

Q & A

Alexis

Krasilovsky



Photo Credit: Amos White V, The Artists Forum, New York City.

Alexis Krasilovsky is the writer/director of the global feature *Women Behind the Camera*, winner of four 'Best Documentary' awards and based on her book of the same title. She studied at Yale University and is now Professor Emerita at California State University, Northridge.

In a nutshell, what is your book *Shooting Women* all about?

Shooting Women explores the lives of camerawomen working in features, TV news and documentaries around the world, revealing their courage and skill in what has long been seen as a male field.

What are you working on?

Tuki the Tiger, a children's animated feature co-written with Shameem Akhtar. Set against a backdrop of poachers, a cyclone and the Bangladesh Liberation War, it's about a young Bengal tiger who has to learn to fight to reunite her family.

Can you share some female filmmakers who inspire you?

Vera Chytilova's 1966 film *Daisies* inspired me to want to pursue portraying female friendship from a female point of view, utilizing female aesthetics. I also learned tenacity from Chytilova as despite continuing to be met by controversy and censorship, she persevered and made two more films in Czechoslovakia. Another role model was Agnès Varda, who taught me a lot about truth-telling and *mise-en-scène* and helped inspire me to make a second global documentary.

Greta Gerwig inspires so many of us to push forward for financial success, despite the fact that the overall number of women directors remains proportionately low in a still male-dominated field. Creatively, I'm also inspired by the work of Julia Reichert, Hana Makhmalbaf, Mira Nair, Celine Song, Margarethe von Trotta and many more.

What was the last film you watched?

I have just finished watching Kinuyo Tanaka's 1953 film, *Love Letter* on the Criterion Channel. I was eager to watch this Japanese director's film as I loved her acting in Mizoguchi's masterpiece, *Life of Oharu*. I wasn't disappointed. Tanaka directed with great sensitivity. The female love interest's impassioned speech that calls out for compassion towards the fallen women of the Second World War reminds me of a similarly activist speech on behalf of humiliated women that is performed by Lucille Ball in Dorothy Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance*.

What scholar or school of thought has had the greatest influence on your own thinking and research?

Etheridge Knight. He had been discovered in prison by Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks, and was known as the 'prison poet'. I was a token white member of the Free People's Poetry Workshop that Etheridge Knight led at Bill's Twilight Lounge in Memphis — Etheridge treated all of us like equals in our quest for honest self-expression. He was a great scholar of life, as well as a great poet.

Do you have a favourite fictional character?

Right now, it's Ana Fried, the protagonist of my recently completed novel, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman*.

What's your favourite world city and why?

Traveling in Ahmedabad, the home of Gandhi's ashram, I soon found myself introduced to the camerawomen of Video SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association), a group which helped rural Indian villages survive an earthquake that killed 20,000, by picking up cameras and influencing policy makers. That's when I realized that the *Shooting Women* project was bigger than just me, and that not only was I making a documentary, but serving as a facilitator across boundaries for women — and filmmakers — to connect globally. (I also love the rose and mango flavoured lassis that are served for breakfast in Ahmedabad!)

What five guests (dead or alive) would attend your dream dinner party?

The ghosts of English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife, the novelist Mary Shelley and the Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi. Living guests would include Christina Sibus (because I'd want this dinner party to result in the new feature project of my dreams), and my son, a budding filmmaker in his own right.

Who would play you in a biopic of your life?

Anya Taylor-Joy (*The Queen's Gambit*) and Mikey Madison (*Anora*)

We really value this excellent project and we are glad to have it among our list of most important backlist titles. Why do you think the book is still so pertinent in 2024?

Part of the reason that *Shooting Women* is so relevant again now after so many years is that this 2015 book provides a historical context for the issue of safety on the set. This issue came to light so glaringly and tragically when Director of Photography Halyna Hutchins was killed at age 42 on 21 October 2021, when a prop gun was discharged by actor Alec Baldwin on the set of *Rust*, which she was filming.

Stories of camerawomen whose lives were threatened by civil uprisings, unfriendly police, hostile politicians, deadly snipers, unsafe sets, and more, and who filmed wars in Vietnam, the Middle East, the Balkans, China, the former USSR and Afghanistan, are included in *Shooting Women: Behind the Camera, Around the World* which Harriet Margolis, Julia Stein and I wrote in the aftermath of my writing and directing of *Shooting Women*.

I felt at the time that the film and book came out that by documenting the dangers and threats that cinematographers have often faced, these problems would be addressed and that their work — and our world — would become much safer. But when will activists' calls for fewer guns and filmmakers' calls for safety on the set be taken seriously enough that this horrible kind of event won't happen again? More fundamentally, why must guns — real, prop or animated — be depicted so frequently in American media? Are there so few storylines that don't revolve around gun violence to interest producers and audiences world-wide?

Through *Shooting Women*, we have always meant to honour the women who shoot films, television productions, commercials, documentaries and art films, often against the odds. We have never meant shooting at women. This terrible tragedy could have been prevented with stronger safety measures on set. Halyna Hutchins, RIP, our screening is dedicated to you.