

Alliance of Women Directors

Celebrating Ten Years Of Advocacy

By DIANA LESMEZ

The Alliance of Women Directors may be small (its membership tops 100) but its goals are boundless and its drive is mighty. Formed 10 years ago during a dinner party hosted by Arnie Morton at his eponymous restaurant, the organization was founded in response to the disheartening employment statistics for women directors in the entertainment industry.

The founding mothers were mostly graduates of the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop for Women (DWW), who were blessed with the support of Jean Picker Firstenberg, the now retired Director and CEO of AFI.

According to the organization's mission statement, the AWD's purpose remains "to create an undeniable presence for women directors...[by creating] a community of peers [who offer each other] mutual support and advance the art, craft, and visibility of women directors in the film and television industry." While the organization's first events were held at member's homes that provided the ideal intimate setting for networking, "it has now become a vast support and information network. We have [hosted] high-powered panels on how to finance independent films. We've held Q&As with top directors; for instance this spring, we interviewed Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who directed "Little Miss Sunshine," and we have a great website which allows access to the individual members' work," states Board of Directors member, actress/director/producer, Jennifer Warren, who has been a driving force of the organization since its launching. Many of the organization's meetings are held in Beverly Hills.

The AWD faces some daunting challenges as it works to improve the opportunities available to women directors, as well as to raise their profiles. Starting in 1996, Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, Ph.D., a professor in the School of Communications at San Diego State University, began compiling statistics on the behind-the-scenes employment rates of women in key positions in the top-grossing 250 films of the year. According to Lauzen's study, in 1998, about 9% of the top-grossing 250 films were directed by women. In 2000, the percentage increased to 11%. However, since

the beginning of the new millennium, there has been an alarming downward trend, with the percentages diminishing significantly from year to year: 7% in 2002, 6% in 2003, and a mere 4% in 2004. In television, 8% of the jobs went to women directors during the 1997-1998 season and 7% in 1999-2000. By the 2003-2004 season, the number had increased to 14%. Yes, it's a slight improvement but hardly one to boast about. Dr. Lauzen's research further revealed that during the 2003-2004 season, women fared better as producers (33%), executive producers (20%), and show creators (18%), than women directors.

"We are now trying to reach a wider audience to alert people that this is a very marginalized workforce. If in the U.S. space program, 20% of the astronauts are women, how can we accept or even begin to understand the reasons for the unusually low employment statistics for women film directors?" asks Warren.

The AWD is an evolving organization, continually looking for ways to expand its services to the community of women filmmakers who comprise its membership. At least twice a year, members gather for meet-and-greet dinners—highly popular events that provide great opportunities for the community to come together to share any latest accomplishments, projects, and professional needs and wants. In addition, the Shadowing Program is one of the organization's most coveted benefits, as it is designed to grant women directors access to the sets of quite a few hit television series in order to intimately observe other directors in action.

Warren adds, "We are more hands-on than some of the other groups perhaps because we are in a period of growth, and we work in tandem with other women's organizations and networks in order to support the first week-end box office returns for all opening films that have been directed by women. We realize that in this industry, the only real indicator of success is the financial one, so if we influence that outcome for women directed films, we will help significantly expand the opportunities available to all women directors."

The AWD is eagerly anticipating the release of two high-profile films, both of which deal with the war in Iraq and are being directed by established women directors, Kathryn Bigelow and Kimberly Peirce. "I am looking forward to the day when we are all given equal chance of success and the playing field will be leveled," states Warren.

It is that kind of hope and determination that fuels the AWD's drive to transform the entertainment industry by opening doors for women directors in all mediums and in turn provide society with a wider variety of choices in films and television programming.

