

INDIECOLLECT

IndieCollect's Tribute to Judy Irola [1944-2021] Celebrates the Achievement of Women Filmmakers



Judy Irola on the set of *Northern Lights*. Photo by John Hanson

Judy Irola's death from Covid-19 on February 20, 2021, was a great shock to all who knew and admired her. She was one of a small group of women cinematographers who forced open doors in a field dominated and monopolized by men. She was the third woman admitted to the ASC (American Society of Cinematographers) and the only woman member of Cine Manifest, a radical film collective founded in San Francisco in 1972. She also broke ground later as the first woman to chair the cinematography department at USC's film school.

The daughter of a Basque sheep farming family, Judy described her upbringing as wild and free. Working for the Peace Corps in Niger reinforced her pluck and perseverance. A job as a secretary at KQED when she returned seemed like a dead-end, so she maneuvered to get herself transferred to the camera department. After that, there was no stopping her!

I met Judy on Cine Manifest's first movie, *Over Under Sideways Down* (1977). When I rented her back house years later we had great fun reminiscing about the old days over good food and good wine. She was then working on her own film, *Cine Manifest*, in which she skewered her male peers but also avowed how much she loved them, especially because "I could usually get my way." Judy was a perfect fit for the collective because, like her compadres Gene Corr, Peter Gessner, John Hanson, Steve Lighthill, Rob Nilsson, and Steve Wax, she was dedicated to making movies that matter.

Judy was the cinematographer for *Northern Lights*, Hanson and Nilsson's movie about the North Dakota Non-Partisan League that won the Camera d'Or at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival. She also helped raise the funds and shot part of *The Wobblies*, directed by Deborah Shaffer & Stewart Bird, and shot *Free Voice of Labor* for Steve Fischler and Joel Sucher (which IndieCollect recently restored). For Lee Grant, she shot *The Wilmar 8*, about women striking for better pay at a bank in a tiny Minnesota town. She was the DP for *Working Girls* (1986), Lizzie Borden's landmark movie that won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance, and the same year shot *Dead End Kids* for Joanne Akalaitis. In 1993, she won the Sundance Cinematography Award for *An Ambush of Ghosts*, by Everett Lewis. A fierce feminist, she traveled to Copenhagen to join the all-woman crew that made *Take It Like a Man, Ma'am!*



Judy Irola on set of *Take It Like A Man, Ma'am!*

About 100 people celebrated Judy Irola at a Zoom memorial on March 14, hosted by Steve Wax & Kate Amend, for which Nels Bangerter cut this short tribute film (below) that you will enjoy. The women DPs and operators who joined us – Chris Burrill, Joan Churchill, Ellen Kuras, Sarah Levy, Madelyn Most, Emiko Omori, Nancy Schreiber, Sandi Sissel – spoke about what a trailblazer Judy was and how much she had done to help them get started or get into the union. The memorial was not only a glorious salute to Judy but also a touching reminder that our indie film community is composed of kindred spirits who support each other.



Tributes to Judy



Photo: Douglas Kirkland

Joan Churchill wrote a wonderful tribute to Judy in IDA's magazine, *Documentary*, where she notes that Judy's "mission in life was to foster and support women to pursue careers behind the camera." And we remember Judy's fine work with some [great reviews](#) of *Working Girls*.

[Read the Joan Churchill tribute](#)

New Releases



Photo: Mario Van Peebles

IndieCollect's restoration of *The Story of a Three Day Pass* by Melvin Van Peebles will be released by Janus Films at the Film Forum in May. Meanwhile, Mario Van Peebles has just announced that he is spearheading a Broadway revival of his father's controversial play, *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, which was way ahead of its time.

[Read about Melvin's play](#)

In the Pipeline



To celebrate Earth Day, April 22, we aim to complete *Possum Living* by Nancy Schreiber, who recently found the original 16mm negative for her cool documentary about eco-subversive Dolly Freed. Nancy is a renowned DP, earning recent plaudits for the TV series *P-Valley*.

[More about the amazing Dolly Freed](#)

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association funded the restorations of *The Story of a Three Day Pass* and *Possum Living*.



Judy Irola shooting *The Faithful Revolution: Vatican II*. Photo by Cherie Mayman

A Note from Sandra Schulberg...

Judy Irola was an extraordinary woman with a feisty wit and terrific style. It's fitting that we celebrate her life and career during Women's History Month. I just wish she were going to be around to see all the films by women directors that IndieCollect is restoring. She was rooting for us and her gung-ho spirit will be much missed as we bring these amazing films to new audiences – soon!

Films by women were important to Judy. You may wish to make a donation in her name to our [Jane Fonda Fund for Women Directors](#).

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