

SIX-MONTHLY REPORT

My brief last November was, after consultation, to restructure the organisation - to set up a council of management and a range of advisory/sub groups; to deal with the 87/88 audit and prepare the 88/89 accounts; to sort out, bring up to day and improve the financial records and to share in the general administration of the organisation.

Most of my first month in post was taken up with the audit and brought to light early, the organisation's precarious financial state, revealing a deficit of around £7,000 at 31 March 1988, and very unrealistic projections for 1988-89. An immediate task then was to get a firmer grip on the finances, to re-budget and to at least aim to break even by March 1989. With really tight monitoring - at one point on a monthly basis - and with Jenny's determined sales drive, we more than achieved our aim and moved from insolvency to profit by the end of the year.

At the same time we secured funding from BFI for 1989-90, along with a warning of changes in the following year. Revenue funding is to be phased out in 1990, the precise details and timing being open to some negotiation. We're advised that limited seed funding will be available to assist groups to become 'financially independent' - capital grants for acquisitions, promotional material and so forth - but deficit revenue funding is to cease.

BFI also pressed us to engage in negotiations with Circles over a possible merger and made clear their reluctance to support 2 women's distribution projects beyond 1989/90. We therefore convened meetings with both Circles and other women's media groups, made a bid to GLA for a small feasibility grant, liaised closely with Women's Media Resources and did some research into enforced mergers in other areas of the voluntary sector. All of this took up an enormous amount of time and energy and added to the pressures already there due to past and present understaffing and a backlog of poor financial record-keeping and management.

Added to that, COW's unique development was reflected in its range of ad hoc and 'mysterious' procedures which took a long time to get to grips with. There were days in the office when I felt I'd achieved little more than smooth the ruffles of an irate filmmaker, or potential customers ringing for the umpteenth time to chase up ! The task facing us seemed impossible at times. What had once been a large and energetic group of enthusiasts in COW, was now reduced to two dedicated but demoralised, jaded and overstretched workers, and a couple of stalwart Acting Directors, who provided what moral support they could.

Building an advisory committee and bringing in new energy and experience was clearly a priority, and so after several weeks of discussion on a possible shape for the organisation, and, pooling ideas on women to invite, we eventually decided on a shortlist. Since then we've had several advisory/steering group meetings, elected an Acting Board of six directors (to be in place until an AGM in the Autumn) agreed a personnel sub-group and gathered together a group of women keen to be involved in a viewing sub-committee.

I was particularly concerned to create a structure which offered a range of ways in which women could involve themselves with COW. Given that most of us are heavily committed and not everyone can, or wishes to, attend monthly management committee meetings, it was important to approach the structure with flexibility in mind. The main policy-making body (the advisory committee) is to meet quarterly, the Board of Directors - monthly, and the sub-groups as and when needed. Women can therefore tailor their involvement to their personal interest and circumstances. Obviously the structure will need time to gel, and in the short term it will probably add to the staff workload. By the Autumn however, and with careful nurturing, it should be a cohesive and active management structure able to take Cinema of Women forward into the '90's.

The last few months of my period with COW have been taken up with monthly financial monitoring, discussions around the future promotion of our titles, recruitment and, more recently, full time work on preparing the 1988-89 accounts for audit so that the new Business Administrator has plenty of breathing space when she comes into post. With Jenny's replacement only being part-time and confined to marketing, the business administrator will have sole responsibility for the finances, enquiries, administration, and legal and personal matters. 75% of the liaison with customers and film-makers previously done by Jenny, will now fall to the business administrator, and she will also have to develop a strategy with the directors that will ensure a financial future for COW with decreased public funding.

And, finally, though it's been a hectic six months, it hasn't all been bleakness and hard work. I've enjoyed becoming familiar with the videos we distribute, meeting lots of new and interesting women, and drawing on Jenny's extensive experience of the business. We've had some lively and challenging discussions and I'll leave the organisation with a more solid understanding of the Independent Film and Video sector, and a deepened respect for Cinema of Women.

Jeanne Wilding

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