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Shooting Stars, Part II (The Women)

Interviews with America's Hottest Female DPs

by David Geffner



JOEY FORSYTE

Like her pal, Lisa Rinzler, with whom Forsyte attended NYU, this Chicago native has been quietly busting down doors for more than two decades. Since her early days working as renegade director Robert Altman's "best boy," to her most recent low-budget indie feature, Preston Tylk, [see "Coming Attractions," pg. 28_ed.] Forsyte's work is marked by a warm, personal touch, reflective of the woman herself. A lifelong backer of female camera crews (Forsyte has had women in her department for much of her career), she is long overdue for a breakout indie feature, much like Rinzler had this year on *Three Seasons*.

MM: You didn't waste time with any rookie directors on your first film. You jumped right in. with a guy who'd been a protégé of Orson Welles.

Joey Forsyte (JF): Yes, it was a real Hollywood story. I have a wonderful friend named Rosilyn Heller, who was probably the first female studio exec in Hollywood. We were having dinner in New York one night, and Rosilyn

saw Henry Jaglom eating across the room. She literally dragged me over to Henry's table and insisted that he hire me for his next film. Henry had always wanted to work with a female DP, so I lucked out.

MM: Was it was anything like what you expected?

JF: Well, it was a fascinating experience for me. There was no script. Every scene was improvised, as was the camerawork. You had no idea what you were shooting until five minutes before you rolled. It's not my best-looking movie, but I did pretty well considering it was a six-day shoot!

MM: Tell me about *The Dark Backward*. It's one of your most stylistically unique films.

JF: One of the things that's so difficult about being a DP is finding words to describe. That film was difficult to articulate a vision for because it was such a unique script. Adam Rifkin, the director, couldn't verbalize what the movie should look like so he showed me the film *1984*. Even though *The Dark Backward* doesn't look like that film, it helped me to define the look. We called it poetic depression. It's a film that is beautifully ugly. When we finished, Adam told me it was exactly the way he had imagined it. That's the best compliment you can get.

MM: Tell me about the film that Martin Scorsese executive produced.

JF: *Naked in New York*. I'd done a student film with the director, Dan Algrant [see Algrant interview; MM # 5-ed.] years before. Scorsese was never on the set, but he talked with Dan every night and his devotion to the film was amazing. As a DP, I really identified with his passion. For me, film helps me connect with something larger than myself. Much the way religion can for some people. That's why I find a guy like Scorsese so impressive.

MM: You crossed paths with him again on the BBC TV series, *Naked Hollywood*, right?

JF: Yes, I did. I will never forget his interview. Most of the other people we'd been shooting were agents, and they were really into the business of filmmaking. Scorsese walks in and proceeds to bring my entire crew to tears.

MM: Tears? How so?

JF: He was talking about *The Last Temptation of Christ* and how it had fallen apart several times. He said that it was a blessing that it took so long to get going. It gave him time to see where the film was coming from—the Italian neo-realists—and to clarify his own connection to the film, which was his religious background. I think filmmakers (like Scorsese) who came out of the '70s really believed movies could make a difference. His words touched me.

MM: I'm curious about another mentor in your life, your father. He's an engineer by trade, but does art photography on the side?

JF: My dad is a tinkering-genius-type guy. And I've followed him down that path. He actually did photography on the weekends to help support us. I was in the darkroom with him since I was a kid. That was magic for me. Being with my father, seeing these images appear in the darkness, is really where it all started. But, to answer your question, my dad just had his very first gallery show this year. At the age of 78! He got great reviews, too, by the way!

MM: Speaking of youthful, my lead for this article talks about the gender-bias against female DPs winding down. Do you think the next generation will have it easier than the women on this list?

JF: You know, nine years ago I had a female studio executive tell me I was crazy to pursue a career in camera. They were simply not hiring women in that area. Period. It was sobering because 12 years earlier, when I had entered film school, I was told flat to my face that I would never shoot a movie. But here I am, having just finished my 17th feature. I still don't get a lot of calls for studio movies. And honestly, if I were a man, that area of my career might be a lot further along. But from my perspective, the independent world is very open to women. I don't feel that I'm denied work because I'm a woman. At the same time, I don't really know for sure.

MM: It's better in some ways, unchanged in others?

JF: Listen, gender bias won't be over until the percentage of women shooting compared to men is much, much closer than it is. I think if things have gotten better in recent years, it's because of women like Ellen Kuras. Ellen's shot big-budget movies which are standing alone, on their own merits. We haven't had someone like Ellen to point to for a long time.

But now we do.

MM: So we're at the beginning of the end?

JF: Yes. There's a whole new generation of film_makers in the business-directors, producers, other DP's-who were raised with working mothers and, to them, gender's not a big deal. I don't mean to downplay it, because the number of women shooting films is not where it should be. In the past, the fear of gender bias has kept some women from pursuing careers as DPs, and there just aren't enough of us. But we're at the beginning of the change.

MM: You're close to the next generation. A lot of them have worked on your movies as ACs. What's your sense-hope or fear?

JF: Equal measures of both. Although there are more women working in camera than ever before, some of them are discouraged about becoming DPs. I try to motivate these young women to use the hurdles, real and imagined, as fuel for their fire. You can change a lot of people's perceptions in this business and still have fun at the same time.

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