

MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REVIEW

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE **MILL VALLEY FILM FESTIVAL**



HOW IT
BEGAN

FOUR DECADES
OF INNOVATION

HISTORY OF THE
SEQUOIA THEATER

MUSIC AND
THE MOVIES

PROFILES OF
MILL VALLEY
FILMMAKERS

AND
MORE!



Tiffany Shlain on the set of her original series *The Future Starts Here*, 2014.

TIFFANY SHLAIN STORYTELLER

by Megan Vered

a vitally curious blonde woman in a straw hat—lips and nails painted claret red—huddles with her crew, brainstorming about an upcoming film project. Meet Tiffany Shlain, a one-of-a-kind story builder.

Born in 1970, this Mill Valley native dreamed about doing something big and bold in the world. After attending Tam Valley Elementary School, Mill Valley Middle School, and Redwood High, she earned a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies at UC Berkeley, moving on to study business and film production. In addition to founding the Webby Awards, she has made documentaries, which often come with a discussion kit, and has delivered a series of engaging TED talks. Her stories are personal, urgently positive, and weighted with love, taking the documentary genre to a new level. A one-woman call to action, Shlain uses her medium to build interconnection.

In her inspiring 2017 short about gender equality, *50/50*, she pieces together the history of women in power. By tracing the rise of successful women, referred to as “unicorns,” she “takes a story of scarcity and turns it into abundance.” Using photomontage, video clips, quotes, and personal anecdotes, she questions patriarchy, feminism, and human rights, exploring what it will take to achieve true gender equality. Described by others as having a “yes bubble” around her, the theme of abundance pervades her films, whether about gender equality, being Jewish, the science of character, or the history of the Barbie doll. In an email exchange, Tiffany wrote, “I think anything is possible...you can will something into existence. Once you say yes, along with a lot of hard work, a great team of people, and engaging your community, magic will follow.”

She enjoys the roles of director, co-writer, coeditor, and co-producer, and often appears in and narrates her films. She loves the collaborative nature of the medium and has worked with the same team for many years. Among her 80-plus awards and distinctions, she was honored in 2001 by *Newsweek* as one of the “Women Shaping the 21st Century,” and she appears on NPR’s list of “Best Commencement Speeches, Ever.” The U.S. State Department selected her films *Connected*, *Brain Power*, *The Science of Character*, and *The Adaptable Mind* as part of the American Film Showcase, to promote international dialogue and understanding. She was sent to embassies around the world to represent America as an artist, filmmaker, and thought leader.

Tiffany, who describes herself as a cultural Jew, feels a deep connection to her roots. She and her husband, Ken Goldberg (a robotics professor at UC Berkeley, artist, and frequent collaborator), both have family members who died in the Holocaust. She has explored Jewish identity, ideas, and cultural connections in her films *The Tribe* (2005), which she co-wrote with Ken, *The Making of a Mensch* (2015), and *Connected* (2011).

She finds travelling for work inspiring, yet always returns to Mill Valley. “I love it here. It’s my home, my foundation, an incredible place to grow up, raise children, and live a meaningful life.” She credits the Mill Valley of her childhood for being her muse: “In the ’70s it was fertile soil for creativity and alternative thinking, from Old Brown’s Store on Miller Avenue with the smell of the candle shop below, creaky floors, and funky shops, to walks on Mt. Tam, Stinson Beach, and reading at the Mill Valley Public Library.”

As a child she went to the Sequoia Theater every Sunday with her father, who loved the movies. Over Chinese food at Jennie Low’s and ice cream at Baskin Robbins, a discussion of the movie led to a broader discourse about the meaning of life. After her parents’ divorce—“we were one of the first families they tried joint custody on...let’s just say it was a trying experience”—this weekly event became a sacred ritual. “Our discussions of values, morals, relationships, and consequences inspired me to make films that ignite global conversations like Character Day and 50/50 Day.”

When talking about her late father, Leonard Shlain, a surgeon and visionary author who taught her that brains are designed to see connections, she says, “He taught me to think differently, think big, and that the most important thing is family. Even with all of his accomplishments, he would say, ‘if you peel back the layers I am, at the core, a father.’ I feel that, too, as a mother.” Her mother, Carol Lewis Jaffe, who wrote her Ph.D. thesis about the importance of mentors and mothers on successful women, taught her that life is “all about process.” “I think about that often,” Shlain said, “even when you are working towards a goal, enjoy the process all the way through.”

Today, Tiffany Shlain rediscovers old haunts and conjures up new ones with Ken and daughters Odessa and Blooma. She is pleased that “they are being shaped by the same excellent public schools that shaped me.” She and her family have created their own weekly ritual since the death of her father in 2009: “Technology Shabbat.” Every Saturday for 24 hours they unplug all devices, allowing themselves space to unwind and reboot. “We are on our eighth year of doing it and it has been life changing. It gives me balance and perspective to take on what I do the other days.” Her Emmy-nominated AOL Original film series, *The Future Starts Here*, explores this weekly ritual, as well as modern motherhood, tech etiquette, the creative process, robots, and new thinking on thinking. This original series was given a special preview screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival in 2014.

When asked to compress her message into one sentence, Shlain advises, “Be present, be grateful, work on making yourself and your world around you better and do things that have never been done before.”