Doc Talk: Another Superior Roundup of Documentaries During Ominous Times

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By Peter Keough

The future for documentaries looks troubling, but the IFFBoston perseveres.

The Independent Film Festival of Boston. At the Brattle, Somerville, and Coolidge Corner Theatres through April 30

Veteran local filmmaker Mary Jane Doherty takes on not just the limits of the universe in her *Cosmic Coda* (screens April 26 at 12 p.m. at the Somerville Theatre followed by a Q & A with Doherty, production assistant Eliza Gagnon, and two of the subjects), but also ventures to the extreme limits of a filmmaker's dedication to getting a story right.

A scene from Mary Jane Doherty's *Cosmic Coda*.

In 1985, as a student at MIT in the Film and Video department headed by filmmaking legend Ricky Leacock, she boldly took on for her thesis film a project pursued by another enclave in the school — astrophysics. There grad students headed by Rainer "Rai" Weiss were trying to construct an antenna to detect gravitational waves, and so prove Einstein's theory about the nature of that elusive force.

At first their earnest, laid back efforts don't seem very promising. They work in a cramped, grimy space filled with DIY-looking gizmos and wires that look like props from a '50s sci-fi movie. Then a rehabbing of the lab forces them to drop the project and put the untested device in storage. That is where *Gravity*, Doherty's movie, ends up as well.

But, three decades later, things have changed. In 2015 Weiss led a team that, employing a four kilometer long version of their desktop prototype, discovered gravity waves. In 2017 he and his team won the Nobel Prize for their efforts. A protégé of Weiss is following up his research — taking it to the quantum level with a new technology called "squeezing." At this point most viewers will have long since lost all comprehension of the concepts involved ("I share this information," comments Doherty in the witty voice-over narration, "in case anyone out there understands what I'm talking about") and the terminology (we are told that, in this branch of scientific research alone, there are 410 acronyms). But it doesn't matter. Doherty captures the dedication, enthusiasm, frustrations, and triumphs of this esoteric band while affirming the persistence and genius of her medium.