

October 23, 2020

Women, Film and the Question of Age

by Bess Austin

Women have struggled for decades to achieve status and acceptance within the film industry. While there have always been hurdles to overcome, the question of age is perhaps the most pervasive. In an industry where talent, creative ability and experience are the things that count in a filmmaker, age has usually been viewed as largely relative. Except, in women.

At a recent event held by Women in Film and Video (WIFV), members of the group stated that many women in their 30's were often discouraged in their efforts to either find employment or grow in their current jobs. Industry executives, although not acknowledging the fact openly, often frowned on female employees wishing to raise families as too costly to the company in hours and wages. The result of this family versus work pressure is that talented women feel forced to leave their careers in motion pictures behind. It is an unenviable choice but not an uncommon one.

Examples of well-known actresses with thriving careers have often taken the step and abandoned performing to rear their children in homes where they could grow up in a more normal way. Demi Moore, Phoebe Cates, Halle Berry, Lisa Bonet, Shania Twain all left motion pictures for a family. Other actresses such as Karen Allen, Debra Winger, Kelly McGillis, and Nicole Kidman, to name a few, spent time away from the screen with their children, returning only sporadically to perform in a particular role.

Like the famous song from the 1940's, "They're Either Too Young or Too Old", the complaints have been similar from women of every age bracket. Young ingenues or beginning filmmakers are thrust into the business with little experience and considered green. They are viewed as flighty, easily distracted, and poor employees who can't retain a job. Older women suffer from the fallacious beliefs that claim they are unable to learn technical skills, can't work effectively with younger colleagues, are unattractive on film or egocentric in the studio.

In the modern world, women in their 40's can begin new families and often experience dramatic changes in their personal lives as well as their professional ones. Geena Davis remarked that when she reached 40 her acting career immediately began a downward slide. The change in health, lifestyle and attitudes has become a blessing and a curse as women face outmoded stereotypes of what society deems them to be at a given age.

This is true of women in their 50's through their 90's as well. Maggie Smith, Meryl Streep, Betty White, Tina Turner, Susan Sarandon, Rita Moreno, Dolly Parton, and Gladys Knight are powerful examples of performers whose talent has grown with age. The same can be said of Rita Wilson, Jane Campion, Jodie Foster, Helen Hunt and Gale Anne Hurd. These filmmakers have gone on to produce and direct award-winning films that showcase their abilities and style into their latter years with great success.

In an industry renowned for putting artistry first, the recognition that women can speak to a present-day audience through the cinematic medium is critical. Distributors no longer market a production with the attitude that 'this film is for the 50-65 or 20-30 year age group only'. In 2020, people in their 50's are the new 30's and viewing habits have changed accordingly.

For women to expand their reach into more varied positions throughout the motion picture production industry, they have to stand together as a collective whole. While it is impossible to completely avoid discrimination, we have to realize that no age group is perfect and the actual reason for limitations on women maintaining specific film jobs is often simply their gender.

Today, as in the Silent Film Era, women can exercise the option of beginning their own production company. Technological growth and internet opportunities have opened doors for the funding, publishing, production, and distribution of films that were nonexistent at the beginning of the 21st Century. They can network with others into positions where acceptance more readily occurs or build new careers with the help of business and creative partners to achieve their goals. It takes strength, determination, and a powerful commitment to reach beyond the limitations placed on women who work in film but, if they stand in support of one another, the opportunities available are boundless.