

Video tells story of incredible friendship

by Jennifer Ditchburn

There's something bordering on mystical about friendships. It's hard to pinpoint why some people become important in our lives and

others fade into the woodwork.

But Montreal filmmaker Ronit Bezalel has managed to capture the essence and magic of a good friendship in her video, *When Shirley Met Florence*.

Shot in familiar locations around Montreal's Plateau area, the video chronicles the incredible relationship of Shirley and Florence, two Jewish women who met 60 years ago as adolescents. Part of what

makes this film so poignant is the fact that the women narrate the story themselves, guiding the audience through a series of anecdotes, conversations, old photographs and music.

Bezalel met Florence Brown through a friend taking a Concordia Jewish Lesbian course. She says she was attracted to the depth of the women's relationship.

"They had something special that I haven't witnessed in many friendships, families or marriages. Their story was a good example of unconditional love."

The video follows Shirley and Florence through both their joys and tribulations. Shirley was a newly arrived Polish immigrant, having lost much of her family in the pogroms. Florence, meanwhile, was struggling to come to terms with her homosexuality, coming out during the 1940's. Through Shirley's marriage to Florence's brother, to the death of Florence's lover Sophie, the story is an inspiration.

The video's appeal comes largely from the personal expression of their relationship. Bezalel spent a year interviewing the two women, visiting their childhood homes, their schools and even cemeteries. All the wonderful quirks and idiosyncrasies of their relationship are exposed, which makes the women seem human and less like the sub-

jects of a documentary.

Bezalel says her very first interview was conducted with the women holding their instruments, the mandolin and the guitar. The two met when Florence heard Shirley playing her mandolin from the street, and began to sing to the melody.

"They were very natural, but also there was a lot of trust between us that was built up over the year. Florence is very articulate, and is very open about being a dyke. She sees the film as part of a greater cause, as a chance to challenge homophobia."

Bezalel, a McGill graduate, has directed a number of other video documentaries, including *Dr. Love Speaks*, about breast cancer, *You Can't Beat It Out of Us*, about police violence against Montreal's lesbian and gay community, and *Tearing the Veil*, exploring the myths and stereotypes surrounding lesbianism. In this her first NFB produced film, Bezalel says she has learned a lot.

"Making this film has taught me a lot of things—about getting a goal and sticking to it, about perseverance."

When Shirley Met Florence is a film with a good share of laughs and tears, and power to renew faith in the good things about life, like friendship.



Shirely and Florence Brown from *When Shirely met Florence*

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