

Exceptional Filmmakers Challenge & Inspire

by Cynthia Close

We are so saturated by visual media and the glut of information—the result of the hyperactive digital age that has swept over us like some horrific tsunami—one wonders how to make sense of it all. Four Vermont women—Deb Ellis, Nora Jacobson, Anne Macksoud, and Bess O'Brien—have spent the better part of their professional lives committed to making films that inform and inspire, bucking the tendency to be apathetic. Their curiosity and desire to understand, to create order, to tell authentic stories that touch on universal truths and enlighten us are some of the elements that unite this most diverse group of filmmakers, all of whom have deep ties to Vermont.

Perhaps *Freedom and Unity: The Vermont Movie*, a six-part documentary series many years in the making and released in 2013, epitomizes the tenacity and collaborative spirit it takes to be a documentary filmmaker today.



(above) Anne Macksoud with Issa, a boy suffering from AIDS, during a shoot in East Africa covering the AIDS pandemic. (top, right) Nora Jacobson and a poster of her most recent film *The Hanji Box*, about the relationship of an American mother and her adopted Korean daughter.

While spearheaded and edited by Nora Jacobson, the film involved the work of dozens of filmmakers, including Ellis, Macksoud, and Jay Craven, the husband and filmmaking partner of O'Brien. The film provides a complex portrait of Vermont that is as much a state of mind as it is a physical place. It opened in Burlington to great fanfare, was broadcast locally, and is widely used as an educational tool in classrooms across the state.

Becoming a Filmmaker

How does one become a filmmaker? For each of these talented women, it was more a journey of self-discovery rather than the result of formal academic training.

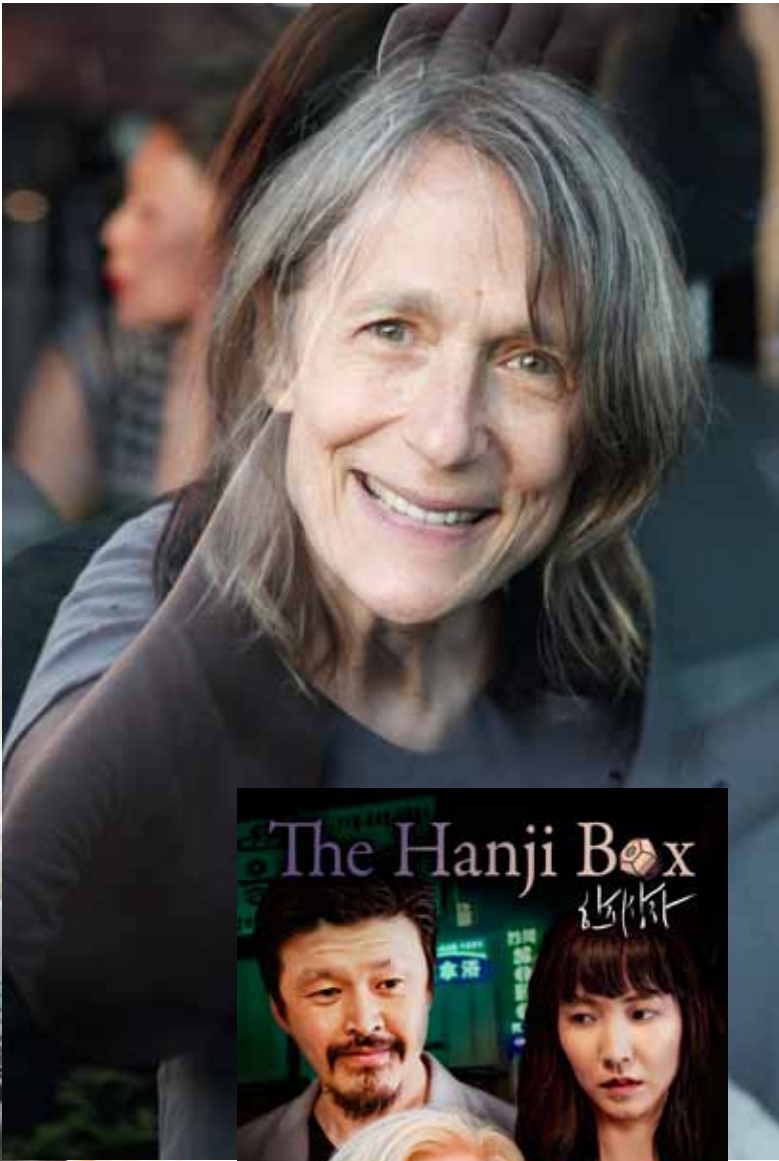
Nora Jacobson was born in Norwich, Vermont, and attended an exper-

imental high school in Hanover, New Hampshire, where she became enamored of super-8mm filmmaking. She was close enough to Dartmouth to be able to use its facilities, and it was there she discovered she had an affinity for editing. She also attended Antioch College, where her interest in people led

her to taking classes in anthropology. Later, at the Art Institute of Chicago, she studied under Stan Brakhage, an influential avant-garde artist who worked in film. But much as she admired Brakhage, she came out of that experience having learned little about the film industry and yet determined to make a living as a filmmaker.

Deb Ellis, also a native Vermonter, left home to get her undergraduate degree in history at Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin. She was driven by a need to understand the human condition and the way the world works. Ellis was only in her early 20s when she worked in a group home for men coming out of prison. It was an eye-opening experience where she learned how other human beings with

her professional life teaching in New Jersey where she made an effort to bring all the arts into the classroom, including documentary film. She always liked creating things and began to make slide shows and short films with her students on contemporary issues such as poverty, civil rights, and the Vietnam War. In spite of her love for teaching, she always “felt unprepared” and after all those years was “burned out.” Her personal search for a more fulfilling and spiritual life led her to John Ankele, a producer of radio and TV programming in the 1960s, who was also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church and a student of Zen and Shambhala Buddhist traditions. They formed a working partnership and began making films in 1985. In 1999 Macksoud moved to Ver-



mont where she now lives in Woodstock. Ankele lives in New York City. Together they run Old Dog Documentaries, their film production company, which specializes in films about environmental issues and the ever-more-pressing effects of climate change. They self-distribute many of their films, which can be ordered through their website. Bess O'Brien attended Mount Holyoke College and wanted to be an ac-

trix. She studied theater and went to New York City in the early 1980s to do Off Broadway plays. When she visited beautiful Middlebury, Vermont, she decided to start a summer theater under a tent and invited all her New York friends to participate. They did environmental theater, adapted a Fellini film into a play, and did a production of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. O'Brien says they survived mainly

from ticket sales and had a blast doing it. While in Vermont she heard about “crazy” Jay Craven, a filmmaker living in the Northeast Kingdom. Although she'd never made a movie, she wrote him a letter that led to a meeting, and ultimately they

(right) Bess O'Brien behind the camera. Pictured is a still of Maddy from her film *All of Me*, about eating disorders, and image from the poster for the film.

photo: Mary Claire Carroll.

fell in love and got married. Together in 1991 they formed Kingdom County Productions. She was eight months pregnant with their son Jasper when they produced the feature film *Where the Rivers Flow North*. Jasper is now 23.

Bringing Issues to Light

Ellis, Jacobson, Macksoud, and O'Brien are all accomplished filmmakers, and while the task of presenting issues to educate and inform usually falls under the umbrella of the documentary genre, Jacobson and O'Brien feel equally at home in the world of narrative, feature film. O'Brien and her husband, Jay Craven, have produced eight feature films, seven documentaries, a radio variety show, a touring musical theater production, and an Emmy-winning television comedy series. But it is O'Brien who has primarily pursued her interest in exploring the power of documentary to bring issues of serious concern to light.

She went back to her roots in theater when she started volunteering with a local group of survivors of domestic violence. The women in the group were encouraged to tell their stories in response to writing prompts. O'Brien created a play using their own words, which toured Vermont. It was a trans-



(left & above) Deb Ellis with an image from her film *Peace Has No Borders*, which won a VCAM Audience Favorite Award at the Vermont International Film Festival in October.



Photo Essays and Text by Diane Elliott Gayer

Of Earth and Being is a collection of photographs and essays critiquing and celebrating what we know and who we are. It is a personal journey through the architecture of time and the nature of place.

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Grandmothers from Tanzania in Macksoud's documentary *Coming to Say Goodbye*, which won a CINE Golden Eagle Award.

formative experience for the women survivors. The play became her first documentary when it was filmed in 1995 by her colleague Mary Arbutuckle and titled *Journey into Courage*. Her next documentary, *Where Is Stephanie?*, is about the murder of 17-year-old Stephanie Sady of Rutland, Vermont. The film explores the after effects of tragedy and the path to healing. Other documentaries followed, including *Ask Us Who We Are*, focusing on the challenges that youths face in foster care, and two films dealing with drug

addition: *Here Today*, about the heroin problem in the Northeast Kingdom, and the more recent *Hungry Heart*, about the prescription drug crisis in Vermont. Her most recent documentary, *All of Me*, reveals the many faces of eating disorders. The film premiered this fall at a special screening in Burlington that included a Q&A with some of the subjects in the film. O'Brien is now at work on her next film, as yet untitled, supported by the Department of Corrections, which highlights a restorative-justice-type program to reintegrate high-profile offenders back into society.

Changing the World

Deb Ellis found her direction as a filmmaker back in Chicago, a city with a very supportive environment for activist filmmaking. She attended graduate school at Northwestern University and worked at the local community TV station. Ironically, her paths crossed with Nora Jacobson in Chicago when Jacobson was working there on a film project about gentrification while she was attending the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ellis, like many of her contemporaries, had no desire or illusions about getting rich as a filmmaker. She was idealistic and believed that films had the power to change the world.

She made *Doris Eddy* (1986), her first widely recognized, award-winning short film portrait of Eddy, a Vermont woman, equestrian, farmer, and feminist who ran the Eddy Farm School for Horse and Rider. Driven by the need to earn a living, Ellis took a job editing the late night news at the NBC affiliate in Duluth, Minnesota, one of the few places in the United States with colder winters than her home state of Vermont. This was before digital technology when filmmakers were still editing on three-quarter-inch tape.

Unbidden Voices, an experimental film she released in 1989, addresses women's roles in traditional Indian culture. continued on page 21

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