

By Peter Keough GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 10, 2017



VROOM by Mary Jane Doherty

### Training reels

Can a student learn from a great filmmaker even though he doesn't want to teach and the student is not ready to learn?

That is one of the questions local documentarian Mary Jane Doherty answers in her program **“Things Ricky Forgot to Teach but Somehow I Learned Them Anyway — Films From Mary Jane Doherty.”** The Ricky in this case is the late Ricky Leacock (he died in 2011 at 89), one of the pioneers of observational documentary and the founder and head of the MIT Film/Video department in the 1980s. Despite the difficulties referred to in the title, Doherty came away from MIT with the foundation of a decades-long career.

Another question that Doherty attempts to answer is: Does gravity have waves and how can they be detected and measured? Finding that out has been a holy grail for physicists for ages and it is what the subjects of her 1985 MIT thesis film “Gravity” were wrestling with. Shot in a grainy black and white like Leacock's direct cinema classic “Primary” (1960), Doherty's film follows a group of MIT postgraduate students trying to put together a device to accomplish that feat.

It doesn't look very promising. They work in a cramped, grimy lab filled with gizmos and wires that look like they were left over from a 1950s sci-fi movie. But the young men seem determined, neurotic, badly dressed, and goofy enough to actually pull it off. Doherty takes up the bewildered viewers' point of view as she interviews her subjects and tries to explain in voice-over the jargony, abstruse matters that are being discussed. Her tone of bemused non-comprehension (illustrated

by the recurring image of an inquisitive cow) paradoxically adds clarity to the proceedings. And certainly she adds humor and charm — her imitations of Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein seem spot-on.

As for the success of the gravity experiment, one of the students in the film, Rainer Weiss, finally solved the mystery; 30 years later he discovered gravitational waves and is expected to win this year's Nobel Prize for physics.

In addition to “Gravity,” Doherty screens “Vroom” (1995), a short film in which she follows a former spy driving about in a Mercedes sports car and relates her subject's thoughts in an erudite, brittily witty voiceover. She will also show “Sonic Boom” (2017), part of a work in progress in which she joins the Boston Children's Choir to learn to sing — a challenge that seems like it could be as daunting as understanding the nature of gravity.

“Things Ricky Forgot to Teach but Somehow I Learned Them Anyway — Films From Mary Jane Doherty” screens as part of the DocYard series on March 20 at 7 p.m. at the Brattle Theatre. The filmmaker will be present for a discussion.

*For more information go to [www.brattlefilm.org](http://www.brattlefilm.org).*

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