

History retrieved Awakening to the power of the union

by Faith Jones

Sara Diamond's *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* presents a funny, disturbing picture of British Columbia women's labour during World War II. It's premiere screening on May 8th at Women in Focus marked the closing of MayWorks, a week-long festival of labour and the arts.

The video intersperses interviews with women who were labour activists during the war years with news footage, photographs and songs of the era. Surveying key war industries and traditional female job ghettos, the video focuses on the labour activities of women, many of whom were realising for the first time the potential power of the labour movement to benefit them.

Unlike the messages put forward by the propaganda of the time, and subsequently by historians, these women did not join the work force out of a sense of patriotic duty, but rather out of economic necessity. And as the interviews make clear, the women saw a clear connection between their paid and unpaid labour. One woman tells the story of using her hard-earned paycheck from a war industry to buy herself a new kitchen. Although her male co-workers teased her about being "bourgeois," she maintained that she deserved that kitchen because she had worked so hard raising her kids. (At this point, audience members murmured "right on.")

Tracked down through union records and pensioners clubs, the women in this video are fascinating and charismatic members of

a remarkable group. Yet for all their humour, these women's stories pose serious questions for contemporary feminists.

Women who were involved in the labour movement of the war years were concerned with a number of issues that feminists have tackled in the past twenty years, such as sexual harassment, pay equity and piece work. What is disturbing is that we experience these women's stories as distant history, not as the familiar tales of our mothers and grandmothers.

Audience members at the screening of *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* expressed surprise at the parallels between the interviewees' causes and our own. This is a sense of removal we do not feel of men's wartime experiences (which are part of our contemporary consciousness), or even

of men's labour past (which is at least reflected in labour's present). How is it that the struggles of living women have such an aura of historical isolation?

"Bad as we think things are now," said Diamond, "the late 40's for activist women were total hell." The wartime era of groundbreaking gains was followed by a complete dismantling of women's labour agenda. A forced amnesia made that agenda almost inaccessible.

The feminist movement should certainly be aware that we are partly to blame for losing sight of these women's achievements. In our historical analysis, we tend towards a narrow definition of 'feminist activism.' In fact, we have bought into the mainstream notion that feminism vanished between the 1920's and the late 1960's.

Diamond's video is a reminder that women have been active throughout the century, and their focus has sometimes been on labour. This too is feminism.

Reminiscent of Agit-Prop

Keeping the Home Fires Burning suffers from some artistic flaws and logical gaps. For those not familiar with the issue of piece work, for example, the few minutes devoted to it is inadequate and confusing. Here perhaps a narrator might be helpful in fleshing out a subject only touched on by the documentary footage and the interviewees.

However, a narrator would undermine Diamond's attempt to avoid the common documentary flaw of lending to its contents an aura of unassailable truth. This represents a problem of the oral historian: what do you do when your interview subjects don't say what you want them to say?

Diamond's answer to this problem was to have dramatisations of the women's anecdotes which can amplify their statements. Unfortunately, the dramatisations in *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* are too repetitive of the anecdotes and don't significantly increase our understanding or enjoyment of them. They are also acted by amateurs, a fact which doesn't bother Diamond since she feels the vignettes are reminiscent of the agit-prop worker's theatre movement of the 1930's.

However, the dramatisations do serve a useful purpose. In an historical video in which colour film indicates the present and black & white film indicates the past, the dramatisations break the rules and present us with historical events in colour, reminding us that to the interview subjects these events were contemporary.

Diamond hopes the video will be used as an educational tool, especially in high schools, and to this end she attempted to keep the humour the women find in their stories at the forefront. In juxtaposing the women's anecdotes against footage from the war period, she hopes to make accessible to high school students the notions of media propaganda and the ideology of female heroism.

Diamond is currently working on another video which will examine the post-war era, and a third which will focus on the Depression.

Keeping the Home Fires Burning (49 minutes) is available, in Vancouver, from *Women in Focus* (878-2250), *Video In* (688-1398), and the *Women's Labour History Project*. In Toronto, contact V Tape.



Photo from 'Keeping the Home Fires Burning'

Art Against Racism

Fusing political and cultural work

by Maura Volante

"I just decided to start it one day, got to work immediately and that's it," said Claudine Pommier, explaining the origins of an upcoming multimedia, multi-venue event, "Fear of Others/La peur de l'autre: Art Against Racism." Since February Pommier has pulled together over 70 artists whose paintings, drawings, photography, sculpture, film and installations will appear at five different Vancouver locations during the month of June.

"I'd been dealing with the subject for awhile in my paintings," said Pommier, "but 98 percent of the artists did work especially for the show, which was a very interesting process."

Although not a "women's show" with a feminist focus, women make up well over 50 percent of the artists represented, and many have shown a strong, feminist approach in previous works.

One segment of the population that gets special attention from the project is children. While most venues offer a jumble of various works, the Centre culturel francophone is devoted specifically to art by children. "I have something like 200 drawings by children in the school system," said Pommier.

Another important aspect of the show for young people (as well as adults) is the bilingual catalogue with contributions from writers of poetry and prose, as well as photographs of the visual pieces. There will also

be a handbook for teachers accompanying the catalogue.

Aside from the visual arts, the five openings will feature performances of various types. At the La Quena opening, there will be a poetry reading including Chrystos, the dynamic Native poet from Seattle who has

impressed many of us in previous visits.

The Carnegie Centre opening spotlights a folk group, Freshwater. The performance for the afternoon opening at the Centre culturel francophone is not yet finalized, but it will doubtless be child-oriented in deference to the young exhibitors. The largest segment of the show is at the Firehall Theatre, opening with the Zaniacs, a music duo. And at the Grunt Gallery, the opening features Baba Yaga, a quartet which performs classical, jazz and original works.

Following hot on the heels of "At the Laundromat" in March and "MayWorks" last month, "Fear of Others" is part of a growing trend towards the synthesis of political and cultural work in Vancouver. It promises to be a challenging, thought-provoking presentation of how artists perceive the problem of racism, and how art can contribute to solutions.

Following is a list of venues with opening and closing dates:

- La Quena, 1111 Commercial Drive: opens June 10, 8 pm, closes June 24.
- Carnegie Centre, 401 Main St.: opens June 11, 7:30 pm, closes July 2.
- Centre culturel francophone, 795 W. 18th Ave.: opens June 12, 3 pm, closes July 4.
- Firehall Arts Centre, 280 Cordova: opens June 13, 8 pm, closes June 25.
- Grunt Gallery, 209 E. 6th Ave.: opens June 14, 8 pm, closes June 25.



poster by Bill Baker