

SUSAN SHIPTON: AN EXTRAORDINARY PICTURE EDITOR CUTS HER WAY TO CANNES



Slipping into her reserved seat inside a grand theatre at Cannes and soaking up the gorgeous print of *Ararat* playing to a packed audience hugely appreciative of Atom Egoyan's film stands out as picture editor Susan Shipton's most memorable premiere. There have been many. Her editing has punctuated half a dozen galas at the Toronto International Film Festival, and this year she'll be front row and centre at the prestigious opening night gala of *Being Julia*, directed by Istvan Szabo (*Sunshine*). Although she has already sat through the film several times at test screenings, primarily listening for how much space to allow for laughter in the funny period drama, the premiere will be an altogether different experience—exciting, high calibre, and with many friends around her.

While Shipton is a fine director (*Hindsight*, 2000), she is known for helping other directors shine by training her astute eye on their rushes. Her work in Canadian television is highly rewarding and her reputation on Canadian features is outstanding. When undertaking a film, Shipton receives the script in pre-production and continues through to the picture lock. In some cases, she schedules time to consult with the sound designer and attend the mix, as producer Robert Lantos made room for her to do on *Being Julia*. Once she accepts an assignment, it demands incredible focus and creative involvement for the duration, which can last more than a year. It did on *Being Julia*, which took her to Budapest last June for the shoot, through a Toronto picture lock this past May and into sound post over the summer.

When I inquire about an example of her editing to view, she surprises me by recommending *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, directed by David Wellington. It's a three-hour film confessional based on Eugene O'Neill's stage play, and the challenge in the cutting room was having the rare situation of four main characters, all of equal importance. The picture editor is required to choose the emphasis within the

scenes, and in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Wellington provided Shipton with ample coverage. She consciously chose to use masters for some scenes, allowing the actors to shift the audience's attention in those moments rather than having cuts do it. Of course, Wellington's subtle camera moves helped to keep the story alive. Shipton recalls the film being a great opportunity to learn about pace and cutting dialogue scenes, and Wellington was great when it came to collaboration.

Editing also involves making technical selections: finding the right flow and having the cuts appear seamless. Shipton appreciates the editing style of Carol Littleton, mainly for her variety (*E.T.*, *The Big Chill*, *The Accidental Tourist*), and Thelma Schoonmaker, who cuts Scorsese's films. But when it comes to learning about her craft, she feels that it is directors who have taught her the most, pointing out that they tend to direct editors as much as they direct anything else. But that doesn't mean she shrinks from sharing her opinions, even when her thoughts differ from the director's. Shipton remains strong but also realizes it's the director's vision in the end.

Her collaboration with directors begins before a frame of film is shot, especially on features and always with Egoyan, with whom she has become a staple collaborator (*The Adjuster*, *Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Felicia's Journey*, *Ararat*, and his current production, *Where the Truth Lies*). She shares her thoughts to help enhance the script and then attends the entire shoot to absorb all the incremental parts of the picture. Whereas most craftspeople focus solely on their specialty, the director, producer and picture editor look at everything and gauge how all the elements of the story will eventually come together.

She begins assembling dailies during the shoot, and for Egoyan she cuts scenes while he's shooting so that he can calculate the shape of the film as he's working. After the shoot wraps Shipton concentrates on the picture edit, and it is at this stage that she appreciates directors who see the value of trying something different and being open to ideas. It is important to her that directors not just trust her to make the standard choices with the material, but also be willing to head into some of the uncharted territory that the rushes encourage her to explore.

While the editing room is a place of endless possibilities, there can be limiting elements in the sum of the rushes, and the editor must deal with that reality. On the other hand, it is one of the final opportunities to contribute towards what everyone on a film tries their best to do, and for Shipton that is to take whatever is given to her in the rushes and make it better in the cutting room.