

# MAKING AND DISTRIBUTING NANA, MOM AND ME

BY PATRICIA ERENS

The trickle of independent women filmmakers who began directing in the 1950s has now become a steady stream as new women enter the field each year. No longer novices in a man's world, these women are not content to make two or three minute black and white experiments. Many women have now become professionals, earning their living at directing and producing their own works. As these women take their place in a competitive market, their products have grown in length and ambition. However, despite the greater opportunities and wider recognition, most of the current women filmmakers are still committed to presenting the other half of the picture—the women's point of view—which seldom finds expression in the Hollywood commercial film.

Typical of this new breed, Amalie R. Rothschild, has been directing films since 1968. Her latest work, *NANA, MOM, AND ME* (1974) shown in the Whitney Museum's New American Filmmaker Series has created great interest and won praise from *Village Voice* critic Molly Haskell. With three major works now behind her, Rothschild emerges as one of the important voices for the women filmmakers of the seventies.

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Three principles in *Nana, Mom and Me*. Amalie Rothschild filmmaker.

*NANA, MOM, AND ME* is a film about three generations of women—Amalie, her mother, and her mother's mother. Begun as a family film to document the life of her grandmother, thus preserving a part of the family history, the work evolved into an exploration of the relationships between the generations. Through questions and conversations, old photographs and home movies, each woman is confronted with the problem of her own identity and the role she has played in her society. For Nana such questions are annoying and so she chooses to ignore their implications. For Amalie

the film becomes a vehicle of discovery as she serves the dual role of participant and recorder.

The main focus of the film centers on the middle generation—Amalie's mother. Of the three, her position is the most complex and it is she we come to know the best. Functioning simultaneously as daughter, woman, and mother, Amalie's mother reveals the various struggles which any sensitive woman must undergo to fulfill society's expectations and to chart out an acceptable self-identity. As an artist in her own right, she exemplifies some of the difficulties faced by women of the previous

generations.

NANA, MOM, AND ME grows out of the American tradition of the personal cinema going back to the early experiments of Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington, and to some degree their mentor, Maya Deren. Jonas Mekas commented on this tendency in 1962 when he stated, "The new artist, by directing his ear inward, is beginning to catch bits of man's true vision." However, whereas the films of the forties were poetic—highly symbolic and imbued with Freudian overtones, the more contemporary autobiographical films are closer to essays—less abstract, more natural, spontaneous, and leisurely. Rothschild's film is also part of the growing body of women's works which constitute a special category—the autobiographical documentary. Unlike pseudo-autobiographies such as Jim McBride's *David Holtzman's Diary* and Stanton Kaye's *Brandy in the Wilderness*, the women's films expose the true identity of their makers. Like their predecessors, films such as *Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill), *Women and Children at Large* (Freude Bartlett), *Home Movie* (Jan Oxenberg) and *Not So Young Now As Then* (Lianne Brandon) explore the problems of creation and interpersonal relationships. But in addition, these works also are efforts to come to terms with being female. By exploring the world of the filmmaker, these films reveal the challenges of being a woman and being an artist.

What is unique about NANA, MOM, AND ME is the recognition by Rothschild of the importance of continuity. Without sacrificing her sensitivity to the individuality of each member of her family, she concentrates on similarities as well as difference, emphasizing the possibilities of relationships, not separation. Though the work reflects a woman who is still probing unresolved feelings, the film seems pervaded with the sense of sharing rather than the opportunity of taking. As such it is a welcome relief from the anguish and isolation of the women's world as depicted in the commercial cinema (especially in the works of Ingmar Bergman). At the end,

NANA, MOM, AND ME seems to have reached deeper into the fertile terrain of mother/daughter relationships than any film of recent times.

Born in Baltimore in 1945, Rothschild initially trained as a photographer and graphic designer. Hoping for a career as a painter like her mother, she earned a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1967. After spending some time in Rome on an honors program, she returned to the U.S. and entered New York University's Institute of Film and Television. While there her script about a woman artist living in New York was selected for production. This became the film *Woo Who? May Wilson*. Working with university equipment and a student crew, the film was completed at a cost of \$2,600. \$2,000 was her own money which went for finishing costs. Done commercially, *Woo Who? May Wilson* would have required \$25,000 or \$30,000.

Following *Woo Who? May Wilson*, Rothschild produced a documentary on abortion entitled *It Happens to Us* (1971). Produced with a grant from five different foundations, this film explores the feelings and fears of women who have had abortions, either before or after the passage of the New York State law. Intended as an informational work, the film goes further and touches on the personal lives of these women.

Her last project before the two year preparation of NANA, MOM, AND ME, was a filmed performance of *It's All Right To Be a Woman Theater* made for The Fifty-First State, a New York Channel 13 television program.

P.E. What was the impetus to make NANA, MOM, AND ME?

A.R. I kind of blundered into it in a way. I don't know what I really had in mind when I began it. It was much more frantic. Four years ago at 84 Nana had an operation; she didn't think she was going to survive it. When she did it took her almost a year to readjust to the fact that she hadn't died. She changed tremendously that year; suddenly she became an old woman. For the first time the full force of mortality really

hit me that she was going to die. I suddenly realized that I had taken for granted that she would always be there. Suddenly I wanted to capture whatever I could of her for my children, so there'd be some record of this woman who has been very important to me and whom I love. I also began to think about having a child of my own and what the implications of a family would mean in terms of my life.

P.E. How did you obtain money to make the film?

A.R. Well, actually I had been awarded an American Film Institute grant for \$10,000 to do a film on women in mental health. To do the project I needed an additional \$40,000. Since AFI only gave me ninety days to raise the money, I was up against impossible odds. I sent sixteen proposals and applications to sixteen foundations and got sixteen no's. It was during the Christmas/New Year holidays and most of the foundations said no without even looking at the project because it didn't fit into their time schedules. At that point I decided to go ahead with the family film which I had started on my own. The final budget ran to \$17,000 which I supplied out of earnings from my previous films.

P.E. Compared to your earlier work, *Woo Who? May Wilson* which is very structured, and *It Happens to Us*, which is organized to deliver a message, NANA is very open, more concerned with the process of discovery.

A.R. I tried very deliberately to cut the film true to the process of filming. When Nana wouldn't let me make a film about her, I turned to my mother to find information. It was then that I discovered my mother as a daughter so to speak. I began to have some insight into her growth and development. Like looking at the home movies and noticing for the first time that after I was born she no longer wore her hair the way her mother preferred, but let it be straight and natural, which meant being herself.

A lot of the credit really goes to Bronwen Sennish who edited the film with me. She had a lot of very good insights and input on the final shape that the film took. I really felt I couldn't have cut it alone. I was much

too close to the material. I needed someone outside who was relatively objective.

**P.E.** Molly Haskell commented in her review of *NANA* that your mother is like the filler in a sandwich—the one who holds it all together. She made that remark as a response to your mother's expressed concern about being "sandwiched between two generations." It seems to me that Haskell's comment is very apt. I came away from the film with tremendous regard and admiration for your mother.

**A.R.** There are a lot of things unresolved in our relationship, especially since our lives are still going on. But I think that the film is pretty clear that my mother was the most important influence in my life as far as my becoming a professional person. She nurtured me in an environment where that could happen.

As I was making the film I began to realize that the film I really wanted to make was about her, because she's been my role model—really important and our friendship has been important. Of course it would never be without rough edges and conflicts and difficulties. I try to express that in the scene in her studio before it cuts to the woods. I have it in there because it's real and I think it's also an issue that's not confronted head on usually because of all the confused tensions and conflicts between mothers and daughters—and fathers and sons for that matter.

**P.E.** It's ironic that the scene in the forest which usually connotes tranquility in nature is the scene you chose to discuss the question of conflict and rivalry.

**A.R.** Well we had to deal with it, especially because there's such obvious symbolism in the fact that our names are the same. Actually we worked this problem through about four or five years ago, but I put it in the film because I felt it was really important. She wanted me to change my name or use the Roman numeral II. I did use the numeral II for a little while. We did a book together on her art work. I did all the photographs, graphics and layouts. I signed my name Amalie Rothschild II in the book. But after a while I found it really pretentious and uncomfortable

and aristocratic. I just couldn't stand it. So I began using the middle initial "R", which she doesn't use.

**P.E.** Which leads me to my next question. How much material in *NANA* was reenacted?

**A.R.** Nothing was reenacted. I knew my feelings about certain things. If mom and I hadn't dealt with our feelings about my name I don't think I could have dealt with it in the film. But I think that's different than staging scenes. A lot of the conversations were taped during the two years it took to make the film. I have between thirty and forty hours of tapes, some of which I used as voice over in scenes like the walk in the forest.

**P.E.** Did you initially plan to work on the film over such an extended period of time or did it just work out that way? Obviously during a two year period you're going to get a lot of growth and change.

**A.R.** No, it happened for a variety of reasons, but I think it all worked to the benefit of the film. I really think it's a better film than I set out to make which was very limited and specific. But I kept discovering new things and realizing there were things we hadn't gotten to. And the process went on and on—even while I was cutting the film. There was still more information that I wanted and I kept going down to Baltimore with a tape recorder to do some more work.

**P.E.** I think one of the real virtues of the film is some of the unresolved moments. There are as many questions as answers. You didn't wrap it all up nicely, it's one of the reasons I enjoyed seeing it over again. I keep responding to new aspects. There's a nice balance between the spontaneity and honesty of some of the scenes and a feeling of *deja vu*. I particularly like the scene where you and your sister are listening to the tapes. Its very complex and convoluted. In that scene you become both audience and participant. We watch you reacting to Nana's comments. It's very exciting.

**A.R.** That scene was filmed fairly late in the game. Bronwen and I spent a month trying to figure how to use that tape. We considered voice over with pictures of Nana. We did it with a black screen. We tried everything to

make that tape work so that you'd listen to it. Finally I realized that the only way to have people listen to a tape was to make a scene where people are listening. It was all done on the spur of the moment when my sister Adrien came to New York. She had heard it once about a year before and didn't really remember it too well. So the reactions are really fresh.

**P.E.** One of the recurring characteristics of your films is the use of photographic stills and animated sequences. Its especially strong in *Woo Who? May Wilson*. They're all beautifully executed. Are you responsible for those sections?

**A.R.** Yes. I've done all the animation, graphic layouts and titles on all my films. I suppose its my design training coming through.

**P.E.** I understand that on *It's All Right to Be a Woman* you used an all women crew. Do you make a policy of working only with women?

**A.R.** I do whenever I can. I worked with a mixed crew on *Woo Who? May Wilson* which was assigned at NYU, but *It Happens to Us* had an entire women's crew except for the sound. The final recording, sound effects and final mix were done by a man who has worked on all my films—the same man, my husband. For *NANA* the crew consisted of myself, my husband, and my sister part of the time. We kept the crew this way because the family wouldn't let anyone else around. Finally Dan Drasin came and did some of the shooting since I had to be in it. The only reason it wasn't a woman was because none of the four women whom I've worked with and whose capabilities I trust were available. I prefer to work with women whenever possible. I'll always bend over backwards to find women to fill positions. It's only when I can't find available women that I consider hiring a man.

**P.E.** You don't mind being classified as a woman filmmaker?

**A.R.** I know a lot of women react with hostility to that. They don't want to be lumped into a bag or classified because I think a lot also has to do with politics. A lot of women who are opposed to that name are women who are fighting to make it in a 'man's world' in a different

kind of way from the way I feel I'm working at it. It doesn't bother me one way or the other because I don't see any tangible negative aspects.

**P.E.** But all your films deal with women and women's problems.

**A.R.** I'm committed to that. I feel that's what I know the most about. I guess all my films really come very completely from the state of my own life at the time I get involved with a project. I made *It Happens to Us* at the time I had an abortion. When you create something that really clicks, it works because it's connected to something in your own experience—something you really intimately know about has somehow fired the work. My experience in the world is that of a woman and that's what I know. Also in terms of personal politics, I feel that that's where I can

use whatever it is that I can do as one individual to help bring about changing attitudes and social change. That's the area I have to work in.

**P.E.** Have you experienced much discrimination against women in the field? At NYU?

**A.R.** It's difficult to answer. When I was at NYU I wasn't aware of the kinds of conflicts I was having because I was a woman. I always ascribed those feelings and difficulties to the fact that something was wrong with me. I wasn't good enough. I didn't see it in terms of there being resistance against me because I was a woman. So I was being called abrasive or aggressive. But finally you have to believe in yourself and be persistent. When I was cutting *Woo Who? May Wilson* I worked with a male editor for two months

trying to get what I wanted, but the film didn't move. It just didn't work. Finally I got the guts to say, "Listen, go away. This is my film and I'm going to cut it the way I want."

**P.E.** How does this attitude relate to the creation of Anomaly Films and New Day Films?

**A.R.** I'm very much committed to working outside the system because it's the only way I feel I do have the freedom to do what I do and be in control. It's hard and it means I'm making films on low budgets and scraping along. But I manage. At least I'm somehow managing to make the films I want to make. I formed Anomaly Films in 1971. It's sort of a pun on Amalie. *It Happens to Us* was its first production.

**P.E.** What is the relationship between Anomaly Films and New



Members of New Day Films: top row l-r: Amalie Rothschild, Julia Reichert, Jim Klein, Joyce Chopra, Claudia Weill. Bottom row: Liane Brandon.

Day Films?

**A.R.** New Day Films is a distribution cooperative devoted to films about women. It was started by Liane Brandon, Julia Reichert and James Klein, and myself in 1971. We began with three films—Lianne's *Anything You Want to Be*, Julia and Jim's *Growing Up Female* and my film *It Happens to Us*. Since then we distribute nine films—all of them deal with women. In a way it's an experiment.

**P.E.** Why did you feel it necessary to form your own distribution company?

**A.R.** Well, given the realities of the system it was the only way to be sure that our films would get seen and that we'd make enough profit to continue being filmmakers. Many distributors are reluctant to handle the kinds of films we make. Films which challenge socially acceptable norms are not especially the big money makers and distributors are primarily concerned with profits. Although it would be naive to say we don't care about the profits, I do think that our first priorities are to education and change.

Therefore it was necessary to handle our films ourselves. Most filmmakers are completely cut off from participation in the distributing process. Once the film is finished they have little say in what happens to it.

We felt our work didn't end with completing the film, but that distribution was an integral part of the film-making work.

**P.E.** How does the cooperative work?

**A.R.** We each do our own production and raise our own funds. Since there is no middle man, all of the rental fees minus the small costs of handling, go back to the creators. We charge fees that are fair so that people who want to see our works can rent them at reasonable rates.

**P.E.** So far what is your experience after three years of operation?

**A.R.** Well, I think I can safely speak for all of us by saying our experiment has been a success. We've reached the audience we wanted. Over 200 libraries have purchased our films and we rent to over 1,000 schools. What's more important, however is we have proven there is an alternative to the traditional means of distribution. It's an important lesson for other filmmakers.

**P.E.** Now that NANA is in distribution, what are your plans for the future?

**A.R.** I don't know about my next project. I'm negotiating to make a film about Margaret Mead, but nothing's definite. At the moment I don't have a penny. It's odd. The minute you have a little bit of a

name in this business, people automatically assume that you're successful and that you go from one film to the next. It couldn't be further from the truth. I finish a film and I'm back at ground zero. I have absolutely no idea where I'm going to get the money to do another film if I don't get a grant.

**P.E.** Do you have any desire to make a non-documentary—a feature fiction?

**A.R.** I think I do. I don't really know. I'm trying to sort some of that out now. I'm not sure how much of that is just sort of pressure rubbed off from the fact that those are the films that people take seriously. I'm working on a short fiction film now. That is I have a script that I want to write and see if that is a direction I can move in. I think with NANA, MOM, AND ME I pushed to the limit how personal one can get in documentary form without really intruding on privacy. I think that perhaps the only way to go further is through fiction where you're not dealing with real people's lives and real tensions. There are people already who object to NANA on the basis that I'm really violating my grandmother.

**P.E.** Any other plans?

**A.R.** No. I'm hoping the Mead project will come through, but plans are still up in the air. I guess in this business that's par for the course.

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# THE FEMINIST ART JOURNAL

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## EDITORIAL: RAINER AND ROTHSCHILD, AN OVERVIEW

BY CINDY NEMSER

In this issue we have two fascinating interviews—one with Yvonne Rainer, dancer, choreographer and filmmaker and one with Amalie R. Rothschild filmmaker. Both women use autobiography and personal experience as the source of their art and both have made extraordinarily skillful and moving films. Yet what a chasm exists between the directly communicated content and format of Rothschild's *Nana, Mom and Me* and the convoluted, enigmatic suggestive confusion of Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . .*

The former is culled from life itself using the raw material of everyday speech as content to shape and mold itself spontaneously into the form it chooses to take. Indeed the form is so much an outgrowth of the content that we tend to forget about it altogether and to respond on a totally experiential level as the film progresses. It is only after the experience is over that we realize how subtle and skillful the structuring has been and how much it added to our pleasure and awareness. An essential segment of human life has been rediscovered in the probing exploration of the relationships of three generations of women and the emotional impact of these interconnections has, for the moment, taken the "artiness" out of the art.

In the case of the latter film *A Film About a Woman Who . . .*, we have the reverse situation. Form takes precedence over content, self consciousness over spontaneity. The artist desperately seeks to experience her feelings and herself but she puts barriers of form and style between herself and any kind of open expression. In her interview she tells Lucy Lippard "I have this basic belief that I couldn't tell a convincing story if I tried, so again it's a matter of having little fragments of stories in a kind of wishful frame for a story in which I can put all kinds of authentic moments in a totally

inauthentic frame." Of course confusion is the result of Rainer's inability to reconcile her authentic feelings with her intellectualizations about the validity of inauthenticity. In order to create what she had convinced herself to be a truly "modern" art, Rainer is working against her own valid self expression and her essential dissatisfaction and alienation come through very clearly. Her inability to release herself is manifested in her dislocation of words and images, the banality of much of her imagery and particularly in her choice of underlying theme: the inability of men and women to communicate and to love one another.

But despite the rigidity of her modernism and her insistence that "the most scabrous confessional soap opera kind of verbiage or experience can be transmitted through highly rigorous formal means," despite fragmentation, disjunction and disinclination to "work back to a more direct relationship to subject matter," so apparent in her "inauthentic frames," the intensity of the artist's feeling, her anger and fear, come through in those "authentic fragments." They come through via Babbette Mangolte's stark grainy images and in the rare moments of human warmth which occasionally flare up between the protagonists. They also come through in the artist's uncanny selection of background music that authenticates a frequently confused sequence of images.

Rainer is indeed the epitome of the alienated artist tormenting herself with her own intellectual pretensions, unable to get back to her living source and as a result producing endless zombie-like avatars of her ongoing unresolved state. However, she is not dead to her feelings, as are so many of her fellow modernists—she has enough awareness to persist in the struggle to break through to herself. It is the fierceness

and complexity of this struggle that gives Rainer's film its depth and richness.

Rothschild has, of course, moved past this stage of confusion. She has pulled the barriers down, thrown away the old rules of what is acceptably "avant garde" and is delving wholeheartedly into herself by investigating and validating her own roots. From the start this film came out of the artist's personal needs. Of her grandmother, the Nana of the film she stated, "I wanted to capture whatever I could of her for my children, so there'd be some record of this woman who has been very important to me and whom I love. I also began to think about having a child of my own and what the implications of a family would mean in terms of my life."

Rothschild's presentation may not be as intricate or as many leveled as Rainer's but it records the beginnings of a new level of awareness rather than documenting the death throes of an old ongoing struggle. *Nana, Mom and Me* is a huge reservoir of source material from which Rothschild and many others, including myself, have and will continue to draw insights and inspiration. Her film gives validation to an area of our lives we, as women, have been brought up to believe is trivial and unimportant. Along with *Antonio Brico*, *Nana, Mom and Me* is a great aesthetic and feminist statement.

While it is unfair to pit two such gifted filmmakers as Yvonne Rainer and Amalie R. Rothschild against each other, I, coming from my own feelings, can only say that Rothschild opens up a new, exciting and uncharted path; Rainer, on the other hand, works out a larger territory and does it with elegance and artistry but, unfortunately, it is a territory in which we all have lingered all too long.

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