

# HAVE WOMEN DIRECTORS COME A LONG WAY, BABY?

by Victoria Sampson

**T**he short answer is, “No.” This article is an invitation to explore, “Why?”

In a 1990/1991 DGA News magazine article Nell Cox, a television director (*L.A. Law*, *Konrad, M\*A\*S\*H*) recalled a question she posed *ten years earlier* regarding how few role models existed for women directors. It was the 1980s when the first statistics on women in key roles in Hollywood came out. They were grim. “We know how hard it is for men to become directors in Hollywood,” said Cox. “Do we dare plan a career hoping to be among the nine-tenths of one percent of the women? The answer is yes, because we expect these figures to change.” That was over 20 years ago and the figures haven’t changed. They’ve gotten worse.

In 1998, 9% of the top 250 grossing films were directed by women. In 2000 it was 11%, in 2002 it was 7% and in 2003, it was 6%. Only 4% of directors of the top 250 grossing films of 2004 were women. In television, women accounted for 8% of directors in 1997-1998 and 7% in 1999-2000. In 2002-2003, it went up to 16% then down to 14% of directors in the 2003-2004 season, a decrease of 2% from the previous season. Why are these numbers dropping?

In 1996, a group of sixty women alumnae from the American Film Institute’s Directing Workshop for Women (DWW) were invited by Jean Picker Firstenberg, Director and CEO of AFI, to a dinner party generously hosted by Arnie Morton at Arnie Morton’s to celebrate a panel of successful women directors, including Lesli Linka Glatter (*E.R.*, *The West Wing*), Mimi Leder (*Deep Impact*, *The Peacemaker*), Agnieszka Holland (*Washington Square*) and Randa Haines (*Children of a Lesser God*). The panelists were inspiring, yet spoke of the blatant lack of opportunities afforded to women directors versus their male counterparts. 86% of television programs did not have female directors. Throughout the evening, it became evident that the gathering wasn’t just about the plight of women directors but the gathering became the blueprint for building what might be done to change it.

I was there, as a 1987 DWW alumna. The evening was electric. Women reconnected with the camaraderie and support we felt while going through the DWW program. It was clear that through more networking like this, maybe things could change. Every woman had a story to tell. Some of us dreamed that our short film

would propel us into feature directing—that one of us would be the next “girl wonder” director. We were inspired by the success of the panelists and reminded of the spark that churned within us—to get our stories up on the big screen, or the small screen or any screen—and to keep at it until we succeed.

That night, at Morton’s, we decided to continue the momentum we felt in the room. That night, the Alliance of Women Directors was born.

The Alliance of Women Directors (AWD) immediately got to work on our

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statement: To  
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We invited guest speakers: Randa Haines (television and film, “*Children of a Lesser God*”), Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don’t Cry*), Kasi Lemmons (*Eve’s Bayou*), Taylor Hackford (*Dolores Claiborne*), Wim Wenders (*Buena Vista Social Club*), and Anjelica Huston (*Bastard Out of Carolina*). We networked, we collaborated, we absorbed, we cheered, we cried, we commiserated, and through it all, we kept dreaming and working on our projects.

And here we are. Ten years later. Have women directors come a long way, baby?

The statistics are still disheartening. In the 76 years of Academy Awards, a woman has never won for best directing. Only three have been nominated. Lina Wertmuller for *Seven Beauties* in 1976; Jane Campion for *The Piano* in 1993 and Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* in 2004. “Almost every other country has more women percolating in their film industries than we do,” says author Cari Beauchamp (*Without Lying Down*). In television, since 1998 up through 2005, one woman has been nominated for an Emmy for directing in a comedy series,

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Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, Professor, School of Communications, San Diego State University, has doggedly compiled statistics of women directors in both film and television. She delivers her statistics twice a year and has been doing so since 1996.

In her 2005 article, “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind the Scenes Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2004,” Dr. Lauzen writes that in television, women fared better as producers in 2003-2004 (33%) and as executive producers (20%) and creators (18%). The percentage of women

executive producers, producers, creators, and writers increased slightly over 2002-2003. If women comprised 33% of all television producers and only 14% of the programs considered had no female producers, then why did women only account for 14% of all directors in television. Are women producers afraid of hiring women directors? Are they pressured into playing by “boys club rules?” What is keeping the women directors from being hired? If this were any other industry, people would be storming down the doors at the injustice based on this obvious gender inequality and filing class action lawsuits. Are women executives not helping women because they are too caught up in the rat race of this industry? Or is this a fundamental male vs. female societal conundrum? Nell Cox, in the 1990 DGA article asked, “What can we do to raise the consciousness of women producers?” Why has it taken over ten years to address and answer this question?

Nora Ephron, acclaimed writer and director, notes the rise in women executives like Amy Pascal and Stacey Snider. But these women grew up in the boys’ network. “They’ve been acculturated to believe that a commercial film is a male film,” says Linda Seger, author of “When Women Called the Shots: The Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film.”

This brings up what may be the fundamental reason that women directors are never “Girl Wonder” discoveries: our socio-economic system is geared towards a male perspective. The harder question then, is, if it’s so deeply rooted, how will women directors’ struggles ever be any different?

Last year’s well-attended AWD event “A Different Point of View, Film from a Woman’s Perspective,” moderated by film critic Richard Schickel in May, 2005, had a panel of women directors: Kimberly Peirce, Kasi Lemmons, Katt Shea, Victoria Hochberg, Claudia Weill, Patricia Cardoso and Catherine Hardwicke.

An audience member brought up the concept of the “myth” of the director comparing it to the myth of the cowboy. This myth of the director prevails on very deep levels that may be blocking the progress toward director equality. Schickel offers, “Myth is called the auteur theory.” In the early days of Hollywood, men were construction workers. They had physicality associated with construction workers. There were the “real workers” on the set and the “money people” up in the studios.

So does it all come down to money? Without money, there are no movies. “Maybe it’s not a men versus women issue. Maybe it’s as simple as looking at what sells, what is marketable and what is commercial,” according to a producer/screenwriter audience member at the AWD May 2005 event. Mary Harron, director of *American Psycho* and the newly released *Notorious Bettie Page* says, “It’s very difficult for women or men if what you’re doing doesn’t fit into industry standards of what people expect from a movie.” Studios are “looking at package deals, who’s hot and how do we package that. Producers and directors come in packages and once you find a winning combination, you’ve got a constant paycheck at the studio...a film is a three-sided story; your talent, your director and your producer.

When you have at least two of those components, you've got a deal. You've got a greenlight." However, that creates another question; since television doesn't deal with the same distribution and financing questions, why are the statistics only moderately different? Perhaps the answer is simple. As director Tara Veneruso (*Janis Joplin Slept Here*) said, "We can't be in the boys club and the boys club is how a lot of films get financed."

Then there are the misperceptions that women directors only want to make female

perspective movies. And that these movies don't make money. Both are not true. Martha Coolidge, television and film director, best known for *Rambling Rose*, says, "Many, many times I've gone to a studio or

producer with the idea of doing a movie that I'm passionate about and found that they can't conceive of a woman doing material that is not completely chick-centric." So we're between a rock and a hard place. We can't get financed for "women's movies" (though films like *Clueless*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *First Wives Club* and *Bridget Jones' Diary* made good box office numbers.) Nor can we be financed for action flicks or male-oriented perspectives though male directors do it all the time. Few people flinched when Michael Mann beat out Spike Lee for

directing "Ali." Nobody told him he couldn't do it because he wasn't African American.

So what's a young (and not so young) woman director to think when a successful director like Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay* and *Monsoon Wedding*) can't direct a political thriller if she wants to? Mira came to Los Angeles to lobby for directing a political thriller and "got the vibe that they were humoring me."

What will it take? A whole change in mind-set for society?

According to the Entertainment Media

Group in Oregon, 54% of the theater going public is female. 75% are between 18 and 49 years old. If that is true, why is Hollywood still thinking that the 18-25 year old male audience is the majority of the movie-going

public? Why are they still greenlighting those types of movies?

In television, however, a great preponderance of the shows are aimed at a female audience, and yet, even in this female-oriented demographic, it is only being served by 14% female directors and only 23% of women in all creative positions. So while women characters represent up to 40% of roles on the TV screen, women directors and creatives represent less than one-quarter of creative roles behind-the-scenes in 2003-2004 season, which is the same statistic as

**"...they can't conceive of a woman doing material that is not completely chick-centric."**

the 1999-2000 season. So where is logic in the argument that women can't do male-oriented action-adventure shows if they also aren't desirable for television's women-oriented narrative and reality-based shows?

According to the Guerilla Girls, an anonymous artists group who erect billboards near the Academy Awards broadcast with daring visuals and statistics on women directors, 56 percent of the men who'd had films in the 1996 Sundance film festival had made another movie. Only 33 percent of women had made a second film. "When a man makes a film that bombs, people say:

"Oh but he has the fundamental capacity to get the job done, we'll give him another chance. When a woman fails, well, she's not up to the task," notes Veneruso. As an example, Leslie Harris' first film

*Just Another Girl on the IRT* got both positive reviews and made a profit. Ten years later, she is still trying to put together funding for her follow up film. Michelle Goldberg, staff writer for Salon, says, "It's obvious that women can make great movies. What's less clear is just how many more they need to make before their stories stop being dismissed as irrelevant, their talents as narrow and their audience as nonexistent."

Mike Figgis (*Leaving Las Vegas*) said, "It is merely a hierarchy that has established a way of being and continues to try to hold

on to certain rules about gender." The great mystery is not why male executives at studios don't give women a hand up, but why the proliferation of women executives in both film and television hasn't made a radical impact.

But perhaps more importantly, our question now is what can we do, as women directors, to get more work? How can we interact with producers and studios to get them interested in investing in us? Is story telling about gender? Entrenched perceptions are the key stumbling block, says Martha Lauzen. Guerilla Girl Kathe Kollwitz says,

"I think Hollywood is enamored with the stereotype of the male genius director who bends the world to his vision. When he's a success, they nurture him. They don't go looking for the woman

genius director." What can we do? Kathe puts it succinctly, "I was talking to a man in the (film) business and he said: 'Well, you don't expect me to hire women just because they're women do you?' And I said: 'Actually, yes. Things won't change until you do.'"

What is the answer? "Mentoring," says Tara Veneruso. Women helping women succeed. On behalf of all women directors, I invite us to form partnerships, have meetings, and generate enthusiasm about the incredible stories waiting to be filmed

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and seen. Whether we change statistics through legal means, such as discrimination lawsuits, or through activism, it is clear that change needs to happen. We are tired of touting statistics, of sounding whiney or complaining. We are not tired of wanting our stories on the screen. Join us, meet us, read our work, see our reels. You know how

to assess who has the goods. You, the executive producer, producer, showrunner, agent or studio head-you can help change the status quo. Don't let another ten years go by. We're ready to take a meeting.

You can reach the AWD by visiting our website: [www.allianceofwomensdirectors.com](http://www.allianceofwomensdirectors.com)



*Victoria Rose Sampson has been a member of the film community for over 32 years as a post-production Supervising Sound and ADR Editor (Frailty, Donnie Darko, Red Eye, Pirates of the Caribbean, Speed, The River, On Golden Pond). She has written and directed two award-winning short films and is on the board of directors for the Alliance of Women Directors.*

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## IN MEMORIAM

GLORIA MONTY, a producer who turned the ABC daytime drama "General Hospital" into a pop sensation in the late 1970's, and a long time member of The Caucus passed away March 30, 2006. She was 84. Another long time member, the distinguished producer, writer and director DAN CURTIS (*House of Dark Shadows, Winds of War, Remembrance, The Love Letters*) passed away March 27, 2006. Curtis was 78. They will be sorely missed.

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