

September 15, 2020

Women in the Film Industry-A Promise of Inclusion

by Bess Austin

Part II. Women in Film-The Most Excluded Group is the Greatest Hope for Inclusion

Women have always had an innate ability to come together and form consensus. It is one of their strengths and, while they may not always agree, they can bond to achieve a goal with tenacity and determination.

From the earliest days, women learned to network and discovered the value of utilizing professional contacts to better themselves. Beatrice de Mille, of the famed de Mille family, and other influential women gave parties where only females were allowed. These were tagged derisively as "cat parties" but they served to open doors for the attendees through introductions and exchanges that might otherwise have remained closed.

Until the 1920's women continued to work both behind and in front of the camera but the rising success of movies carried its own price. With the advent of talking pictures, films grew longer and more technically complex. Jobs that had once been shared by both sexes were suddenly more difficult to obtain and they found themselves wedged into lower paid positions with few opportunities for advancement.

The prosperity of the Roaring Twenties was suddenly jolted to a halt when the 1929 Wall Street crash propelled the country into a terrible depression. Despite desperate national circumstances, the 1930's created an insatiable hunger for movies. Need for escapism had never been so strong with more than a quarter of the nation unemployed.

The Hollywood of the 1930's and 40's saw the coveted director's chair becoming the domain of 'men only' with Dorothy Arzner being the only female director still working. This brilliant and determined woman introduced the process of adding stock footage to actual film and created the first crude booms for microphones.

In 1933, the Motion Picture Production Code was put into place which further limited women's jobs both onscreen and off. A few actresses rebelled. Mae West, admired as much for her brashness as her sex appeal, managed to control her films thanks to her box office grosses for Paramount. It took another actress, however, Academy Award winner Olivia de Havilland, to begin breaking the barriers of the studio system when she successfully sued Warner Brothers in 1943. Her action, termed the de Havilland Law, not only freed performers from long-term contracts and endless suspensions but effectively altered employee rights in California and encouraged filmmakers to strike on behalf of unfair studio policies.

The chance for a woman to direct continued elusive until Ida Lupino took up the challenge in the 1960's. She would go on to achieve status for films like "The Hitch-Hiker" and TV series "The Twilight Zone" and "Charlie's Angels".

Production was no less difficult when actress Lucille Ball along with her husband, singer Desi Arnaz, built a bridge for women and formed the Desilu Studios where she produced classic series such as "I Love Lucy" and "The Untouchables".

The Feminist movement of the 1960's and 70's spurred a need for greater opportunities in the industry. Women fought for higher pay and a chance to work as producers, directors and even heads of production companies.

In 1933, the Motion Picture Production Code was put into place that severely limited women's jobs both onscreen and off. A few actresses rebelled. Mae West, admired as much for her brashness as her sex appeal, managed to control her films thanks to her box office grosses for Paramount. It took another actress, however, Academy Award winner Olivia de Havilland, to begin breaking the barriers of the studio system when she successfully sued Warner Brothers in 1943. Her action, termed the de Havilland Law, not only freed performers from long-term contracts and endless suspensions but effectively altered employee rights in California and encouraged filmmakers to strike on behalf of unfair studio policies.

The Feminist movement spurred a need for greater opportunities in the industry. They fought for higher pay and a chance to work as producers, directors and even heads of production companies. Numbers of women with careers in film continued to grow through the 1980's and 90's in slowly expanding circles. Penny Marshall, Amy Heckerling and Lizze Borden all directed the popular hit movies "Big", "Look Who's Talking" and "Working Girls". Gale Ann Hurd and Lauren Schuler produced a series of box office winners while working as a team with their director husbands, including the smash hit, "The Terminator".

As the 21st century dawned, female performers still suffered from stereotypes. Women had difficulty maintaining jobs, being chosen for film crews or rising in the corporate hierarchy. They were frequently relegated to lesser positions. Many became freelancers, the only way they could work on a continuous basis. Barbara Streisand, Kathryn Bigelow, Oprah Winfrey, Sofia Coppola and a handful of others managed to break free of those strictures but it was a limited number who attained that altered status.

Today, women are making an impact. They occupy positions in finance, marketing, social media, sales, production and corporate leadership. Gina Davis, Julianne Moore, Ana Du Vernay and Rita Wilson are a few of those gifted and courageous women who have moved beyond the Celluloid Ceiling.

In Hollywood, there have always been those groups who were excluded of which women are, by far, the largest. Their ranks are filled with every race, culture, language, belief sexual preference and disability. As members of that group, women have stood together in their efforts to climb within the film industry knowing that when they open doors for one another, it will ultimately open the doors for all...and that door is the one of true inclusion.

