



'No Job for a Woman'

Director Michele Midori Fillion on brave women war reporters and her doc about them. At VIFF this week.

By: By Robyn Smith, 8 October 2012, TheTyee.ca

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It's common to see brave women reporters on the front lines of war today, women like Christiane Amanpour, Maggie O'Kane, and legend Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times correspondent thought to have nine lives until she died February covering the atrocities of the Syrian civil war. Though she fought for access in many different, harrowing ways, few dared hold Colvin back, least of all a male editor. It was her imperative: Syria was the world's most important story that no one was telling, so why shouldn't she?

When America joined the Second World War, women reporters felt the same way. But at the time they were denied access to the battlefield, instead assigned "women's angles" that took place far from the front lines. While some fought back, others worked within those parameters, writing intimate human stories of the wounded and of refugees, the kind that define great war reporting today.

Screening at the Vancouver International Film Festival this week, the documentary *No Job for a Woman: The Women Who Fought to Report WWII* tells the stories of three Second World War correspondents who found their own inventive ways in: wire service reporter Ruth Cowan, magazine reporter Martha Gellhorn, and war photographer Dickey Chapelle. The Tyee is a proud media sponsor of the film, which combines archival footage and photos, re-enactments of the women's stories, and interviews with courageous contemporary women war reporters.

The Tyee asked director Michele Midori Fillion just how far these women went to report the news, how she found out about them in the first place, and why you should know about them too. You can catch the film tonight, Monday, Oct. 8, 6 p.m. at Empire Granville 5 and meet the director, or Wednesday Oct. 10, 2:30 p.m. at Empire Granville 5.

How did you first hear about these women?

"When I was at journalism school (at the University of Western Ontario), I was looking for a thesis topic and I came across a book by Julia Edwards called *Women of the World: The Great Foreign Correspondents*. I'd heard of Margaret Bourke-White, I'd heard of Martha Gellhorn, but I hadn't heard of most of the other women. I didn't realize there was such a lengthy history there, and I was just

stunned.

"The one story that hit me in particular was the story of Dickey Chapelle, a photographer who got her start during World War II. She was quite young, 24 at the time. She lived this unbelievable life. And it was her life story in particular... I just could not believe I hadn't heard of her. She was from Milwaukee and when I meet someone from Milwaukee I go, 'Dickey Chapelle?!' And I get this blank look. I'm thinking, wow, even people from Milwaukee don't even know who she is.

"I started doing research on her. That was in the early '90s, before the Internet. In the library I'd look up her photos, her articles... she wrote a memoir called *What's a Woman Doing Here?* I vowed to myself that I would do a documentary about her. She lived such a dramatic life that it would be a great feature film. And some other people agree: Brad Pitt's company has the rights to the story of her life to do a feature film. In any event, when I started focusing on her, I came across other women.

Why did you care about them so much?

"Prior to World War II, the women that were reporting, they weren't under restrictions. Martha Gellhorn was reporting the Spanish Civil War and she was walking around with a letter from Franklin Roosevelt in her pocket saying 'Give her access to wherever she wants. Let her go where she wants to.' And then the U.S. enters World War II and bang, these restrictions fall down on these women. It's the sheer determination these women had, that kind of drive...

"When I was living in India (making films with the Aga Khan Foundation in the 1990s), just after Rajiv Gandhi had been assassinated... there was constant sectarian violence there. You could just tell by the tone of the streets that something was about to happen. You could just hear a riot developing. Inevitably someone would come up to me and say 'You need to get out of here, this doesn't concern you.' And I would get into a rickshaw and go home. I'd read in the newspaper the next day that 34 people had been killed, or 16 people had been killed. It never occurred to me to stay. It was always like, 'Oh. I need to leave.' War reporters don't do that.

"It's the same thing as Sept. 11. What is it that impels people to stay? Most of the people were running out of the building. The firefighters were running in. What is it? What does it take to do that? I think war reporters have the same instinct. It is an instinct, a gut thing. 'I need to stay and see this.' I don't have that instinct.

Did you get a glimmer of what drove them into crisis, though they were disadvantaged by restrictions? Was it just straight-up moxie?

"In World War II, there was such a sense of patriotism. For someone like Ruth Cowan, who was a long-time reporter, she was a professional. She'd been reporting forever and World War II was happening and everyone was gung-ho, like the soldiers. 'We want to help, we want to go!' We call her the 'dutiful one,' but I think there was such a level of professionalism with all of the women. This was what they wanted to do. They were going to do it, either working within the restrictions and reporting as Ruth Cowan did, or like Martha Gellhorn, and Dickey Chapelle to a certain extent, which was more 'I'm just going to do it, and if I have to break the rules, I'm going to do it.'

"It stemmed from a work ethic. 'This is my job. Why are you stopping me from doing this?' For

somebody like Martha Gellhorn... she was just so indignant at the atrocity of war. I always have this sense of her of being really pissed off and wanting the world to know, because she felt that if the world knew, people would do something about it.

Do you have a favourite anecdote about one of them?

"One of the themes I was exploring was 'Where is the war story?' Because women really moved the boundaries of that. Traditionally there was this idea, and it still pops its head up, that the war story is at the front. And so what is the front? There was this clear delineation in World War I of what the front was, and who could be at the front, and how you get to the front, and being at the front. And that's where careers were made. The women were very well aware of that: careers were going to be made during World War II, and if they remained restricted they weren't going to get the kind of honours that the men ultimately did.

"The exploration of what the front line was is really exemplified to me in this story of Dickey Chapelle. She was really good at wrangling piecemeal. (Covering Iwo Jima), she was on the U.S.S. Samaritan (a hospital ship), and she was supposed to stay on there. And then she found somebody and asked to be taken ashore. They said okay, even though the top brass was telling her she couldn't get off the boat. Then she wrangled a drive in a jeep, which the women were not permitted to do. She finally gets this sergeant to take her to the front line. This is the professional imperative: You go to the front line. It shows you are a real war reporter. So she gets to this place, and the sergeant says: 'This is the front line.' And she gets out and runs up the top of this dune on Iwo Jima, and it's just sand as far as she can. She's really confused. 'Here I am, and it looks like nothing.' So she starts bracketing her shots and does this series of photographs, 360 degrees around. Meanwhile, she's swatting at all these wasps buzzing by her head. She comes down 10 minutes later and this sergeant starts screaming at her. 'What the *fuck* were you doing?! I've never seen anything like that in my life. Don't you realize you were standing on the front lines and you were being shot at from both sides?'

"She's just elated. Of course, this shows her war reporting mettle. She gets back to her tent and starts writing out (her report), *Under Fire on Iwo Jima*. Because this is the story war reporters want to write. This was originally supposed to be in the film, and the actors when I was casting it, the women, were having the best time screaming all the profanities that the sergeant was screaming at her. It's really too bad we couldn't have kept it in. It just took too long to tell. So you know, if Brad Pitt ever does make the movie of Dickey Chapelle, I hope he keeps that in."

Did they tell war stories differently than their male counterparts?

"Martha Gellhorn, she really thought she was doing war reporting by focusing on the human cost of war, which was really becoming a newer idea at that point. Not just which tanks went where, and where did the front line move to, descriptions of soldiers falling... (the women) were interviewing the wounded, the refugees. That was the unintended consequence of the restrictions: the women had to focus on the human cost of war, which actually became very popular."

"Was it an essentialist female take on war? Or was it the fact that they were restricted and that's what they could find as a war story? That's the question I leave.

"I also interviewed a number of contemporary women war reporters. Many have been influenced by

Martha Gellhorn. Janine di Giovanni, who's a reporter for the Times of London, she said, 'Do I report a war differently? Yes. I'm not interested in RPGs, I'm not interested in whatever the new machinery is. The first thing I do is go to hospitals, and that actually tells -- not only for compassionate and humanitarian reasons -- it always tells me what's going on in the war and what kind of weapons are being used.' Deborah Amos, a National Public Radio reporter, said the same thing. She was in Iraq, Afghanistan, and she's currently doing the Middle East."

What do you hope VIFF goers get out of this film?

"*No Job for a Woman* is a film about history, it's a film by a female director, it's a film about media and journalism, it's a film about writers... it's a film that on its surface would seem like a World War II film, but it's not. It's much more than that. I hope viewers come away (feeling) it's a film that works on so many levels, and is actually asking the audience to ask themselves questions about how we understand a war story, and what is a war story."

This interview has been condensed and edited. 🍃

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