

San Francisco Film Society

Oral History Project

Interview with Cathy Meyer

Conducted by Sheila Cadigan

Children's Hospital, Oakland, California

August 22, 2006

SHEILA CADIGAN: This is Sheila Cadigan. The date is August 22, 2006, and I am interviewing Cathy Meyer in her office in Oakland at Children's Hospital for the San Francisco International Film Festival Oral History Project. First, I just wanted to ask you a few questions about yourself. What is your place and date of birth?

CATHY MEYER: I was born in Los Angeles April 16th, 1948.

SHEILA CADIGAN: What did your family do?

CATHY MEYER: My father was in the *schmata* business; the fabric business. He sold fabric to clothing manufacturers, and before that, he was a singer with big bands. My mother was a stay-at-home mom.

SHEILA CADIGAN: In Los Angeles?

CATHY MEYER: In Los Angeles.

SHEILA CADIGAN: What was it like growing up in L.A.?

CATHY MEYER: Well I was a Valley girl, and it's a lot different than it is now. I suppose there was a little bit of the movie business even then, when you're growing up in L.A. Sally Field was at my school, and Cindy Williams, and the children of many movie stars, even though it was a very middle-class public school. Mike Ovitz was in the class ahead of me.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So it's like living in L.A. now; you're constantly seeing celebrities without their makeup, celebrity-spotting.

CATHY MEYER: Yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Did that inspire you in any way to get interested—

CATHY MEYER: Not in the slightest. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: Tell me about your education.

CATHY MEYER: I went to UC Santa Cruz in the early days. And then I went up to San Francisco State for a teaching credential, which I ended up never using. And shortly after that I went into publicity for films.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So that places you in the Bay Area, right?

CATHY MEYER: Yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And that's where you met your husband, Gary?

CATHY MEYER: I met my husband at a creative writing conference at a YMCA camp in Pescadero. Very unlikely for either one of us to even have been there.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Was it love at first sight?

CATHY MEYER: Something like that, I suppose. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: But did you share a common interest in film?

CATHY MEYER: No. I mean, he was completely involved from the age of five, when he first saw **Lady and the Tramp**. But he went to San Francisco State, and he used to come and visit. He worked in the audiovisual department, and he used to be our weekend film educator, because he would borrow films from the AV center and hitchhike down to Santa Cruz with this Bergman or that Truffaut under his arm, and we'd borrow a 16-millimeter projector from somewhere, and a bunch of people would gather at somebody's house and we'd watch movies. So that was pretty much my earliest film education of any real meaning.

SHEILA CADIGAN: It was during your courtship, then.

CATHY MEYER: Yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: At that time, did he own his theaters?

CATHY MEYER: No. He was just graduating college, and he worked for the United Artists theater circuit after that. I was doing substitute teaching and temp jobs and things like that, and then it became clear to me that there were no teaching jobs, so I knew some of the people in the film business just through my husband, and I was hired at Wodell Associates, which was the major film publicity and advertising agency in the city at that time.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And they were doing work for the Festival?

CATHY MEYER: No, not then. We were hired by the studios to do publicity on different films. I did media buying. I didn't do publicity at that point.

SHEILA CADIGAN: How old were you when you started working at that job?

CATHY MEYER: Mid to late 20s.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And you married Gary what year?

CATHY MEYER: 1971.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you were married for ten years before you started working at the San Francisco Film Society?

CATHY MEYER: Right.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And what were your activities in film during those years? You were working at Wodell.

CATHY MEYER: I worked at Wodell, and then I worked at a small agency, Jan Zones Agency, after that. There, too, it was a very small agency, so it was one of those jobs where you did everything from setting up press junkets to vacuuming the floor. And I had a wide-ranging group of films that I worked on, from just cheesy exploitation stuff to some art films, a lot of independent things.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So what was film like in the '70s, early '80s, as opposed to now? I would think promoting would be very different.

CATHY MEYER: Well promoting is very different. Of course, there were a lot fewer places that you could promote in one sense; in another sense there were a lot more. It was just very different. Of course there was nothing online. The newspapers were the **Chronicle** and the **Examiner**. Then the **Bay Guardian** was around. But there were a lot of locally produced TV shows. There were some locally produced talk shows that I was able to get guests on. The news tended to cover these kinds of things a lot more than they do now so, if you had a good angle, you could certainly get coverage.

SHEILA CADIGAN: What are some of the memorable moments in that era for you, where you had an angle and you were able to score a lot of people.

CATHY MEYER: Well, I remember the big score we didn't get, and I wish I could remember the details. It was one of these cheesy exploitation films. But we had some big promotion set up and actually got a good amount of interest from the press. And that was the day that Patty Hearst was caught, so we got nothing. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: Busy news day.

CATHY MEYER: That's right. That's always the danger you run into having no real newsworthy product to sell. I worked on **The Wicker Man**, which was fun, with Christopher Lee, who never made it to town, but we had a fabulous phone relationship because he was stuck in Alaska in a snowstorm. So I

can't even imagine how we could have been communicating, because there were no cell phones, so it must have been over shortwave radio or something. He kept saying he was coming to town. And I think he even did an interview that way.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And this is before you went to the Film Festival? This is when you were at Wodell? So you were just doing work for studios, trying to get local press, and that would be farmed out to agencies within the cities—Is that how it worked?

CATHY MEYER: Right. There were a lot more agencies in the city, and a lot of the studios had a lot more local distribution offices here, and then they could set up local deals. So it was a lot more localized than centralized like it is now.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So that's the difference, really, between the studio system that operated pretty much in the '70s and '80s.

CATHY MEYER: Well, yes. It wasn't the studio system like you think of in the '30s and '40s, but there was a lot more local publicity that was done.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And then people like Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas were living here.

CATHY MEYER: Yes, the early '70s is when **Star Wars** came out.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Would you have worked on any of those things?

CATHY MEYER: No, although my husband was the only one—Because he was younger than most of the people in distribution, all of whom were saying, "Who'd want to go see some stupid movie about spaceships?" He was the one who said, "We need to book this." So he was an early champion of **Star Wars**.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Tell me about how you first started with the Film Society. Was it called that then?

CATHY MEYER: No. It was just called San Francisco International Film Festival. Of course I'd been attending it for a few years. But I was doing some freelance work for Mel Novikoff, who was one of the directors of this newly reconstituted Festival. Claude Jarman was just before us, so Claude left, and then there was this new group of people that started putting the Festival on. One of them was Mel Novikoff, who owned the Surf Theatre chain and was kind of the hero of independent film in the Bay Area. You talk to anyone that was around during those times, and they will say to you that they got their film education at one of his theaters. So he got together with Albert Johnson, who I'm sure you've heard about. Albert was the king. He taught film at Cal; he was a huge authority on all kinds of film. I never was lucky enough to attend one of his classes, but apparently he sang and danced his way through the classes. (LAUGHS) He would act them out; act out films. He was passionate about film. And he had been in the old regime, too. His role there, that he was most famous for, was his interviews. He really pioneered the whole tribute idea. He interviewed anyone you can think of. I mean, I can remember seeing Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward and Bette Davis, and just unbelievable interviews that would—unfortunately for the people waiting for the next show—would go on for hours. You know, a six-hour tribute was not out of the question. So Albert was then brought on board with this new group. He did the programming and he did the interviews. It was an interesting group because it was also Tom Luddy, who is another authority on film. It was all these people who were very strong-willed and had very definite opinions about things. The rest of the staff just kind of sat back and waited until the dust would settle to talk. (LAUGHS) And decisions were made that way.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you actually entered the Film Festival at a sort of turbulent time, right after Claude Jarman, to where there was this sort of unusual structure with the triumvirate of Mel Novikoff, Peter Buchanan, Tom Luddy as executive director, and Albert Johnson as the programming person. And there had been some financial turbulence before that.

CATHY MEYER: It was an effort to bring it back. No one wanted to let it die, of course. But really, I was the hired help, so I don't know what the board thought. I don't know if it was a rubber-stamp board or—I mean, now that I'm in the thick of the nonprofit world, I know all the red flags we should have been looking out for, but all that being said, as I look back at these program books, there was some pretty incredible programming that took place. All the luminaries of world cinema were presented at these festivals.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you were there in '80, '81, and then there was no '82, right, because they were moving the Festival from the fall to the spring and it skipped a year?

CATHY MEYER: That's what it was, yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And then in L.A. it merged with Filmex, the L.A. Film Festival. So you left at the end of '81, because there really wasn't anything to do for a long time.

CATHY MEYER: I don't remember. I just remember it was a difficult time.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Can you elaborate?

CATHY MEYER: I wish I could. You know, this is all sort of coming back to me.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, begin at the beginning. What was your first sign of trouble? What were you first aware of?

CATHY MEYER: Well it was run by a group of very strong-willed guys who may or may not have had a good business sense of what was going on. I can conjecture for days, but I don't really have the facts to say this is what happened and why. I think the finances were in dire shape. I don't remember who was locked out, but I think the staff was kind of dismissed because there was no Festival the next year.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you and Patricia Peyton, your jobs didn't exist anymore?

CATHY MEYER: Right.

SHEILA CADIGAN: But when you were hired, you were the first full-time staff they had had in a long time to do publicity?

CATHY MEYER: Right.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Normally the programmers are full-time, but the publicist is just brought in for the Festival.

CATHY MEYER: Well, I was full-time during the period. I had a small PR agency over here in Oakland concurrently with that, so I would just work it so that when it became clear that these were going to be pretty full-time but seasonal projects, that's what I would do for that period of time. So I had other things I was doing. I was full-time, but not year-round.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And probably given how scrappy their finances were, you probably weren't paid that much.

CATHY MEYER: No. I can't even imagine how much I was paid. I'm sure it was pathetic, whatever it was. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: But that's the way a lot of these film festivals were.

CATHY MEYER: Oh sure, yes. Also, right around then, Mill Valley was starting up, and I was the first publicist there. I was pregnant when I was working at one of the first ones. I was working for a small agency.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Why don't you tell me about the Mill Valley Film Festival. Was that started as a response to the lack of a festival in '82? Did somebody feel like they had to fill the breach?

CATHY MEYER: No, like a lot of these things start, it was a small group of people who loved film, who lived in Mill Valley and who wanted to do something small and local. So they started up this festival that, in the first couple of years, it was shown—I want to say it was like the rec room in a library or something. I mean, it was very small. It was pretty ambitious programming. But I remember very clearly when I was setting out to do publicity, Stanley Eichelbaum, who was the head critic for the **Examiner**, his exact words were, “Why do we need another film festival?” And then, of course, he went on to write glowing things about it once it got started.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Because it is the trendy local festival.

CATHY MEYER: Right. We couldn't have foreseen that then, because it was a small, struggling festival.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Boutique festival.

CATHY MEYER: Right.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, there are a lot of them now.

CATHY MEYER: You can't turn around without hitting a film festival somewhere. We had brief talks about whether this was kind of a challenge to the San Francisco Film Festival. In fact, I was doing a radio interview on KCBS. Now I can't remember which festival I was talking about (LAUGHS), but we did a little pre-interview. And I said, "I'll be happy to talk about anything, but if you ask me about this competition, there really isn't one, so don't ask me about it." So of course that was the first thing they asked me. It was live radio. I had nothing to say, because it's a silly question. They try to look for something that's not there.

SHEILA CADIGAN: But were a lot of the same people involved in both festivals?

CATHY MEYER: No, not at all. Totally different set of people. Mill Valley was a very hometown kind of thing. It still is, but it *really* was in those days.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So publicizing it was all local?

CATHY MEYER: It was very local, although Jeanne Moreau came in. That was fun. She was wonderful.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you did bring in celebrities and have parties.

CATHY MEYER: But again, it was very hometown party, with one big French movie star and that kind of thing.

SHEILA CADIGAN: I'm going over some of the period of days when you were working '80, '81, and the people that you were working with. Can you tell me about Peter Buchanan?

CATHY MEYER: I'd rather not.

SHEILA CADIGAN: You'd rather not?

CATHY MEYER: No.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Tom Luddy?

CATHY MEYER: Tom was just like he is now. He works with my husband on the Telluride Film Festival now, so I see him all the time. The two of them are, like, joined at the hip, this time of year especially. Tom is just an authority on film from around the world. And what he also loves, and what I always used to enjoy watching, is he loves putting people together. He loves introducing the Bulgarian editor to the Italian set designer. He loves that kind of interaction, and making sure it's a real community of film. It's fun to watch him do it.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And he's still doing it.

CATHY MEYER: He's still doing that, yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So how did the Telluride Film Festival grow out of the San Francisco Film Festival?

CATHY MEYER: Well, Telluride is kind of a festival of the mind, more than a location. That is to say that everybody comes in from all over the country to do that one.

SHEILA CADIGAN: To program it?

CATHY MEYER: The Pences used to live near Telluride, but he teaches at Dartmouth, so they've been living in New Hampshire for years. And the development director lives in New Mexico, I think, so people are spread all over the place.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So, it's a virtual festival except—

CATHY MEYER: Except when it happens.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So whose idea was it?

CATHY MEYER: That was Bill and Stella Pence, together with Tom.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And Gary's the programmer for that?

CATHY MEYER: He's one of the programmers.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So he just scopes out films that he thinks would be good?

CATHY MEYER: Yes. He's been doing that for the last few years. He's part of the group that goes to Cannes. Things come in all year long, but they spend the spring and summer really honing down, going through the stuff that comes in over the transom, and going to festivals and picking out the programs. And then there's a lot of cross-country communication about what's good and what's not good.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Why don't we talk about some of the great moments in the Festival during your years. I understand you were at a party where there was an altercation between Catherine Deneuve and her director. Can you tell me about that?

CATHY MEYER: This was not at a party. **The Last Metro** was being shown, and they were there to present that. They were onstage and Albert Johnson introduced them. And Truffaut refused to speak English onstage, even though he could. He just wouldn't do it. And so Catherine Deneuve did most of the speaking. They did their little interview, and then they came offstage. I was in my press room, which was back behind the screen. And all of a sudden, I heard this noise, this crashing and banging and voices raised, and I walked out. The back door to my press room was back behind the screen, where it was pitch dark. All I could hear was this noise back there. And the film had started. I'm thinking, "Oh my god, what's going on?" And it immediately became clear that Ms. Deneuve was hitting Truffaut over the head with her purse because she was so mad at him because he wouldn't speak English onstage. And the purse exploded, and the contents went all over the floor in the pitch dark. Somebody came running out from the volunteer room, which was next door, scrambling around trying to pick up the contents of the purse and pulling them offstage into the volunteer room to get them to calm down. And to this day, I don't know how much, if anything, the audience knew about what was going on. It seemed like it was unbelievably noisy to me, but they may not even have realized what was going on. That was pretty exciting, wasn't it? I don't know how many people ever really knew about it.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, I think now a few people will.

CATHY MEYER: Now they know.

SHEILA CADIGAN: You were saying there was an interesting interview with Bob Guccione that you brokered.

CATHY MEYER: That wasn't part of the Festival, though.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, you can tell about it. What would your interactions have been with Bob Guccione? Which film would it have been?

CATHY MEYER: It was a film called **Caligula**. It was booked into one of Mel Novikoff's theaters.

SHEILA CADIGAN: That was an X-rated movie.

CATHY MEYER: Yes it was. It was quite shocking for the day. And their regular publicist, Peter Ujlaki, whose brother is the head of the arts department at San Francisco State now, Peter was a good friend, but he just did not want to work on this film. So he called me up and said, “Can we hire you as a freelancer?” So I set up the press screenings. And the press was walking out in droves. But we had an interview.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Walking out because of the content?

CATHY MEYER: Well it wasn't to many people's taste. It was pretty raw. It would be interesting to see it in the context of now, what it would be like.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Yes, whether the same people would be walking out, or would they be desensitized by now

CATHY MEYER: Yes. Some people thought it was great, and other people thought it was horrible.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Helen Mirren was in that film, right?

CATHY MEYER: Yes she was. But in the meantime, before the screening, I had already set up this press lunch with Judy Stone and Sheila Benson, who was the writer for the **Pacific Sun** in Marin, who then eventually went on to become the L.A. Times critic and is now living in Seattle. So Sheila, Judy, Bob Guccione, Carmine the bodyguard, the Pet of the Year and me, a nice Jewish girl from Encino. (LAUGHS) It was a very funny thing. Judy Stone, if you haven't met her, she's very smart, but she's a real journalist. I mean, she's in there digging for answers, and very down to earth, and knows a tremendous amount about film, trying to get some answers out of Bob Guccione. And he's just this slick—It was just the juxtaposition of these pretty well-known film journalists and this guy who has **Penthouse** magazine. They were both very much feminists, and then you had this Pet sitting there, doing nothing, saying nothing. It will always be one of my fondest memories because it was so bizarre. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: What were they asking him?

CATHY MEYER: Just the typical questions you ask: How did you come up with the idea for this film? What do you think about the controversy? All that. But it was very funny to me, watching the interaction between these people.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Because he's pretty slick on interviews. I've seen him.

CATHY MEYER: Oh, he's very slick. He's almost reptilian in a way.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And I'm sure he was dressed in these '70s, early '80s fashions.

CATHY MEYER: Oh, he was dressed in white polyester pants—some things you never forget—and these big boat shoes, and probably a polyester shirt, the whole '70s outfit. I liked Carmine the bodyguard quite a bit. He was a cool guy, as long as you were on his side, I think. We never got the chance to test what kind of a bodyguard he was, but he was straight out of **The Sopranos**.

SHEILA CADIGAN: I've been hearing from other staffers that some of the parties were pretty wild and interesting because those were the cocaine years. I mean, obviously I know you didn't—

CATHY MEYER: Yes, I was kind of young and innocent. The party that was the most memorable was really the party at Coppola's for **Rich and Famous**, because it was such a mob scene. Candice Bergen and Jacqueline Bisset were there, and George Cukor, and probably some other stars that I can't remember now. Coppola's house was this wonderful old Victorian on Broadway. The kitchen was always the scene—people hanging out—but then there was a media room or library or something like that downstairs, where the press interviews were supposed to be taking place. And you can imagine what it would be like trying to control the flow of something like that in a house, rather than in an auditorium or some place where you have limited access to different rooms and you can control them. This was just chaos. There were way too many people there, because that was the popular party and everybody wanted to be there. I made the mistake of asking my husband to guard the door, knowing full well that he was hopelessly in love with both of those actresses. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: Jacqueline Bisset and Candice Bergen?

CATHY MEYER: Particularly Jacqueline Bisset. He wasn't quite as strong as he might have been. And they were lovely. They were very nice people. They were as patient as they could possibly be under the circumstances, which was trying to do interviews in total chaos.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So what other local luminaries would have been at a party like that? I assume Francis.

CATHY MEYER: Francis, of course. I don't know if George Lucas was there. He was pretty shy, actually.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Lucas?

CATHY MEYER: Yes. He didn't show up at a whole lot of those things.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well he seems to show up at the Tosca parties. I've seen him in pictures.

CATHY MEYER: Well he's a little bit different now. But Phil Kaufman and Rose, his wife, I'm sure, were there. They're great. They were always fun to have at parties.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So the local famous film community.

CATHY MEYER: Right. There's a number of them. I should have done my homework to figure out who else would have been there.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Let's talk a bit about the films that were screening during those years. You said given how turbulent the period was, looking back at the programs, you were just amazed at how you were able to pull off such great Festivals.

CATHY MEYER: Lots of great Festivals.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Whatever the financial difficulties were, the public probably wouldn't have guessed at them.

CATHY MEYER: Okay, so in one year you had films by Nicholas Roeg, Godard, the Taviani brothers—

SHEILA CADIGAN: They were mostly foreign films.

CATHY MEYER: But then there were local documentaries. **The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter** was that year; Connie Field, a local filmmaker. And that was a big achievement then. I mean, it's amazing; films from China—

SHEILA CADIGAN: And how was the programmer bringing in films?

CATHY MEYER: It was Tom Luddy and Albert Johnson, pretty much. They both have connections in the film world, all over the world. Well, Albert's passed away, but everybody knew them.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So, they would travel to the foreign film festivals and cherry pick things.

CATHY MEYER: Right. Then we had the premiere of **Kagemusha**, which I still remember, because it was Kurosawa's wonderful epic. The crowd was just insane with happiness over this film because it was so beautiful and so different from some of his other films and just so visually stunning. And because this was in the Palace of Fine Arts, it had that huge screen. Actually, the layout of that theater was interesting because it was all on one floor; it's stadium seating, so there aren't any aisles, so it's just a thousand people sitting in rows and this huge screen in a venue where they don't usually go to the movies. It became more of a special event because it was all set up for the Film Festival, as opposed to having it in a regular movie theater. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but it just struck me at the time.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Do any other films stand out? You were talking about the tributes.

CATHY MEYER: Right. Well, first of all, there were a couple of other kind of famous local Bay Area films that were shown then, that now, looking back, were pretty groundbreaking. One of them was this short called **Survival Run**, about a blind marathon runner on the Dipsea Trail in Mill Valley. That got quite a bit of mention. Then there was also a film called **Here's Looking at You Kid**, which was about a burn victim and his mom. It was a documentary produced by a guy named Andrew Maguire, who actually ended up being on the Mill Valley Film Festival board. He was quite active in trauma prevention. But then he went ahead and made this film, which got quite a lot of good press. So that was exciting, to be able to show those kinds of films, because it was our local guys make good, and they do a good job, and they're talking about important things. We were proud to show that.

SHEILA CADIGAN: The media in that area was more interested in films that had local content?

CATHY MEYER: Oh, they loved the local stuff, sure, because, well, for one thing, they could interview people, but if it's a local story it will always get more interest. You can get more TV stations to cover stories if they have a local angle.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Were the Golden Gate Awards around then?

CATHY MEYER: Apparently they were, according to this, but I don't remember too much about them.
(LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, awards would draw in more local stuff and have a showcase for it.

CATHY MEYER: Right, sure. Another one, as I'm looking at the program book, this film by Lino Brocka called **Manila in the Claws of Neon** was quite violent and raw and just really brought the house down, because people hadn't seen anything like this before. It was this kind of social look at the lives of people in Manila. There weren't many Philippine films that were shown around here; this was one of the first, I think. I probably will be corrected. But I remember it was one of those electric moments where

people were going wild when they saw this film, because they'd never seen anything like it. That was exciting.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Was Tom Luddy's emphasis as programmer on international things?

CATHY MEYER: There was a lot of collaboration. **Bye Bye Brazil** was another one. It was a Carlos Diegues film. It was one of his first, if not the first, to gain popularity in this country. Brazilian cinema was making its way here early then, and again, the crowds just loved it. So those are the moments you live for in international film festivals. I think people would tend to, then, go to theaters to see more films that they had never heard of before. That doesn't happen so much now. That's another tangent I'm not going to get off on. But it was really exciting to see people come to see something that they had never seen before and just be completely swept up in it.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, it was discovering these national cinemas in countries they weren't aware of.

CATHY MEYER: It was seeing the way the world works in other parts of the world.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And the artistic sensibilities.

CATHY MEYER: Right, and just having so many students there. Now, I'm sorry to sound like an old lady, but they have to go see the latest **Dumb and Dumber** movie or something now, and there's just not that sense of adventure like there was.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well in '80, '81, there was still an Iron Curtain, and I think a lot of the board or programmers at that time were trying to bring in films from East Germany, from Poland—

CATHY MEYER: From China. It was pretty risky, some of these things.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Any stories that come to mind about filmmakers coming in from those places?

CATHY MEYER: I'm trying to remember.

SHEILA CADIGAN: From China, from East Germany, from where there might be consequences in their home countries then, but there was a valiant effort. I mean, that's coming up in other interviews. Laura Thielen talks about that a lot. It was very exciting for her.

CATHY MEYER: Oh, good. You got to talk to her. Yes, she was great. That was right after me.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Yes. And I guess Peter Scarlet was the programmer with her.

CATHY MEYER: I worked with Peter at Mill Valley. He was there then. So there was a lot of crossover.

SHEILA CADIGAN: They would go to places like Cuba. They would have film festivals there, but it was sort of a tortured process. Some of their prized possessions that they would come back with were from places that were under communist rule still, and breaking out filmmakers who have these subtext messages in sort of regular films that were allowed to be made.

CATHY MEYER: Right. Well I mean, that's what the Philippine film was for me. It wasn't a communist country, obviously, but the poverty and the struggle that these people were going through, and to see it on this huge screen in front of a thousand people who had never seen anything like that before, it was really exciting and opened a lot of eyes. And that's what a festival is supposed to do.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you think these film festivals are instruments for social change ultimately?

CATHY MEYER: Oh, they could be. I don't know what happens afterwards. I think you learn a lot if you go, if you're willing to take a chance on things that you might never have heard of.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well frankly, I got into foreign cinema by going to the Balboa, when I lived about a block away from it. It was a great deal to go in the morning. It was like five bucks, and you could watch four movies in a row—you were cheating the system—so I would go in for the one movie that I

wanted to see, but I'd sit through the rest of them and discover this foreign cinema that I never would have known about. Otherwise, my tastes were very strongly American, culturally.

CATHY MEYER: Well, that's the fun thing about Telluride. Telluride is the one festival where nobody knows what's going to be shown until they get there. They take a leap of faith. It's not an easy place to get to. And they just know that the programming will be good and they'll find out about things they never heard of before. What else? Giulietta Masina was honored that year, and that was fun. I just loved her.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Why?

CATHY MEYER: Well, she was known as Fellini's wife, but she was the star of **La Strada** and **The White Sheik** and **Juliette of the Spirits** and **Nights of Cabiria**; some of my favorite films. So in my tortured Italian, I tried to talk to her. I probably insulted her because I had no idea what I was talking about. But she was very gracious. She didn't speak very much English as I remember, but she was just charming to everybody. The press can be a pretty rowdy bunch, and they were clearly all in love with her, and it was a nice press conference. Sometimes these things attract the riff-raff who aren't really even writing, and the less important they are, the more important they think they are. So people who are the hardworking journalists, who are there earning a living and writing are fine; it's these other people that try to sneak in for free. But they were all kind of cowed by the fact that Giulietta Masina was there, and they were all on their best behavior. And Kurosawa was there.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Tell me about him. He was very influential on the Bay Area filmmaking community, on Coppola.

CATHY MEYER: And George Lucas, all those guys. They modeled some of their work on his, and they also helped to bring in some of his work when they got a little bit more successful and they were able to present some of his work.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And there was a Kurosawa Award, right?

CATHY MEYER: Yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Was that in place when he was there, or was it after?

CATHY MEYER: I think that must have been later. And just a little sidebar, a funny note. For **The Seven Samurai**, when my husband's company was producing the reissue of that, [frequent Kurosawa star] Toshiro Mifune came to town for that. And he would only ride in our car because we had a Japanese car. He didn't want some big limo. He wanted to ride in our Honda.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you drove him around?

CATHY MEYER: I didn't. Gary did.

SHEILA CADIGAN: What was Kurosawa like?

CATHY MEYER: Interesting. His translator was Audie Bock. Do you know who she is? She actually became famous several years ago because she ran for State Senate. But she was Kurosawa's official translator. So that's another little sidebar there.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Audie Bock. I don't remember what happened to her.

CATHY MEYER: She was a distributor of Japanese films, I think, or something like that. Again, you'll have to check greater minds than mine to remember what she was doing. And at some point she decided she could run for State Senate, and she jumped into a void that was ripe for the taking, and she won.

SHEILA CADIGAN: That's right.

CATHY MEYER: Yup. So that was the end of her Japanese film career, I think.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So going back to Kurosawa—

CATHY MEYER: Well, another one of those nights onstage, where people were so thrilled to be in the same room with him, and I wish I had specific details for you, but it's just those moments, where it's just electric and people are screaming and yelling and cheering, and they loved the film so much. Albert did the interview. Of course Audie was onstage to translate. It's always hard when you have an interview that's being translated at the same time, because you don't have that kind of quick back and forth. But people were so willing to hang on every word; they were just thrilled to be there. Albert had so many good questions to ask because he knew so much about everything, all of Kurosawa's films. I wish I had more details for you.

SHEILA CADIGAN: But he was there for **The Seven Samurai**?

CATHY MEYER: No, this was for **Kagemusha**. The **Seven Samurai** reissue came a little bit later. And who else? Charles Bronson didn't make it; just as well. Michel Legrand was a personal frustration of mine. I was convinced that people would be so interested in coming to a tribute of his because his music was so popular. I could not get any interest in that program. Just miscalculation on my part. I think I even had a full-page article in the Pink Section about him, just a lot of publicity, and people weren't interested.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So nobody came to the film?

CATHY MEYER: Not many, not many.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Was there an interview with him afterwards?

CATHY MEYER: There was an interview. He was perfectly charming and all that. So the crowd that was there was very happy to be there and very appreciative. It was also very exciting because this was the beginning of what we knew of the New Zealand film industry.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So it was this rediscovered national cinema, which you see a lot of now.

CATHY MEYER: Right. Victor Nunez as well, he showed this film called **Gal Young 'Un**, and he was a young American film director in the beginnings of his career. It's always fun to see that, and to see people pulling for him. People really liked the film. There's just that kind of collection of people who are there because they really want to be there. They're, in a sense, really proud of this young guy for having made this film. And he was lovely and charming onstage and had interesting things to talk about. Those kinds of moments are the essence of film festivals for me because you don't see these people outside of those kinds of places often. Everybody's there because they want to be there, because they are interested, rather than somebody told them to come. They made the choice to come. And when it turns out to be a huge success, and they're discovering a new talent, those moments are really electric.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So you and Gary probably have seen a lot of people you knew as young filmmakers mature over the years.

CATHY MEYER: Yes. Did anyone tell you the Spike Lee story?

SHEILA CADIGAN: No.

CATHY MEYER: Oh, that's a good one.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Bring it on.

CATHY MEYER: That's when, whenever **She's Gotta Have It** came out, '85 or '86 or something. And it was one of his first films. Not many people had ever heard of him. The place was packed. Halfway through the film, there's a blowout; the whole place goes dark. So at first there was all the running around that you do when you're trying to get the film back on screen. I believe it was my husband who finally suggested to somebody, "Spike's got a great personality. Just bring him out onstage, have him talk." So they brought out flashlights, and he just sat in the dark with a flashlight on and answered questions as best he could from the crowd in the dark. It was just as much fun as watching the film.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Did they ever show the film?

CATHY MEYER: I think they finally got it back up on screen. It was probably a good hour later. He held that crowd for a good hour.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Yes, he's a very entertaining person.

CATHY MEYER: Oh, yes. And that was another one of those nights of discovering somebody you never heard of before, and wow, they're just great!

SHEILA CADIGAN: He just did this documentary about—

CATHY MEYER: About Katrina, which was an incredible achievement. It's sort of come around. It's almost as though you're discovering him again. It's a whole new chapter.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Or this new direction he's gone off into.

CATHY MEYER: Yes.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Anybody else you can think of like that?

CATHY MEYER: Oh, **The Day After Trinity**, another local filmmaker, Jon Else. It's all about the Bomb. That was amazing. In a sense it was like the Al Gore film is right now, where people are just sitting there going, "Oh my God, I had no idea!" It was a very, very strong film.

SHEILA CADIGAN: That was, I think, when **The Day After** was airing on television.

CATHY MEYER: Then also, this film **Poto and Cabengo**, about these twins who invented their own language. And now there have been other films that have been touching on that kind of topic, but I think that was one of the first. It was fascinating. And I totally forgot that Jackie Chan was there. I think people here didn't know who he was yet.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well he seems to be kind of big now.

CATHY MEYER: I'm trying to remember when **Stop Making Sense** was shown. The Talking Heads film. It was different from any other music film that had come along up to that point. It was shown at the Castro at midnight, and it was just 1,500 people standing up on their seats, dancing. What a scene! This was also a good education for me, because there were some good local musicians that were performing. I went on to work for the Festival of the Lake over here in Oakland, which had a huge international music component to it, so it was good that I already knew some of these musicians from the Film Festival. One of my most glamorous moments came as a result of my volunteers trying to take care of me. But I had no volunteers in the beginning. There was a volunteer coordinator; there was a whole committee of them, I guess. And it was their job, obviously, to staff the Festival with all the hundreds of volunteers that are so crucial to making something like this work, because there's really only a handful of paid staff. I walked into the press room on the first day, surrounded by boxes and stuff everywhere, and said, "Okay, so who are my volunteers?" Well it turns out they had forgotten to get any volunteers for the press. I had no help. So, some frantic calls were quickly made over to the Pacific Film Archive, and they made some phone calls, and voila! Some really fabulous volunteers showed up either later that day or the next morning. And one of them is a very, very close friend of mine now, Leslie Donaldson, who was a producer at Channel 2. But at one point, several people decided that I needed to be taken out for some pizza, since I hadn't eaten in days, probably. I just remember sitting at that pizza place on Chestnut Street, not far from the Palace of Fine Arts, sitting there eating pizza one minute; and the next minute, I was apparently sleeping in the pizza! I just remember keeling forward, and there I was, asleep in the pizza. And that's the glamorous life of a film publicist at a film festival. (LAUGHS)

SHEILA CADIGAN: And we were talking about how you really can only work like that when you're a certain age.

CATHY MEYER: You really can. I don't see how people do it now. All of these projects, whether it's the Mill Valley Film Festival or San Francisco, or even some of the other events that I used to do, you're just working these insane hours. You never eat well at all. I remember another day in the press room at the Film Festival, it took me an entire afternoon to get through one burrito, which of course was by the time it had been sitting there for several hours. That was the level of nutrition. I was pregnant with my daughter when I was working Mill Valley, so I was commuting from Oakland to Mill Valley every day,

in the summer heat, and working out of this un-air conditioned office in Mill Valley, where the highlight was, in the early days, a group of volunteer women that would put on these parties, and they'd have to test out the food. So every day they'd come in and say, "Shall we try this chocolate fudge cake or that one?" I think that's why my daughter has a sweet tooth now, because you have no sense of eating any decent meals for weeks at a time.

SHEILA CADIGAN: We were going to look at the 2001 lineup to see if anything pops out at you.

CATHY MEYER: **Tre Fatelli** was there, with Francesco Rosi. **She Dances Alone**, that was an interesting film. That was directed by a guy named Robert Dornhelm, who was there. Oh, I guess Jeannette Etheridge was in it, which I forgot about.

SHEILA CADIGAN: That was about Nijinski's daughter?

CATHY MEYER: Right. And Nijinski's daughter was there. She was as much of a character as you imagine that she would be.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So I assume there was a big party.

CATHY MEYER: There was a big party. I don't remember a thing about it, except that there was a big party. (LAUGHS) I'm sorry; I'm hopeless with this. Oh, this was also the years when all the films were coming out of Eastern Europe. So this film **Short Cut** by Jiri Menzel; he was hilarious. His English was just good enough so that everything he said, people loved him. And it was a very funny film. He did **Closely Watched Trains** and some other things, **Capricious Summer**, that people loved. Of course, I don't remember what he was talking about, but I remember this was one of the most charming guys around. We had a press conference with him, and people were just eating out of his hand because he was such a lovely guy. And there were all these filmmakers emerging. Ralph Arlyck is back around again. He won the Golden Gate Award that year. **Street Music** was, I don't remember if the director, Jenny Bowen, was local, but a lot of the people were. So again, the press loved everybody involved in that. Ed Bogas did the music, and he's since gone on to do a lot of music for independent films and animated films and stuff. This must have been the year I couldn't actually ever go see any of the films. I was

going to say, being a publicist for a film festival is a great job for someone who doesn't have any interest in seeing movies, because I tried and tried. I would go to press screenings; I was continually working to the point where I thought, "Well I've missed half an hour now; I can't go in and see it. I'll see it at the Festival." Then I tried to go see it at the Festival. I would hunker down in my seat in the dark and someone would find me and drag me out. So it was very frustrating if you actually wanted to see any movies. **That Sinking Feeling**, Bill Forsyth's screenplay and direction. Bill Forsyth was *the* Scottish filmmaker at the time. And he made these absolutely charming films that made everyone want to hop on the next plane to Scotland. And **That Sinking Feeling** was literally about bathroom sinks; they were leading players in this film. It was, again, one of those only-at-a-film-festival moments, when people were just besotted with love for this guy and his film, cheering and screaming. And it was such a funny film. There are stories about this film, but I can't remember what they are. You should ask somebody who was around at the time.

SHEILA CADIGAN: **Soldier Girls?**

CATHY MEYER: **Soldier Girls**. Well, Nick Broomfield is an interesting guy. It's pathetic; I can't remember anything.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, you were working. You didn't get to see anything. You were running around putting press kits down and returning phone calls.

CATHY MEYER: And just working, and just going for the next one, and setting up the next press conference, and making the phone calls for the next thing going on. **They All Laughed**, Peter Bogdanovich's film, not that great. (LAUGHS) It was shown at the Castro, and had a great cast. Colleen Camp was in it, who was hilarious, and the supermodel Patti Hansen. And Ben Gazzarra was in it. Audrey Hepburn was in it. We were all pulling for it, and he thought it was better than it was, so that was a little bit awkward. I remember at the Castro, they always had these receptions upstairs in the mezzanine, and it was pretty packed. It was one of those uneasy things where he was still pretty famous and in the height of his career, and people really wanted to like the film, and it wasn't so great. So there's always that kind of uncomfortable moment when somebody famous comes to town and he's made a lot of better films.

SHEILA CADIGAN: That would have been right after **Star '80**, where that porn star was killed, the girlfriend.

CATHY MEYER: Right. So it was kind of an uncomfortable era.

SHEILA CADIGAN: It was a bad year for him.

CATHY MEYER: Bad year, yes. That was good: **Imagine the Sound**; jazz film. Aren't I giving you so much information? Dolores Del Rio, now there's a star. People were pretty excited about her. Do you know who Dolores Del Rio is? She was a famous star of the Mexican cinema who then became a star of American cinema. She was quite the spitfire, the typical American look at a Mexican movie star. And she was very lovely. She comported herself like a true queen of the cinema. There were enough fans there that remembered her whole career, and they were so happy to be around her

SHEILA CADIGAN: The Australian cinema, was there some special showcase on that?

CATHY MEYER: Yes. They were showing mostly shorts, actually.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Because that has certainly come into its own.

CATHY MEYER: It was just the beginning there, yes. They had several programs. It's interesting to look back through this and see who we now know about, because that's of course when our dear friend Mel Gibson was just starting out. But again, I don't remember very much at all about this.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Okay. We were going to maybe wrap up with some of your impressions of the board members that were very influential during the years you were there. I mean, you were saying that Gary knew George Gund.

CATHY MEYER: It's all sort of blending together, all these people. It's not a big town, so people in this industry all tend to know each other. And Gary was at United Artists Theatres and then starting up

Landmark Theatres, so I'm sure that's how he met George. George would distribute some of these obscure Eastern European films and bring them into town. And Mel Novikoff knew him. I'm sure people will talk about Mel at some length.

SHEILA CADIGAN: But you were describing George as very generous.

CATHY MEYER: George was just always generous. I mean, he was always there. And I don't quite know how to explain that, except to say some people are benefactors and you feel like they're just doing it for the wrong reasons, or they want to be perceived as social butterflies or get their names on this and that. And you never got that sense with George. It was always truly because he loved the films. And I think that's probably the same that it is today.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And he had an interest in bringing in cinemas from behind the Iron Curtain.

CATHY MEYER: Yes, Eastern European cinema.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And Russian?

CATHY MEYER: I can't remember if it was Russian, but I know some of the Eastern European.

SHEILA CADIGAN: So he and Jeannette Etheridge were very close, I think, maybe because they had that tie. She began on the board around the same time you were working there.

CATHY MEYER: Yes, but we really had very little interaction, if any, with the board. We probably met them at parties or something like that, but they were never in the office. The board was over there, and the worker bees were putting on the Festival.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well Jeannette said she socialized a lot more with the staff than she did with the other board, and she felt more hands on.

CATHY MEYER: Well I didn't really know her then as Jeannette. I mean, probably Patricia spent some time with her.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Okay. And then Saul Zaentz?

CATHY MEYER: I'm actually surprised to see this letter that you showed me, because I just don't remember Saul being involved at all. But again, we were doing the work, and it was another stratum of people that were on the board and out there talking to the community and things, because we were just doing the work of putting on the festival. Albert was probably one of the best bridges to both those worlds, because he was truly gifted at interviewing and he had a wealth of knowledge about cinema, but he was also the soul of charm and could talk to absolutely anybody about anything. My memory of Albert was always showing up in the morning in the office with a big pink box. And you knew something bad for you was in it. And he was only too happy to bring it in every day.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Do you have any more thoughts about the Festival and your role? We're going to wrap up pretty soon. Your husband is still very involved in bringing in films?

CATHY MEYER: Well, yes. That's his world. At a certain point I just left that whole world. And the only festival I go to now—I hardly ever even go to San Francisco because my whole life is predicated on traffic, so if there's not an immediate parking place and a free trip across the bridge with no traffic, I've become very cranky about that kind of stuff. So it's pretty limited. I mean, I would love to just go. And now, I suppose, with both kids out of the house, it might be easier to do that kind of thing and have fewer obligations in that way. But it's very tough to go. And now I understand why it's hard to get audiences, because everything seems to be much harder to do. Parking is hard. Traffic is hard. The prices are high. You really have to trust the programmers, which I think people do. I mean, I think people are pretty happy, especially with Graham Leggatt. I think he's just going to do a great job of turning this Festival around and making it really what it should be again. I think he's a pretty talented guy.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Well, one of the reasons why they wanted to do this oral history project is because it is the oldest one in North America, and all the other ones are probably going to follow the same

growing pains and same patterns and funding challenges and efforts to bring the community in and keep the event from being elitist, and follow whatever the independent cinema is doing all over the world. So they wanted to take stock at fifty years. And you were there at the halfway mark.

CATHY MEYER: Right. And I think the whole issue of not making it elitist, it's always a struggle. It's a struggle no matter what kind of organization you're in, because some of those people are the people that pay the bills; but on the other hand, that's not who you're necessarily doing it for. So there's always that struggle of, what films are you going to show? Are you going to show the ones that are going to get the most press, or are you going to show the true discoveries that wouldn't be seen anywhere else? And I think probably San Francisco has always struck a pretty good balance between the two. Yes, you have to have a certain amount of glitz; that's just the nature of the game.

SHEILA CADIGAN: Something that's going to bring in celebrities.

CATHY MEYER: And something that's going to get people writing about it, I mean, as pathetic as that is. I think in my history of promoting anything to do with film, where it all came home to me was, I did a publicity tour with the dancing raisins. Don't ask. I got more press on that than anything I have ever done. I mean, it was shortly after calling one of the TV stations, and I thought it was very exciting to say, "Jeanne Moreau is in town," and they said, "Who's he?" But the dancing raisins were definitely popular. Everybody wanted those dancing raisins on their show, and the animator that made them. So there you go. That's always the struggle. And it continues to this day. There's less and less press coverage of things that are outside the mainstream.

SHEILA CADIGAN: But now with the Internet opening up things like blogging and viral video—

CATHY MEYER: Yes. I mean, it's everywhere, but there's not any critical mass right now, so that you have to work hard to—

SHEILA CADIGAN: Pack in a theater.

CATHY MEYER: Because you have so many sources, and maybe you might bring in one person from this source and one person from that source, but that doesn't pay the bills. And still and all, unfortunately I have to say that if it doesn't get covered in the **Chronicle**, people don't know about it.

SHEILA CADIGAN: And you were saying your period was also the advent of these entertainment shows.

CATHY MEYER: Right. **Entertainment Tonight** started up then. Gary and Leonard Maltin have known each other since they were fourteen years old, I think. And when he joined that show, and they were going to come up here and cover the Film Festival, people just didn't even understand the concept of what this show would be and why it would be at all interesting to have them cover events. Well it's still there after all these years, miraculously, and it spawned a dozen other shows just like it.