

WITH ABUNDANT CURIOSITY

The Film Work of Paula Kelly

by Tricia Wasney



Paula Kelly. Photo: Charles Shilliday

"He came to the back door. At first I didn't see him, only a shadow blocking the light."

—from Paula Kelly's script for *The Emancipation of Emily Blake*

Shadows and light, the arrangement of objects in space, relationships between people and with their worlds are the stuff of filmmaking. Paula Kelly's strength as a filmmaker lies in her ability to imagine, and to find and reshape, compelling stories. Central to her filmic storytelling is a dedication to, and love for, comprehensive research. Resisting limits to both her inspiration and her form of expression, she works in the experimental, documentary and dramatic genres. Her writing is robust and, in addition to produced and realized film scripts, her work has been published in literary and historical journals. Although character development initially drives her work and she draws from many sources, the visual environment is equally important. She favours a dense and textured approach, and one that allows for surprising juxtapositions. Paula's varied background as history student, reporter and writer, and her sensitivity to the visual aesthetic, surface in the subjects she explores and how she brings the stories to the screen. Her films have screened around the world and a number of awards and honours have been bestowed upon the filmmaker and her projects. Paula has collaborated with numerous production companies, broadcasters and other partners in the development of her projects, from short and experimental subjects to a feature-length film.

An attraction to making films began to take shape for Paula about twenty years ago, around the time I met her in a basic filmmaking workshop at the Winnipeg Film Group. We were part of an enthusiastic group who eventually made a short film together. Most of the participants did not end up pursuing film as a career but it was clear even from this fledgling endeavour that Paula possessed a seriousness and dedication to the art and



craft of film. I remember being impressed, for instance, by her meticulous recording of shots as continuity manager on that little film. We were reunited, in a filmic way, in 1991 when we both contributed segments to *The Exquisite Corpse*, an eleven-part film produced by Dean and Pierre Naday through the Winnipeg Film Group. Again, Paula's interest in storytelling and her visual sense, as well as her attention to detail, were evident as we worked on each other's films.

Paula made a conscious decision to commit to a life as a filmmaker around 1994. She had been working in the book-publishing world and making short films and asking herself if she was going to take this to the next level, to seriously pursue filmmaking in all its complexity. In 1997 she created her production company, Journey Films. This was a major step, as Paula puts it, "to think an idea into reality." The first project produced under the Journey Films banner was *Personal Alarm*, a sober documentary look at women's perceptions of safety. This was in contrast to the more light-hearted short drama, *A Hot Cuppa Tea*, made a year or so earlier. These subjects reflected a conscious decision by Paula to explore diverse stories in various



ways through filmmaking. Paula considers the experience of making *Personal Alarm* one of immense learning, of how to tell a story, of understanding where her greatest interest lay and to experiment with different modes of filmmaking.

Although Paula's interests and her artistic practice as a filmmaker are diverse, there is a consistent thread in much of her work and that is her tendency to explore the overlooked, the underserved and the unknown, in stories of people and of place. She especially has a strong and abiding interest in strong female characters whose contributions and experiences have not been widely recognized or, in the case of her dramatic works, are just worth imagining and enlivening. Paula's form shifts from documentary to drama and sometimes the two overlap. She is deeply interested in character development and generally in the relationship between people and their personal histories. Canadian author Robert Kroetsch has commented that when he writes about his grandmother, he wants it to be about someone else's grandmother, too. This is the challenge of many artists who explore character, to place either personal experiences or the accounts of other lives into a broader context.



So while Paula may begin with a singular person in a specific circumstance, she develops an environment that reflects upon, and resonates with, the human experience.

In *The Emancipation of Emily Blake*, a feature-length drama currently in the final script phase, Paula explores the life of Emily Blake, the last woman to be executed in Manitoba in 1899. Despite being an obviously significant and unique event, it is

not widely known. As a drama based on an actual event, the script indicates that the filmmaker will use a number of devices to re-imagine Emily Blake's life and circumstances. Factual archival records will be integrated into the dramatic telling of the story along with more fanciful imaginings and visual effects that suggest possible motivation for Emily's actions. Although ostensibly about a Victorian character in a small

Manitoba town, the way Paula interprets Emily's failure to achieve her perceived rightful station in life becomes a more universal and contemporary story of class struggle, human interaction, sexual repression and gender inequality.

In the feature-length documentary *Appassionata: The Extraordinary Life and Music of Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatté* Paula presents an account of the worldly virtuoso musician and composer who relocated to Winnipeg in the late 60s. Although it is a well-known anecdotal story among those familiar with Winnipeg's art and cultural community, it had not been as completely told to the public at large until Paula released this film in 2006. Paula combines archival footage, interviews and musical performances with extensive dramatizations of incidents in the lives of the central characters, ranging from pre-World War II Europe to present-day Winnipeg. She neatly, and in a fantastical manner, segues into the musical performances from these re-enactments. As Sonia composes a duo for piano and violin, for instance, the camera pans to two musicians performing the completed work in the same room. In another sequence as Sonia departs for a concert tour sadly leaving her ailing lover on the railway platform, a lone violinist comes into view performing, as a station busker, one of her more melancholy and discordant solo violin works. Through the dramatizations, combining the factual with the imagined, Paula creatively translates Sonia's possible inner life, communicated by the thing most important to the musician: the music.

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong (2001) is an accomplished documentary about Helen Armstrong, a tireless crusader for the rights of working women and one of the little-known organizers of the infamous Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. Paula's prowess as a researcher is evident throughout the film as she seeks out material to build her story. Starting with just two photographs of Helen Armstrong and a sparse account of her life, Paula tracks down an impressive number of newspaper



articles and other contextual documents, family members, and women's rights and labour activists to present a more fully developed document of an important episode in the life of a woman who made a major impact in Winnipeg and nationally.

Again Paula combines archival research with dramatizations, more subtle but no less effective than those employed in *Appassionata*. The dramatizations serve to elucidate the life of Helen Armstrong not just as a labour organizer, but also as a woman, mother and wife during the First World War era in Winnipeg. The film becomes a portrait not only of Armstrong but of the restrictions and the aspirations of women at a very significant time in history. *The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong* knits together Paula's long-standing interests in culturally transformational events and the practice of filmmaking, and, just as importantly, her desire to bring to the fore the stories of women otherwise buried in a more male-centric historical practice.



I recently worked with Paula when she was selected as Artist-in-Residence at the City of Winnipeg Archives, through the Public Art Program that I manage for the Winnipeg Arts Council. The mandate of the residency was for the selected artist to work with the records of the Archives over a period of six months and to produce a permanent work of art that reflected some aspect of the artist's sifting and reflecting. The City of Winnipeg Archives is itself an under-recognized jewel in Winnipeg, a major reason I sought it out as a site for an artist residency. This Archive holds a wealth of original and unique documents about Winnipeg but does not have the public recognition of its bigger sister, the provincial Archives of Manitoba.

The City of Winnipeg Archives project was a serendipitous match for Paula, given her enthusiasm for rooting out information in little-known territory. She chose to explore the building of Winnipeg, the effect of flooding in this temperamental

floodplain we call home, and our imagination of our future as a city through three distinct short segments that together comprise the short film *Souvenirs*. Paula sought out current and retired city workers, a largely underappreciated group, to hear their personal stories about the building of the city. Through the interviews, the remarkable archival film footage and photographs, as well as Paula's footage of current city work, a picture emerges of how modern Winnipeg came to be, through infrastructure and human toil.

While the first two short films of the trio, *Sand and Stone* and *Watermarks*, address the physical reality of Winnipeg and the impact of the landscape on the psyche of the people who live here, the third short film, *Waiting for the Parade*, delves deeper into the imaginative realm. Paula employs archival footage of the celebratory parade marking the 75th anniversary of the city, which in its slightly garish and almost surreal images offers a more dream-like reading of Winnipeg. In addition to the parade images there are much earlier images of children performing cartwheels on grand lawns and of women circa 1920 laughing and hamming it up for the camera. The visuals combine with the voices of current residents reflecting on the past and the future of the city, its challenges, its realities and its possibilities. This segment is a kind of disjointed beauty; it makes one think of Winnipeg, or of any city, as an *idea* and not just as a tangible collection of rivers and earth, citizens and buildings. Together the three segments are a lovely reflection on the landscape and the creative imagination.

Although Paula has a gift for the historical drama and documentary form, she is also clearly engaged in the present and the future and in the poetic possibilities inherent in all. *Devil's Lake* is a dramatic short film project in development, a future-world story about flooding in the year 2059. This kind of speculative storytelling is a long-standing interest for Paula, especially films which explore some kind of apocalyptic vision. Paula

shot footage of the Winnipeg flood of 1997 and this had a major impact on her. Surveying the flood zones, she was struck by the “end of the world quality” of the scene: a lone dog barking on a dike, the sudden and deleterious transformation of the landscape, a lack of human activity. She used some of this footage in *Souvenirs*, the historically based Archives project, but a future-focused project on flooding resonated with her too. After all, as Paula puts it, the future is the “flip-side of history” and both require artists to make imaginative leaps in order to create film worlds.

Euphoria is another project in development that takes place in the present and recent past. This feature film script is a road-trip tale of a six-year-old girl’s underground life after a parental abduction which then intersects with her journey home as a young woman to meet the father she thought was dead. Despite the gravity of the situation, the script conveys moments of levity and humour, reinforcing that life is complicated, messy and unpredictable.

Like the great documentarian Errol Morris, it seems that Paula “can’t get enough of people and the wealth of stories they have to tell.” In an interview, Errol Morris has commented: “When I was in graduate school studying philosophy, a friend of mine said, ‘There’s really only one philosophical question: what to do next.’ I have these endless ideas about what to do... part of what I love about documentary is this idea that you can reinvent the form every time you make one. And you can create visuals that are really strange. Oddly enough, that are severed from reality.”

Paula has commented that her documentaries are really also dramas. As Errol Morris relates, playing with film form can result in strange and compelling worlds. Paula challenges herself with each project with fresh ways of showing and telling. Journey Films is an appropriate moniker for Paula’s production company as she builds her career and her films step-by-step, with abundant curiosity.

REFERENCE

Errol Morris, as interviewed by James Hughes, “The Eleven-Minute Psychiatrist: The Stop Smiling Interview of Errol Morris,” *Stop Smiling Online Magazine* (March 2006).

SELECTED INDEPENDENT FILMOGRAPHY

Souvenirs (three short films) | 2008 | 22:30

Sand and Stone | 6:00

Watermarks | 11:00

Waiting for the Parade | 7:00

Re-Learning Our Ways | 2008 | 23:00

Appassionata: The Extraordinary Life and Music of Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatte | 2006 | 95:00

Endangered Words | 2006 | 23:00

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong | 2001 | 44:30

Epiphany Rules | 1999 | 25:00