



COURTESY OF FILMMAKERS

Salon stories: Dianne Griffin and Erica Jordan film both sides of the manicure table in **Painted Nails**.

Griffin and Jordan Getting Nails Done

Michael Fox May 12, 2013

Today's fun fact: San Francisco has more nail salons per capita than any city in the country. Perhaps that won't come as a surprise to the ladies in the crowd, who pay a tad more attention to fashion and grooming than your trusty correspondent. Then again, filmmakers Dianne Griffin and Erica Jordan were caught a bit unawares themselves. "We spent quite a bit of time researching that without coming up with a number," Jordan says. "Then we went to Yelp and what did we find—700?" That puts the number of technicians somewhere north of a thousand, with Vietnamese immigrants comprising the lion's share. Indeed, the central figure in **Painted Nails** is a Vietnamese woman, although the filmmakers will explore "both sides of the manicure table," as Jordan puts it.

Griffin and Jordan visited a whole lot of salons, eventually bringing a translator along, seeking the right woman around whom to structure their documentary. Like so many previous generations of immigrants, who came with hopes and dreams of a better life and were marginalized by their minimal knowledge of English, and by their "foreignness," Vietnamese refugees have struggled to assimilate and to be accepted. It occurs to me, reflecting on my grandparents who came from the Ukraine, that it takes a good long while to feel secure in one's adopted country. Imagine what it must take for a recent immigrant to let a couple of filmmakers document her everyday life.

"We found someone that we thought that we'd like to follow and that would be open and willing to be vulnerable to us," Griffin explains. "We also want to protect our interviewee, because [the salon] her job and this is how her whole family survives. We also want to protect her [because] she's very open, and there are some things we don't think should be revealed."

The filmmakers, who began shooting **Painted Nails** late last year, report that the influx of technicians drove prices down, making it an affordable luxury for many more women. "Why are women going outside and paying for a service that maybe their family would have done for them?" Griffin muses. "My mother would never have gone to a nail salon. It's almost as if they're going to get this emotional need fulfilled. A lot of the women talk about pampering. A lot of these [clients] are working-class women, and they like to look down at their nails and feel feminine."

That reminds me of the bus drivers we've all encountered in San Francisco with beautiful, ultra-long nails that would seem detrimental to controlling and maneuvering a large steering wheel. The filmmakers are compiling on-the-fly, woman-on-the-street interviews, using the flip cameras they carry in their purses, and here's hoping they get the lowdown from a few of MUNI's finest.

"We do nail sightings," Jordan confides with a laugh. "There are so many situations where we get into conversations with women, it's nice to have a little camera." From an aesthetic standpoint, the filmmakers also savor the low resolution. "We kind of like the grittiness of the flips, the in-the-moment feeling," Griffin explains.

The rest of the film will be shot on HD, of course, and one of the filmmakers' challenges will be meshing the different looks and formats. They'll also need to develop the tone of the film, allowing for humor and eye candy—the film is called **Painted Nails**, after all—along with a respect for the lead character's hurdles and struggles. There's also the health of nail salon technicians who are dealing with chemicals all day, which is no laughing matter.

Jordan's resume includes a couple of lovely experimental narratives, **Walls of Sand** (made with Shirin Etessam) and **In the Wake**, while Griffin's body of work includes a personal documentary she shot in Eritrea, **White Hotel** (co-directed with Toby Solvang). I wonder out loud how they'll combine, or reconcile, their sensibilities on **Painted Nails**.

"I hope we can incorporate some of the poetic elements," Jordan says. At the same time, she notes, "In the last seven, eight years I've been orienting myself more to documentary filmmaking. I'm interested in the process; there's a certain spontaneity and a certain flexibility being able to just go in and make films. This piece is so exciting because we can do so much of it just the two of us. We have shooting, editing and producing experience, and it's a story that takes place right here."

"Erica and I have known each other for maybe 15 years," Griffin points out, "and we've followed each other's projects over that time and have known where each other was creatively. Another thing that drew me to Erica was she had experience collaborating with someone. And she's still friends with Shirin and I'm still friends with Toby, and that says something to me about the relationships we created."

The filmmakers just received their first grant, from the Puffin Foundation in New York. For some time, though, as part of a strategy of engaging prospective audiences early in the process, they've been developing relationships with Women's Voice for the Earth, California Healthy Nail Collaborative, Coalition for Clean Air and Physicians For Social Change, as well as a salon group in Oakland. To find out more, go to <http://digallmedia.com>.

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