



Her new film is a shattering reflection on the fragile myths of security and safety, instilled in children during the late '50s, to be permanently overthrown by an adult experience of random sexual assault. For Jan Krawitz, *In Harm's Way* culminates a twenty-year career as documentary filmmaker and teacher.

"I believe in documentary as a form because it's an accessible form: I've chosen it because I'm much more interested in reacting to things around me than in creating stories from my imagination." With an undergraduate education at Cornell University and a Master of Fine Arts from Temple University, Krawitz has taught at Temple, Evergreen State College, The University of Texas at Austin, and is now Professor of Communication at Stanford. She directed and edited *Styx* (1976); co-directed (with Thomas Ott) *A Chicken in Every Pot* (1978), *Afterimage* (1979), *Cotton Candy and Elephant Stuff* (1979), *P.M.* (1980) and *Little People* (1982); she directed, edited and did sound for *Drive-In Blues* (1986) and *Mirror Mirror* (1990).

Her films are distributed by the Museum of Modern Art, Direct Cinema Limited and Women Make Movies. *In Harm's Way* is her response to a tranquil childhood in suburban Philadelphia and the anonymous violence she experienced in 1985 after a long day of filming. It is her first "personal film."

"I think the film is somewhat different than many first-person films: it's an *impersonal* personal film, you know?" she suggested in a recent interview. "It's not merely a recounting of the assault but a reflection on it and its significance to my life. Of course, all of my films are implicitly personal. *Mirror Mirror* expresses my views about body image although I don't literally include my 'voice' in the film. I think of *Mirror Mirror* as ventriloquy because what you do in a film is cast people who you think will say what you want them to say—and if they don't, they end up on the editing room floor. I also think that *Little People*, although its subject is dwarfism, is personal in many ways because the themes explored in the film are a reflection of my own pre-occupations. For me, *Little People* is the precursor to *Mirror Mirror* in terms of its exploration of image. Dwarfism presents an extreme example of our culture's willingness to judge people based on appearance. The intent of *Mirror Mirror* is to make a sham of the notion of an ideal body type. The film suggests that there is no single perfect body—the ideal is posited as something other than what one is or can reasonably attain."

Her filmic subjects have moved from the solitude in the subways of Philadelphia (*Styx*), to the arduous lifestyle of a traveling tent circus (*Cotton Candy and Elephant Stuff*), to the gathering of more than 500 dwarfs for an annual convention (*Little People*). *Drive-In Blues* is a delicate blending of camp and nostalgia in revisiting the half-century history of this American institution. And *Mirror Mirror* is a provocative exploration of the relationship between a woman's body image and the quest for an idealized female form. Much of her work incorporates newsreels, trailers and promotional footage from archival films.

"In terms of my filmmaking, *In Harm's Way* is definitely the most ambitious project. I don't think I could have pulled it off ten years earlier [when the sexual assault occurred]. All of my other films prepared me for the challenges presented in the production of this film. I mean, the film looks deceptively simple in its concept and approach, but it's decidedly complex. Every piece of archival footage—which was pulled from very diverse sources—is manipulated and extracted from its original context. It's easy enough to acquire found footage and use it in a compartmentalized way, but I didn't want to construct a literal relationship between what I'm talking about and what the audience is seeing. It was important that the images not *illustrate* what is being recounted in the narration, but they also shouldn't pull the viewer in a completely different direction. There's a really tricky symbiosis between the image and sound where an impression is created that couldn't be achieved by either element standing alone."

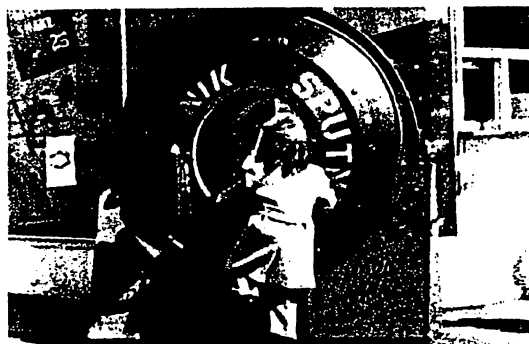


Screened recently at the Museum of Modern Art as part of a celebration saluting the 25th anniversary of Women Make Movies, *In Harm's Way* was nominated for a 1996 IDA Distinguished Documentary Achievement Award, received the Best of Fest award at the Utah Short Film and Video Festival, and has been featured at the Margaret Mead, the Denver International and the Mill Valley festivals. It recently won the Isabella Liddell Art Award at the Ann Arbor Film Festival.

"A motivation for entering my work in festivals is to create visibility for the piece. For an independent filmmaker, festivals are really a critical first round—they confer credibility on the work. To have the imprimatur of festival venues, the occasional press reviews that come with that, the nomination for an IDA Award, and distribution by Women Make Movies gives potential buyers (universities and libraries) the assurance that the film has received some attention. So they might be more likely to preview it for potential purchase. That's happened with all of my films—they make the rounds of festivals and that focuses attention on the work.

"It's all about audiences. I make a film to be seen. You know, being an independent filmmaker is like a tree falling in the forest: you need to know if your film makes any noise, but you're often not around to hear it. The great thing about festivals is that if and when I'm lucky enough to attend them, you can transcend the tree in the forest phenomenon. A festival can give you an opportunity to have a dialogue with the audience. That's incredibly gratifying. I always learn a lot from the comments people make, the perceptions people have. For me, festival venues are not about ego gratification but about interactions with the audience.

"One question that I've been asked at every screening is whether making the film has been cathartic. I wasn't motivated specifically by a need for catharsis around the 1985 assault. Once I had sufficient distance from the event, I began to reflect on what it meant in a larger sense. You know, in this country the focus



In Harm's Way

is always on the perpetrator and not on the victim, and I just wanted to put forth a different perspective, to focus on the emotional legacy rather than the facts of the crime. The details of the assault become immaterial over time, but the fallout from its occurrence will always be there. I wanted to explore how this random encounter with violence caused me to reconstruct my world view.

"I showed the film at a conference of film professors, and one person said, 'You know, there are lots of films about Holocaust survivors that end with a more hopeful feeling. But your film leaves me in a really negative place.' And I replied, 'You're missing the whole point of the film!' Yes, I like my job, I'm happy, I have a husband and a child, I continue to thrive . . . but all of these facts are not relevant to the film. I purposely wanted the film to end with an ellipsis . . . not some cliché happy ending or follow-up about where I am 10 years later. The experience that I had is completely embedded in me. It caused me to call into question everything I had assumed, my whole value system. The film doesn't suggest that I am dysfunctional or incapable of getting out of bed in the morning, but I do allude to the 'gossamer shroud of fear' that will always be with me. I also get questions from the audience about those details of the assault which are not disclosed in the film: did they catch the guy, and so on. I'm more than willing to talk about why I made this film, but I'm not willing to give information about the crime itself beyond what I reveal in the film. I think people ask about whether the guy was caught because they want to feel better about the incident, but that redirects the focus away from where I want the emphasis to be; that is, what is left in the wake of a violent crime regardless of whether the perpetrator is caught. It was really important to me that the film transcend this particular event and speak to any viewer who has had the occasion to question the foundation of their belief system. For me the film is about how your sense of security is structured and how fragile that is, how a single event can undermine years of socialization and, ultimately, your perception of yourself."

Krawitz is grateful for the PBS exposure of her films. "When *Little People* was shown on PBS, it was programmed opposite the Democratic National Convention in 1984. Eight and a half million people saw the film. I think that *Little People* is a really important film that speaks to misplaced values in our culture, about who we designate as the other, what is average, what is normal. We got a number of very moving letters from people who wrote to their local PBS stations after seeing the film, and that's really gratifying. I don't make these films for financial profit. I just want them to be seen. It's exhilarating to think that eight million people spent an hour watching a film about dwarfs, and perhaps it caused them to think about themselves and other people differently."

Having taught continuously since 1979, Krawitz finds academia "a place where I can continue to make work that is important to me while helping to train aspiring documentary filmmakers. I much prefer to support myself by teaching than going the route of producing corporate films. It's a hospitable environment

in which to work and one that implicitly supports my goal to remain an independent filmmaker. I have creative autonomy and freedom from the marketplace because I don't ask my films to support me. I've never tried to second guess what's hot in the funding circuit in any given year, what the granting agencies are looking for. I've always trusted my own instincts, assuming that if a topic is interesting to me, I can interest my audience in it.

"To be a filmmaker in a university is to be a square peg in a round hole: the tenure committees don't know what the venues are for a documentary film, the relative prestige of festivals, the importance of an IDA nomination. So, there's no charted 'publish or perish' route; you just do what you need to do, be true to your ideas and try to preserve creative autonomy. There's a continual struggle to find enough creative energy for both your students and your own projects. At the end of a week of countless rough cut critiques of student work, it's hard to trot into your editing room and find any creative energy left for your own film. When I starting working on *In Harm's Way*, I played around with the archival footage for several years, off and on, without making any headway. When I finally got a sabbatical, I could focus completely on the film and concentrate on writing the first draft of narration. So, between summers and vacations, and that one sabbatical, I was able to edit the film. *In Harm's Way* went through twenty-one drafts of narration over the course of almost two years, but there were often big gaps when I didn't have the time to work on the film."

Krawitz enjoys the academic environment and the give-and-take atmosphere of being with students. "Teaching has given me much more self-confidence, both as a filmmaker and as an academician. I think it's important to my students that I'm a working filmmaker. I'm able to empathize with their creative angst and their production woes. I share my work with them, including uncut rushes when appropriate—I reconstructed rushes from *Cotton Candy* so that I could show them 400' of rushes of a particular event, and then the edited scene as it appeared in the film. When they first begin to shoot in an observational style, it helps them get a sense of how to capture a scene in 10 minutes of film. The most important thing I try to impress upon my students is that they have to be passionate about the stories they choose to tell on film. I tell the students, if you don't care about what you're doing, the audience isn't going to care about it either."

For her latest film, writing the narration was perhaps the most difficult and yet most satisfying experience for her. "A lot of people have responded really favorably to the narration, and that's been very gratifying. It was my first foray into writing and probably my last! I know I'll never make another first-person film. I mean, that's the story I wanted to tell, and there really isn't anything else in my personal experience that I wish to explore on film."

TIMOTHY J. LYONS is Editor of *International Documentary magazine*.

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