

Q&A: “Bomb Girls” Executive Producer Janis Lundman on being a woman in the world of film and television



Above: Lundman at an advance screening of “Bomb Girls – Season 1” in Ottawa at the Canadian War Museum on December 6, 2011. From left, Executive Producer, Director and Co-Creator, Adrienne Mitchell, Executive Producer Janis Lundman, and actresses Charlotte Hegele, Anastasia Phillips and Ali Liebert.

Photo credit: Back Alley Film Productions Ltd.

Fine Arts graduate Janis Lundman (BFA '78) has produced provocative Canadian film and television for nearly three decades. Alongside business partner Adrienne Mitchell, Lundman has co-owned the award-winning production company Back Alley Film Productions Ltd. for 23 years. Since 1989, the company has produced feature length documentaries like *Talk 16*, and dramatic television series “Bliss”, “Drop the Beat”, “Straight Up” and “Durham County”, which has garnered eight Gemini Awards and 24 Gemini Award nominations.

The company's latest production "Bomb Girls", a dramatic series that focus on the lives of women during the Second World War, is currently nominated for seven Canadian Screen Awards. Lundman also received a Genie Award in 1997 for Best Documentary Short for *Unveiled: The Mother/Daughter Relationship*.

Q: Over the past three decades Back Alley Films has created, produced and financed award-winning film and television. What is the secret to your success?

I'm very curious about the world around me, about people, politics, religion, art and music. I'm always trying to understand what makes the world tick, and what makes people tick. Also if something interests me or grabs my attention I try to learn more about it. That's how I form different ideas and content. I follow that instinct.

It's not about trolling the oceans for what I think broadcasters and distributors want, and just throwing things at the wall and seeing what sticks, which is what a lot of producers and companies do. I'm a lot more selective and I just follow what interests me and what I care about.



Janis Lundman, executive producer and co-owner of Back Alley Film Productions Ltd.
Photo credit: Back Alley Film Productions Ltd.

Q: How has your time at York influenced your career path?

I think that the best thing about York, and the most important, was that I was given the opportunity to explore the creative aspects of filmmaking and how that related to me, personally. It taught me how to use this medium to reach other people, and to express ideas that I had politically and personally. So it was a tremendous learning experience, not only in terms of the technical and theoretical aspects of film and filmmaking, but

also it taught me how to collaborate with different people, and how to work within a team, which was valuable because film and television is a very collaborative industry.

York gave me the initial push that I needed to follow my own creative voice, and provided me with a theoretical and practical foundation to start my career.

Q: Was there one specific class or professor that helped influence you to become a producer?

The class that had the most influence on me, although I wasn't aware of it at the time, was my Russian film class, taught by Jay Leyda. Jay was an *avant-garde* filmmaker. He was a film historian well known for his work on Soviet and Chinese cinema, and he actually worked with Sergei Eisenstein, who is still referenced today by people like Spielberg and Coppola. And there I was with this professor who actually worked with Eisenstein! We watched films from the 1920s, which was a sort of golden age for Soviet film. As I watched these films I learned about editing, how to tell a story, and how to express political or religious ideas through film.

It also made me a much more visual person. It made me rely less on dialogue and more on the visual, and influenced how I sometimes edit film.



Lundman on location for "Durham County". From left, Script Supervisor France Lachapelle, Director of Photography Eric Cayla and Janis Lundman.

Photo credit: Back Alley Film Productions Ltd.

Q: Many of your productions have strong female characters and a focus on the feminine. What is it like being a woman in your industry?

I think it's not as difficult as it used to be. When I first came out of York there really wasn't a very big industry. Now it's a \$5 billion industry in this country, and there are so many women involved in it. A lot of the broadcast executives are often women. You

have women directors, vice-presidents, and crew members. There are women in all of these roles, but I guess there are not as many as I'd like to see. There aren't a lot of women who own their own companies, and although there are broadcast executives who are women, often it's men at the very top.

It is still very difficult because I think, like all jobs, you get into this thing where you might want to have a family, or you may want to have a relationship, or you want to focus on something else, but what support does the industry give you to do that? The reality is that it doesn't give you a lot of support. So if you decide to take a couple of years off to take care of an elderly parent or have a child, any of those roles that are often given to women to do, it becomes very difficult to drop out of what you're doing in the industry and then come back again. So it's a challenge. I think that in our company we try to support women and try to give them those opportunities because I think it's important.



Lundman and business partner Adrienne Mitchell on the set of "Bomb Girls".
Photo credit: Back Alley Film Productions Ltd.

Q: Are there other things that the industry can do to make it more accommodating for women?

Yes. I think that just being open to hiring someone, to giving a woman her first break is important. There is this perception that a man will be given an opportunity before a woman, because they think that he will be able to do it better and can be relied on more. There is this perception that a woman is too emotional, and that she will fall apart or not follow through. It's very subtle, but I've been in meetings where I've felt that, and have heard those kinds of things. In terms of what I do, and what my company does, we try to work against that.

I don't think it's just our industry. I was reading an article recently in the newspaper about banks, and I was looking through and the first thing that I noticed was that

everyone was Caucasian, and most of them were men. And I'm thinking, well it's not just film and this industry. It's endemic. It's all over, but we are getting there. It's better than it was when I graduated from York.

Q: Your most current production, “Bomb Girls”, focuses on the lives of women during the Second World War. Can you tell us a bit more about the series?

When we started to work on “Bomb Girls” I didn't know anything about the work women did in the munitions factories. My mother worked in a factory during the war, but she was not making bombs. I loved all the history and the research that I did. It was the first time women were permitted to go out and get work. They had paychecks for the first time. They could wear pants. They could smoke. They could go to movie theatres on their own. They started experiencing all of this independence.

When the war ended women went back home, back to the kitchen. They got married and had kids. But I think they instilled, on some level, into their daughters and granddaughters this sense of independence, and then about 20 to 25 years later you have the women's rights movement. That came out of their daughters.

Q: This past October you came back to York to the Department of Film's Norman Jewison series to speak about “Bomb Girls” and your career. It has been a few years since you left York, why is it important for you to remain connected to this community?

I think it's very important for me to reach out to younger people who want to get into this industry because I'm not going to be here forever. I think it's a great industry. If you want this kind of lifestyle, and if you want to be creative in the medium of film and television, then it's fantastic. I think it's important that someone like me, who's been doing this for a long-time, goes out and meets younger people and talks to them and answers any questions that they may have.

Q: What advice would you give someone who wants to work in film and television?

My advice is to do an internship or a co-op placement. I think that that's a really wonderful way to find out whether you'll like this industry or not. You'll spend maybe four to six months in an environment that will teach you about the types of people that are in the environment, the types of things that you'd be doing, the kinds of problems that arise, and the kinds of challenges that you'll face. I think part of the challenge with our industry is that it has this glamour attached to it, and the reality is that it's a lot of hard work. It can be a lot of paper work and it can be boring. It can also be stressful. For it to work, you have to love what you're doing.