

Movie Mission
By LISA JONES
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A Hollywood filmmaker uses her talents and Buddhist practice to create an organization promoting diversity in the industry.

Film director or social activist? Nanci Rossof was torn between these two seemingly divergent career paths. Then a car accident. Injuries. Deep prayers and the fervent question, "What do I really want to do with my life?"

"I was chanting a lot," Ms. Rossof says, "and it occurred to me in front of the Gohonzon. I told a friend, 'I'm going to create an organization that promotes diversity in the film industry.' My friend said, 'Then that's your mission for world peace!' At the time, I didn't think I was important enough to have a mission for world peace." She laughs, disbelieving.

But now she not only sees the value of her varied talents, interests and experiences, she has integrated them into a vision for making Hollywood more accessible for people who are underrepresented in the filmmaking work force.

Two years ago, Ms. Rossof founded Filmanthropic, a not-for-profit organization that provides both on-the-job training and creative-control opportunities for women, people with disabilities, members of ethnic communities, people over age 40 and people identified by federal government criteria as being economically disadvantaged. The program is open to people who live in the Los Angeles area and is not a training program for actors.

By producing at least one low-budget independent feature film each year, Filmanthropic gives participants the hands-on experience they need to compete in the Hollywood job market.

"This is a difficult business to break into," Ms. Rossof explains. "Because movies cost millions of dollars to make, studios and producers can't afford to take chances when it comes to hiring. Filmanthropic provides a way for participants to show actual proof of their capabilities and earn on-screen credits."

Rossof herself has shown such actual proof. She was co-founder and artistic director of Theatre Aquarius, a leading Canadian regional company, before graduating from the American Film Institute directors program. Her directing credits include *The Adventures of the Black Stallion*, starring Mickey Rooney. She has coordinated educational programs for the Directors' Guild of America and served as an advisor to the Canadian government on the role of women in the film industry. Her work as a writer, producer and director has garnered commendations from the governor of California, the State Assembly and the city of Los Angeles.

Hollywood's response to Filmanthropic has been as gratifying to Ms. Rossof as her past successes, if not more so. "I'm moved by the generosity and spirit of philanthropy in this business," she says, pointing to the office furniture that was donated by Columbia Tristar. The office space, too, was donated — in the aptly named Crossroads of the World Building, beneath the famous Hollywood sign.

Yet despite the positive buzz about Filmanthropic, funding has been hard to find. "We're a grass-roots operation that can't survive on a grass-roots budget," Ms. Rossof says, citing the relatively high costs of filmmaking.

But, as some SGI members say, if what you want is possible, then why do you need the Gohonzon?

"I pray for the success of Filmanthropic," Ms. Rossof says. "So I have to believe that the

funding I need will appear. It's hard to keep going when grants don't come through. But I have to challenge myself to overcome this obstacle. Gandhi said, 'You must become the change you wish to see in the world.' Filmanthropic is based on this kind of faith. My mission is my work, and my work is an expression of my Buddhist practice."

Currently, Ms. Rossov is struggling to get Filmanthropic's first movie, an interracial love story, off the ground. "We're at an important juncture," she says. "We need to begin principal photography this year, absolutely, do or die."

As almost everyone in Hollywood can attest, assembling all the requisite pieces to put a film into production is no small feat. "One of my friends says that making a movie is like playing dominoes with clouds," Ms. Rossov says.

In such circumstances, she finds Nichiren Daishonin's letter "The Eight Winds" to be particularly inspirational.

Ms. Rossov's Buddhist practice has enabled her to remain focused on her larger purpose and maintain a humanistic attitude. "I've learned to resist the urge to slander people who don't support what I'm trying to do," she says. "If a person — whether a studio executive or a grant administrator — doesn't see things my way, I have to work around that. Because of Buddhist practice and study, I know better than to waste time and energy thinking ill of people who 'just don't get it.' I have to keep moving forward.

So far, the people who do get it include actor/director Edward James Olmos and actress/producer Jasmine Guy, both of whom serve on Filmanthropic's board of advisors.

"Many people have a cynical view of Hollywood, that it's a town based on insincere connections," Ms. Rossov says. "But I refuse to buy into that perception. People want to get into the entertainment industry because they believe they have something important to say, something to contribute. I refuse to underestimate the power of another person's dream."

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