

City filmmaker takes on Eckhardt-Gramatté's story

RESCUING fascinating women from the dustbin of history appears to be a calling for Paula Kelly.

The Winnipeg filmmaker made her mark in 2001 with *The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong*, a documentary about the life of a women's leader of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.

Kelly is back again with another documentary in a similarly dramatized form, though one even more ambitious in style.

Appassionata: The Extraordinary Life and Music of Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatté, which screened at Winnipeg's FilmExchange earlier this month, has its TV debut tomorrow at 8 p.m. on CBC's *Opening Night* performing arts series.

The 94-minute film, produced for just under \$1 million by Winnipeg's Buffalo Gal Pictures, is a well researched and visually creative piece of Manitoba social history.

"A project chooses you as much as you choose a project," says Kelly, who was in Quebec last weekend screening *Appassionata* at the Montreal International Festival of Films on Art.

"Because of my background in history, I've noticed that women's history slips under the radar."

Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatté, a pianist and classical composer, died in 1974 at age 75.

For 21 years, as the wife of the Winnipeg Art Gallery's great director Ferdinand Eckhardt, "Sonia" (to use the accepted diminutive) cut a swath through this city's cultural elite.

Her name graces a performance hall at the University of Winnipeg and another at the University of Calgary. A competition of contemporary Canadian works is held in her honour at the Brandon University School of Music.

But few know about her European roots as the possible illegitimate daughter of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, about her devoted first marriage to the obscure German Expressionist painter Walter Gramatté and her harassment by the Nazis.

"Hers is a story about the artist who struggles," Kelly, 45, says. "It's also about how people who love the artist help them in their struggle."

The filmmaker spent a couple of years rooting through files of letters and pictures in Ferdinand and Sonia's Harrow Street house, which is maintained by a non-profit foundation.

"The house is so redolent of Berlin in 1925," Kelly says.

Kelly had numerous personal letters translated from their original Russian and German. She interviewed such reliable sources as art curator Pat Bovey, musician Ruben Gurevitch and critic Ken Winters.

She dramatizes large sections using actors, Jan Rubès as Ferdinand, Colombe Demers as Sonia and Darcy Fehr as Eckhardt.

She employs several musical set pieces, including performances by the likes of star pianist Marc-André Hamelin.

"My hope is to make her music more visible for musicians," Kelly says. "It's very virtuosic."

Coincidentally, a documentary on endangered aboriginal languages which Kelly made for the local *Sharing Circle* TV program will air Saturday night on Citytv.

Her next project is a dramatic feature based on another little-known Manitoba woman. Emily Blake, a domestic servant in Brandon almost 100 years ago, became embroiled in a love affair with a local businessman and shot his wife.

"Filmmakers should not be afraid to tell local and specific stories," Kelly says.

"Inside these stories are the universal themes that everyone cares about."



Morley Walker



KEN GIGLIOTTI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Kelly: 'Women's history slips under the radar'

Bjelajac's life celebrated

Friends and admirers of the late artist and art teacher Nik Bjelajac will gather to celebrate his life 7 p.m. Friday at the Forum Art Institute.

Now located at 120 Eugenie St., Forum is one of the city's oldest non-profit art schools. Bjelajac co-founded it more than 40 years. He formally retired two years ago at age 84.

He died of a heart attack at age 86 on Feb. 22.

Bjelajac was admired for his lovely watercolours, but his greatest contribution was drawing the talent out of generations of art students.

Dafoe short-list released

The Winnipeg-based Dafoe Foundation has released its short-list for the annual \$10,000 Annual J.W. Dafoe Book Prize.

The nominated titles are *Saskatchewan: A New History* by Bill Waiser; *Loss of Faith* by Kim Bolan; *The Middle Power Project* by Adam Chapnick; *Curse of the Narrows* by Laura MacDonald; and *Bitter Embrace* by Maggie Siggins.

The Dafoe Prize honours what the foundation calls the "best book on Canada or Canada's place in the world." The winner will be announced at the end of this month, with a former dinner ceremony to be held in May.

Music festival correction

The Winnipeg Music Festival's gala closing concert is at 2 p.m. Sunday at Westminster United Church. I reported the wrong time and location yesterday. My apologies.