

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR NIETZCHKA KEENE**

Nietzchka Keene, filmmaker and professor of communication arts, died on October 20, 2004 after a brief but valiant battle with a rare form of pancreatic cancer. She is survived by two sisters, a niece and a nephew, her two beloved cats, and many deeply saddened friends. She was 52 years old.

Nietzchka was born and raised near Boston, Massachusetts. She received her BA degree in 1975 in germanic linguistics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and her Masters of Fine Arts in film production from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1989. While at UCLA she served as a research assistant in Old Icelandic language and linguistics under Dr. Jesse Byock. In 1985-86 she was awarded a Fullbright Fellowship to Iceland where she wrote and prepared for production her award-winning, full-length feature film, *The Juniper Tree*.

Nietzchka worked in various capacities in the film industry in Los Angeles while attending graduate school, including positions as a recordist for a sound studio, a dialogue editor in a post-production house, a projectionist, and a re-recording mixer at UCLA. She produced three short films as a graduate student – *Friends* (1977), *Still* (1978), and *Hinterland* (1983). In 1986 after returning from her Fullbright year she wrote the script for *The Juniper Tree* and returned to shoot the film in 1987 on location in Iceland. It was the first film to star the well-known singer and actor Bjork, in the role of a young child in a story based on a fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm. She won a Verna Fields Memorial Scholarship from UCLA in 1987 for editing *The Juniper Tree*, completing it in 1989. It has been screened in more than 23 festivals and invitational events around the world, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Harvard Film Archives, and the Art Institute of Chicago. It won the Prix du Public at the Festival des Films des Femmes de Montreal in 1990 and the First Prize for First Film at the Troia International Film Festival in Troia, Portugal in 1991. It was praised by critics as “distinctive, ambitious, and genuinely poetic” and “a demanding but impressive achievement that seems to mirror a distinctly female sensibility in its concern with psychological and historical perceptions of women.”

Nietzchka herself described her work as focused on the enduring power of folklore in modern life. She produced a short film, *Aves*, in 1994, with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the University of Miami, which used innovative animation techniques to illuminate the spiritual state of a cloistered nun. This can again be seen in her second feature film, *Heroine of Hell*, which was funded by a grant from the Independent Television Service, a PBS-backed production initiative launched in the early 1990s to develop innovative creative work for public television. Only 2-3% of the proposals submitted were funded, and Nietzchka’s script was judged to warrant the maximum amount granted. She shot *Heroine of Hell*, a narrative combining medieval iconography with a present-day storyline and starring Catherine Keener and Dermot Mulroney, on location in Miami, completing it in 1995. It was distributed via PBS to member stations in 1996. A full-length script, *Sleeping Beauty*, was optioned by an independent filmmaker in Los Angeles in 1991.

Professor Keene had two projects in progress at the time of her death. One, a script entitled *Belle*, was based on the true story of a female serial killer, Belle Gunness, in La Porte, Indiana in the early years of the last century. She had nearly completed a third feature film at the time of her death. *Barefoot to Jerusalem* is a story of a woman’s journey, after her lover’s suicide, through a solitary landscape which brings her into battle with the devil. The film was shot on location in Madison and in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 2001 and was in the final stages of post-production.

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Nietzchka Keene joined the University of Wisconsin faculty in 1995, after spending four years teaching production at the University of Miami. She headed up the video production program in the Department of Communication Arts here, teaching courses ranging from advanced production through editing and screenwriting. Her creative guidance and dedication to the teaching of her art shaped the lives of hundreds of students who passed through the production courses in the Comm Arts major; she was selective in whom she accepted into her courses and rigorous in her expectations. She was still teaching only two weeks before her death. The department has set up the Nietzchka Keene Memorial Fund in her honor, which will be used to provide an annual prize for undergraduate student film and video production. In addition, her films and papers have been donated to the collection of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, where they will keep her memory alive to students and scholars of the art form she cared so deeply about.

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