Hunter Gault, the CNN correspondent in South Africa and an advisor on the film, introduces it to the sold-out audience at the Museum of Africa in downtown Johannesburg.

Before leaving Jo'burg for Durban, I accomplish two things: I learn to "click" when I pronounce Xoliswa, and pick up *Shouting Silent* for distribution in the US.

Durban:

Located on the west coast of South Africa, Durban reminds me of Miami Beach before art deco restoration, Madonna and gay boutiques. I'm here for the Durban International Film Festival, one of the oldest festivals in South Africa. My host, Peter Rorvik, the Executive Director of the Center for Creative Arts at the University of Durban, is the guiding force behind this twenty-three-year-old festival.

The opening-night event is the African premiere of Philip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, a real-life drama based on the writing of Australian Aboriginal Doris Pinkerton. Although I am terribly ill with the flu, I am completely drawn into the simple story and the stunning photography of Chris Doyle, Wong Kar Wai's cinematographer. Pinkerton, a grandmother of twenty-nine children who is in attendance to give a writing workshop, brings the audience to tears with her introduction to the film.

Besides attending the screenings of WMM films, I participate in a panel discussion on the ethics of filmmaking, entitled "Who Owns Our Stories." When I looked at the program, my first thought was, "Oh, no, not another panel on that subject." But in fact it was incredibly powerful to discuss the issue in South Africa, where the vast majority of the film industry is still white, yet so many of the stories being told are black ones. The audience is challenging and confrontational, asking hard questions about the continuing inequities in the industry. It makes me realize that the film industry is a microcosm of the country. In South Africa there is more equipment, labs, and trained professionals than in any other African nation, yet the process of training black media professionals and turning the power of the media over to the racial majority still lags far behind where it should be. It reminds me of the situation women faced in the US thirty years ago; which, of course, is part of the reason Women Make Movies was founded. But groups like Women of the Sun, and events like these festivals, are good signs for the future.

November: Warsaw, Poland

When I arrive in Poland, I realize that many of the countries I've visited have gone through major upheavals in the last ten to fifteen years. South Africa experienced the end of Apartheid; Korea, the birth of democracy; and in Poland, of course, there was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism.

Ula Sniegowaksa, the curator of the Center for Contemporary Arts, was interested in bringing WMM to Warsaw because almost no one in Poland has had the chance to see feminist independent films. Ula's enthusiasm is infectious. She has managed to get support from the US Embassy for a week-long exhibition, a lecture on feminist filmmaking, and workshops on film distribution and marketing. There's even going to be a reception celebrating our thirtieth anniversary, hosted by the American cultural attaché. I can't help but think of the irony of a Polish Jewish American being invited back to the country my relatives fled.

But Warsaw in 2002 is a far cry from the Warsaw my grandparents left. The city is a study in contradictions. Everything feels old, yet ninety-five percent of the city was rebuilt after World War II. My hotel reminds me of the ex-KGB hotel where I stayed in St. Petersburg in 1991. It's a huge place with incredibly tiny, narrow rooms and single beds. The only guests seem to be businessmen in gray suits. On the streets, capitalism abounds: There are ads for consumer goods everywhere, yet on Sunday I am taken to a huge flea market where thousands of people are selling old shoes, batteries and other household goods.

The Center for Contemporary Arts is a new art space housed in an old castle. Although the architecture is distinctively Eastern European, the art scene is definitely Western. French designer Philippe Starck has an exhibition opening, and a Shirin Neshat exhibition recently closed. The program of recent shows is impressive by any standards, but here it is extraordinary, given that there are no Polish foundations and the government provides no support except the space.

Ula has done an amazing job of developing and promoting a retrospective of predominately experimental films which includes the films of Maya Deren, Sally Potter, Mona Hatoum, Midi Onodera and Ngozi Onwurah. There's lots of mainstream press interest-- there's even an article in *Vogue*-- and I'm interviewed on the country's most popular TV magazine program devoted to film. When I'm asked to compare the status of women's filmmaking in America to the local scene, I'm glad I did my homework.

The history of women's filmmaking in Poland is similar to the rest of Eastern Europe. Women filmmakers have always fared better under communism than under capitalism. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were a significant number of women filmmakers in Poland. Though the second wave of feminism had little impact on Poland (or on other communist countries), filmmakers like Barbara Sass and Agnieszka Holland had the opportunity to make feature films in the 1970's and 1980's. In fact, Holland is one of the few women directors ever to be nominated for an Academy Award, for her 1985 film *Angry Harvest*.

But when communism collapsed, so did the old government-funded studio system. Since then, it has become increasingly difficult for filmmakers to make films at all. There's a whole generation of young filmmakers who know next to nothing about marketing their films, in or outside of Poland. These are the young people who come to the workshops I give on marketing and distribution. I feel a little bit like a shill for American-style capitalism, but they are so eager for information and networking that I am grateful to have the opportunity to share my expertise. I am completely drawn into their enthusiasm. The workshop is so successful that we continue it long into the night first at a restaurant and then at a bar.

The day before I leave, one of the students offers to drive me to Lomza, my grandparents' old village. I go with the irrational and naïve thought that I might be able to find a trace of my past. It turns out to be a hopeless and devastating experience. There's not a sign that Jewish people ever lived there, except a forlorn and vandalized cemetery and the

suspicion of the local people that I've come to claim the property my grandparents left behind. But I leave Poland having found something else: a country in transformation and a group of young filmmakers, particularly women, with a vision of a different Poland.

I come in December to home to face a pile of correspondence, my still unfinished apartment renovation, and the beginning of winter in New York. As I relax at home for the first time in months, I reflect on all of my experiences over the last year. It was inspiring to see how women's films are being received, and how women's film festivals are thriving. I've met so many wonderful people and have learned so much about the global independent film community. Thirty years after the start of Women Make Movies, I can't believe how far we've come. I can't wait to see what happens in the next thirty years – which is probably how long it will take before I attempt another world anniversary tour. But then again, I still have trips to Turkey, France and the Czech Republic in 2003 to get through before this tour is over.