

Hillgrove sharing her knowledge of filmmaking Saturday at Sebastopol Center for the Arts

JOHN BECK
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
July 10, 2009



“You want to see how to make dirt sexy” asks film editor Vivien Hillgrove.

Before you can nod, she wakes up the Final Cut Pro program on her Mac, quickly jumps to a sequence in the documentary she’s working on, tentatively titled *Soil*, and hits play.

Opening notes chime in as a tractor shovel bites into a steaming mound of compost. Voices conspire in chants. The lens closes in on the man behind the machine. More shots of dirt, rich, black earth. Drums pound out a primal beat. Dump trucks move in rhythm. More steam. Then eventually a wide shot, revealing mounds upon mounds of earth.

“It’s the music,” she says. “Hear that? Music is the key to most of this.”

She’s in her studio, surrounded by acres of soil and hundreds of herbs from all over the world. In addition to editing well-known films like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or working as dialogue editor on *Blue Velvet*, Hillgrove once ran Mom’s Head Nursery off Todd Road in Santa Rosa. Closed for two years, the herb garden is grown over with blackberry brambles and lush foliage.

Now, she's about to close another chapter. After 41 years in the business, Hillgrove plans to retire next year.

Saturday evening, she'll share a few of the secrets behind "the invisible art" of editing in the presentation "Putting all the Little Bits Together," as part of the ongoing Summer Filmmakers Sampler at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts.

Actually, "retire" might not be the term most people would use to describe her plans. "I really would like to start making my own movies," she says, a goal that goes with her lifelong pursuit of "new challenges."

One of those early challenges lured her into filmmaking in the first place. She was a student at City College of San Francisco, planning to become a psychiatric nurse, when a friend asked if she would "work the sound" on her thesis film project.

"She basically needed a warm body to turn the Nagra (sound recorder) on," she remembers.

Hillgrove parlayed her minimal experience into a job at Studio 16, shooting industrial films and in-house promotions for companies like Wells Fargo in the late '60s.

"It was basically my film school," she says. "It was the best training I could have had because I got to do everything."

Eventually, she started getting work on low-budget films by word of mouth. While editing one of those movies in a studio Francis Ford Coppola owned on Folsom Street in San Francisco, she met director Phil Kaufman, who was working on *The White Dawn* at the time. He later gave her a job cutting source music on *The Right Stuff*, which led to dialogue editing. Around the same time, she worked with Coppola as a sound editor on *One from the Heart*.

Over the next four decades, she worked as dialogue editor perfecting the sound of speech and re-recording dialogue when necessary on *Amadeus*, *Mosquito Coast*, *Backdraft*, *Fletch*, *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, among others.

She holed up in a Los Angeles sound studio with Dennis Hopper to re-record his dialogue for the classic gas-mask scene in *Blue Velvet*. In another scene, when director David Lynch wanted a sentence read in reverse but Laura Dern couldn't fly out to re-record it, Hillgrove came to the rescue by making 10 copies of the sentence and cutting "each word in a different harmonic" so the sentence made sense in pitch and inflection when replayed in a different order.

"That blew his mind," she said. "It took an entire day just to do that."

Along the way there was the occasional bomb, like *Howard the Duck*. Or the time she found herself living in temporary quarters in Los Angeles, editing *Beverly Hills Cop 2*, or 7, "whatever it was."

As a film editor, she worked on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with legendary supervising editor Walter Murch. She also edited *Henry and June* and several other features before focusing primarily on documentaries in the mid-1990s.

“I saw the writing on the wall,” she says. “The films weren’t going to be as good as the ones I had been able to work on. We were getting calls for films where they were hatcheting up women and more violent kinds of stuff.”

Immersing herself in the language and metaphor of documentaries, Hillgrove became much more involved in the storytelling process, working hand in hand with directors like Lourdes Portillo (known for *Senorita extraviada*, which won a Sundance special jury prize), Deborah Koons (*The Future of Food*) and Lisa Denker and Charlotte Lagarde (*Heart of the Sea: Kapolioka’ehukai*). She also co-wrote *First Person Plural* with Deann Borshay Liem.

“I realized there’s so much that needs to be done in terms of documentaries and revealing what’s really going on out there,” Hillgrove says.

After her two latest projects, *Soil* and another film with Borshay Liem tentatively titled *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* are finished, she plans to ease into retirement by donning the director’s cap for a feature film or two.

“I’ve got a lot of ideas that I’ve collected over the years, very eccentric ideas for films that would be a lot of fun to make.”

She admits, “It’s probably not what people think of when they think of retiring. It’s doing something different. It’s refreshing.”

<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/2258472-181/hillgrove-sharing-her-knowledge-of?sba=AAS>