

## A Shameless Film

"It's very much a buddy movie. I call it the Fellowship of the Chair," says filmmaker Bonnie Sherr Klein, laughing.

**Michael D. Reid**

Times Colonist

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Activist Bonnie Sherr Klein has never been one to embrace stereotypes and -- 19 years after her career was interrupted by a massive, life-threatening stroke at age 46 -- she isn't about to start now.

In *Shameless: The ART of Disability*, her first film since *Speaking Our Peace* (1985), the legendary Canadian filmmaker does the opposite.

An intimate, humorous and subtly subversive portrait of five artists who happen to be disabled, Klein's collaborative 70-minute documentary dispels stereotypes, redefines our perception of disability and explores disability art.

After a long and painful journey, Klein -- best known for her groundbreaking 1981 anti-pornography documentary *Not a Love Story* -- is more than qualified to make an inspiring film about persons with disabilities who are transformed by art.

Life as she knew it came to a crushing halt in 1987 when the native Montrealer, a pioneer with the National Film Board's Studio D Women's Unit, suffered a severe stroke that left her paralyzed, unable to talk and requiring brain surgery. Years of rehabilitation later, she still has physical limitations but has regained some mobility using canes, a walker and a scooter chair.

"I thought, 'This is it.' I thought I'd never make a film again," recalls Klein, who travelled here from her home in Roberts Creek to attend two screenings -- one tonight as part of Movie Monday, another Tuesday as the Open Cinema feature.

"I lost my identity as a filmmaker," says Klein, looking back. "I was furious and depressed for a long time."

Not that making a film was uppermost in her thoughts as she reeled from the effects of the stroke.

Nor did she appreciate well-meaning people who said her experiences would be ideal subject matter for a film.

"I'd get pissed. I'd say, 'This is my life -- not raw material for a film.'"

A lot has changed for the outspoken artist who once thrived on the crazy, high-stress movie business.



CREDIT: Gerry Kahrmann, CanWest News Service

Bonnie Sherr Klein, a filmmaker whose movie is showing in Victoria this week, had a debilitating stroke 16 years ago. *Shameless* is her comeback film.

"Everything has slowed down -- the opposite to a life in film," says Klein, whose new NFB documentary is a follow-up to her book *Slow Dance: A Story of Stroke, Love and Disability*.

She says "everything seemed more impossible" when she suffered brain damage that affected her "executive function" -- the ability to organize, classify and remember: "All the things that making art is about."

With the support of her family -- including her husband, Michael, and her daughter, author Naomi Klein -- Klein learned to enjoy a more laid-back lifestyle.

It's one of the more surprising -- and enriching -- results of her life-changing stroke.

"Of all the people I know who are disabled, there are only a few who would have their lives be different," says Klein. "It's staggering for most people to learn. If you asked me if I would undo my life after the stroke, I wouldn't."

Achieving a sense of liberation inspired Klein to collaborate on the film with her fellow artists.

What she didn't want to make was a patronizing triumph-over-tragedy film that put disabled persons on a pedestal.

"My purpose was to address that. It was because of my own experience and with my friends who contradict the stereotype. I know it from both sides. I was in a unique position, plus having access to this [filmmaking] tool. I had gone through all the ignorance and fears."

*Shameless*, which Klein says is "really about different ways of being human," profiles humorist David Roche; Catherine Frazee, a writer, scholar and activist; and two artists who will attend the Victoria screenings -- multi-media artist Persimmon Blackbridge; and Geoff McMurchy, a quadriplegic dancer and director of the international kickstART festival of disability art.

Opening with a movie night Klein organizes for her friends that features *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *Psycho* and other films that stereotype disabled persons, *Shameless* reflects on their odysseys, leading to reunion at a kickstART Festival.

In exploring the relationship between disability and creativity, Klein -- who had to work at a slower pace and learn about working with digital film technology -- focuses on the camaraderie of the group.

She says she hoped the film would convey that living with disability is an art in itself.

"There are no rules. We make it up as we go along. We have to be resilient," says Klein, 65.

"It's very much a buddy movie. I call it the Fellowship of the Chair," she laughs, noting the most frequent criticism she has heard is that the film's subjects are all high-functioning. "And four of the five are in relationships, which is so opposite."

Although Klein is profiled, she was uncomfortable directing herself, so friend Anne Wheeler agreed to handle those scenes.

Describing *Shameless* as "a picture of the possible," Klein says she's gratified by positive feedback from disabled viewers.

"The idea was it's our turn to tell our own story," says Klein, whose producer Tracey Friesen was shocked to learn that of the 83 disability-themed films she found while searching the archives, not one was made by a person with a disability.

So determined were the film's collaborators to "talk back to stereotypes of fear" that some alternate titles were tossed about. They included *Piss on Pity* and *Not a Crip Story* -- a title Klein felt was too self-referential.

While making *Shameless* was fulfilling and therapeutic, albeit draining, Klein says her priorities have changed.

"I don't think I'm interested in making any more films, but I am interested in mentoring."

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SEE IT

What: *Shameless: The ART of Disability*

Where and when: Movie Monday, Eric Martin Pavillion, 1900 Block of Fort Street, tonight at 6:30 p.m.

Open Cinema, Hermann's Jazz Club, 753 View St., Tuesday at 7 p.m. (doors, 5:30 p.m.)

Cost: MM, donations appreciated/OC, \$5-\$10, sliding scale donation; dinner, drinks available

Info: [www.islandnet.com/mm](http://www.islandnet.com/mm) and [www.opencinema.ca](http://www.opencinema.ca)

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