

## Reel women

Female filmmakers defy gender-based obstacles



Cynthia Geary's film *Los Amigos Invisibles: The Making of Arepa 3000* will show at the Woodstock Film Festival.

Both the current issue of *Premiere* magazine and a recent annual special issue of *Variety* tout the gains women have made in the film and television industries, in terms of getting their own films made as well as making films for others. These articles claim that women have experienced major gains in achieving parity with their male counterparts. The actual numbers, however, tell a very different story.

In a society where women make up some 51 percent of the population, they have achieved nowhere near this figure in their chosen fields, where a glass ceiling has consistently blocked their ability to succeed. One of seven seminars at the second annual Woodstock Film Festival, which will take place at a variety of venues in town from September 20-23, will explore why it is even harder for women to make films in an already difficult and competitive industry.

The gender-based issues and barriers confronting women in the industry will be the subject of "Girlfight - Spotlight Seminar on Women in Film," a panel and reception at noon on Friday, September 21 at New World Home Cooking on Route 212 just over the Woodstock/Saugerties line. Sponsored by New York Women in Film & Television, the seminar's cost is \$25 per person with a discount for members of the organization.

In a combative industry that remains dominated by males as studio heads and in virtually every specialty from directing, producing and cinematography to editing and even acting, men make the films they are comfortable with, believes Karen Durbin, the film critic for *Elle* magazine and a regular contributor on film to *The New York Times*. "And," she emphasizes, "they don't feel comfortable with relationship movies."

Interviews with acknowledged experts on the subject like Durbin and Martha Lauzen, a professor of communication at San Diego State University, as well as with several female filmmakers, whose work will appear at this year's festival, indicate women face obstacles at every stage of the business because of gender. For starters, women generally prefer to make different kinds of films, those that explore relationships and feelings and focus on developing characters rather than adhering to formula action scenarios with hefty doses of violence and sex. When it comes to financing, however, the films women opt to make are often deemed uncommercial, despite the huge success of relationship and female buddy films like *Terms of Endearment* and *Thelma and Louise*. This is key because filmmaking is a costly business.

Even if a female filmmaker is able to get financing for her project, she is less likely than her male counterparts to find backing for her next film, according to Lauzen, who has compiled and published two studies on the industry annually since 1994: one on the number of women behind the scenes in the film industry, and the other on women both on screen and behind in television. "There is this boy wonder aura that male filmmakers have with their first few films,

two percentage points from 4 percent to 2 percent. Only in the category of female directors did women make notable gains, from 5 percent in 1999 to 11 percent in 2000. But one must consider that the number of female directors had also decreased markedly from 9 percent in 1998 to 5 percent in 1999.

Based on interviews with filmmakers, whose work was accepted for this year's festival, it is not surprising that Lauzen found female executive producers and directors hired significantly greater numbers of women for their films than did their male counterparts, or that, by genre, women were most prevalent behind the scenes in romantic comedies, comedy dramas and animated features. Nor does it come as a shock that women were least prevalent on action and sci-fi films.

"This is an idea-based industry and, if there are a lot of men working in the industry, they will tend to work with other men," says Terry Lawler, executive director of New York Women in Film and Television, a not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to promoting equity in the industry. Only two percent of the membership of the American Society of Cinematographers is female, notes Lauzen, adding, "To get into the group, a person has to be nominated by two members, so you see the nature of the problem."

In an effort to identify the mechanisms blocking the advancement of women, Lauzen examined scheduling among other factors. In television, she found the major three networks systematically awarded better time slots to programs featuring men than women and men were favored on these programs in jobs both behind and in front of the camera.

There have been "incremental," although not substantial, advances since Lauzen first began compiling the studies in 1994. Points out Lauzen, "Between the time a woman gets out of film school and into the industry, something is happening... There are lots of questions we still don't have answers for."

Female filmmakers tend to get less financing than their male counterparts, probably because "they are not seen as serious players," says Lawler, who is unable to provide an explanation. "It is hard to know the cause but you can see the effect."

Durbin says women seem to have a somewhat easier time of it when attempting to make an independent film. The "indie" world and the film festival circuit offer them more parity initially, but these filmmakers can still expect to encounter the same prejudices when it comes to distribution.

Argentina-born Gabriela Bohm conceived of, produced and appeared on camera in the documentary *Passages*, a film about her personal odyssey through Eastern Europe, South America and Israel during her pregnancy eight years ago as she sought to uncover long-buried family secrets, including her father's suicide. Both parents were from Eastern Europe and had survived the Holocaust, after which they emigrated to Israel and, later, to Argentina.

"I needed to do the film," acknowledges Bohm, who didn't care whether her project ultimately proved commercial. Her goal was "to create a narration" she could eventually show to her child. "It is a challenging film to watch," she acknowledges. "I think it is a film that promotes questions."

That is an understatement. The film probes issues of suicide, pregnancy with the intention of single parenting, the effect of the Holocaust on those lived through it, and rape. Bohm discusses the horrendous and vicious details of a date rape, linking it with the rape of her aunt by Russian soldiers at the end of the war after her aunt persuaded the soldiers to take her instead of her younger sister (Gabriela's mother.)

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The Woodstock Film Festival (Septem-

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"The films that appeal to me are the films that make me question," she says. "I think the discussion that could come from it could be really valuable."

*Passages'* riveting pace and revelations are balanced by laughter and light-hearted moments, along with footage that transports the viewer from country to country. Above all, the documentary offers hope of birth after death and a continuance of life.

*Passages* still does not have a distributor, however, even though Bohm completed it in September, 2000. She financed the film herself with money left to her by her father. She is already at work on her next project on "crypto" Judaism, an offshoot of the religion, whose practitioners in Mexico have blended Jewish and Catholic practices and beliefs since coming to the New World after the Inquisition.

Screenwriter/director Kate Montgomery has two strikes against her in terms of her feature-length comedy *Christmas in the Clouds*. The lighthearted romance and story of mistaken identity features a Native American cast and is the first actual comedy to do so although *Smoke Signals* had some comedic moments.

The studios tell her it's a shame she has "no big names" in her film. Nor can they figure it out. "I have definitely found people poo-poo it because it is a friendly family film and so they assume it can't be art... The distributors, movie theaters and even some of the festivals have bought into the idea that art films have to be tough, edgy and dark."

Demographics along would seem to dispute this. A recent study of 1,100 films over a three-year period by Paul Kagan and Associates, a market research firm specializing in the film industry, found that 40 percent of the PG-rated films grossed over \$20 million each at the box office as compared with only 27 percent of the R-rated films. The largest single market in the United States is the baby-boom generation and 1991 saw more births nationwide than any year since 1960, which means a sizeable number of 10-year-olds in the population, according to Montgomery, whose background for eight years on the business side of the *Wall Street Journal* has given her a solid grounding in marketing and demographics.

"If they wanted to make money, you would think they'd hedge their bets with some PG or PG-13 movies," she says. "This industry comes right out and admits it's all about greed and making money... Then why isn't it about that?"

Montgomery is not alone in her belief that there is a dissatisfied audience willing to go to the movies who cannot find anything playing at most theaters that interests them. "They are tired of the gross-out humor, and the tremendous focus on violence, sex and negative, dysfunctional relationships that don't work," she says. "In [*Christmas in the Clouds*], the relationships work. The characters may be flawed, but they care about each other."

Most of the formula action films that are flooding the market are aimed at society's lowest common denominator, she believes, noting, "Globally, we earn ourselves tremendous resentment by exporting this stuff."

After reading an article in a trade publication

## Bhagavan Das prefestival event

The Second annual Woodstock Film Festival from September 20 to 23 will begin with a pre-festival spiritual chanting and film event with local musician Bhagavan Das at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, September 19 at the Colony Café. Admission is \$10 per person. Das, who introduced Ram Das to his spiritual master, Guru Maharaji, and lived in India during much of the 1960s, will perform call and response chanting with tabla player Ray Spiegel. Das is the subject of a 30-minute film, *Woodstock Now*, by Neil J. Colligan, that will premiere at the festival. The film also has a sneak preview at the Wednesday evening event.

The film will be shown at two screenings as part of a free "Woodstock Vignettes" series from 1-3 p.m. and 4-6 p.m. at the Fletcher Gallery on Mill Hill Road on Saturday, September 22. The series by Woodstock area filmmakers will also include films by Elliot Landy, Ed Sanders, Allen Midgette, Kim Sperlock, DeeDee Halleck, and Gregor Treiste. ++

recently about the financial losses theater owners are suffering, Montgomery thought to herself, "Get a brain guys. Pick up a film festival schedule and see what is available and what people really like." *Waking Ned Devine* grossed \$50 million at art theaters in the United States, but how many multi-plexes showed it? she poses. "If every store was a Gap, that company wouldn't do well either... Very few theater owners understand that they need diversity."

Cynthia Geary has followed a non-traditional route that make be the reason for her slow, but modest success. Geary got into the business six years ago and owns The Desert Dogs film company with partner Jim Larsen. Their first film was *Butt Crack*, a "schlock, zombie film" that pays homage to the monster movies of the 1950's and 1960's. It was followed by *Los Amigos Invisibles: The Making of Arepa 3000* about the Grammy-nominated music group by the same name, and *Seeking Heat*, a colorful and vivid exploration of David Byrne's Luaka Bop record label. Geary and Larsen used the profits from each film to finance the next one. By making a film every two years and financing their films themselves, they have been able to retain control. *Seeking Heat* has been picked up by the Discovery's People and Arts Channel and will air in Latin America on September 16.

In her six years in the industry, she has had to stand up to crew members and music industry people who "talked down" to her and was forced to replace one crew member because of the individual's attitude. She has witnessed male department heads who were willing to allow their departments to sink into the red rather than admit they had made mistakes and change course.

But she has held her course, striving to build credibility through her business practices. And, she acknowledges, her crews generally have more women on them than those of her male counterparts. In fact, she agreed to place *Seeking Heat* with Discovery only because her editor of choice, a female, is under contract to the company.

Like many female filmmakers, Rosemary Rodriguez encountered a dismissive attitude when she sought financing for *Acts of Worship*, the film she wrote and directed about the friendship between two women: a homeless addict and a photographer. She spent six years writing the film, which premiered at the 2001 Sundance Festival and has already won a string of awards including best director and best indie film at the Santa Barbara Film Festival and best festival film at the Crossroads Film Festival. She was told by many of the potential backers she encountered that, although her characters were good, the film was not commercial.

"Probably not," she says. "It's about two women and what they go through. "Men don't think about

those things... For women, characters and who the people are, relationships and warmth are more important than violence. The things that interest me are the simple things of life, not the big bomb that goes off."

She eventually found financing through contacts she had made earlier while working on the crew of *Hurricane Streets*. Many of the actors and crew worked for a pittance because they believed in her film, she says, but she still hasn't gotten distribution. "It definitely is considered a non-commercial film even though I have no problem with audiences. "It doesn't fit into that box of action movies with big names that we are used to."

"This is not the best time for an independent filmmaker to sell a film, but I am not giving up," says Rodriguez. "It is definitely harder as a woman because the road that distributors consider acceptable is very narrow and getting narrower all the time."

*Christmas in the Clouds* will be shown at noon on Friday, September 21, at the Bearsville Theater and *Passages* will be screened there at 2:30 p.m. on the same day. *Acts of Worship* will show at 4:30 p.m. at the Tinker Street Cinema. *Seeking Heat* and *Los Amigos Invisibles* will be featured at 3 p.m. on Saturday, September 22 at the Bearsville Theater.

Individual tickets to festival screenings will range from \$7-\$12 each with the opening and closing night receptions costing \$75 each or \$125 for both. A festival pass at \$500 will provide access to all events. Tickets and a complete schedule are available online at the festival's website: <[www.woodstock-filmfestival.com](http://www.woodstock-filmfestival.com)>, or at the festival's office in the red barn beside the old Deaneys' restaurant at the intersection of routes 212 and 375. Office hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. For further information, call 679-4265. ++

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