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by **Stephen Galloway**

Lauren Shuler-Donner remembers the time when she knocked on a producer's office, hungry for a job: "I was fresh out of film school; I would tear up the yellow pages, go knocking on doors, and I went to this guy and said, 'I'm going to make movies.' And he looked at me and said, 'Honey, either get yourself a see-through blouse or learn shorthand. That's the only way you're going to get into this business.'"

Two decades later, Shuler-Donner doesn't wear see-through blouses and she still hasn't mastered shorthand. She is, however, one of the preeminent producers in the industry, the maker of films like *Free Willy* and *You've Got Mail*. One of a host of top-level female producers, executives, artists and craftsmen, she has helped change the way the industry thinks about women — living proof, it would seem, that such expressions as "the year of the woman" and "the shattering of the glass ceiling" have genuine merit in Hollywood.

But talk off the record to Shuler-Donner and many other women, and they'll tell "It still happens that there are men in a meeting who'll act like a woman hasn't even spoken," marvels former United Artists President Lindsay Doran. "As recently as a year ago, I was in a meeting at MGM and every time a woman spoke, a man in the room would say the same thing, as if he hadn't even heard her and the idea was his, as if some little fairy was whispering in his ear."

Doran found the incident amusing — largely because it was unusual, she admits. And in many ways it is easier to laugh at such tales today than it would have been a decade or two ago. For one thing, several women are now among the most powerful players in the game. Three women are running studios: Sherry Lansing, the spiritual den mother of female executives and longtime chairman of Paramount Pictures' movie division; Stacey Snider, recently named chairman of Universal Pictures; and Amy Pascal, who was promoted to chairman of Columbia Pictures two years ago.

On an equally positive note, women have penetrated fields once considered the exclusive domain of men. Writers like Callie Khouri (*Thelma and Louise*), Laura Jones (*Angela's Ashes*) and Robin Swicord (*Little Women*) are among Hollywood's top scribes, and directors like Jane Campion (*The Piano*) and Nora Ephron (*You've Got Mail*) are in great demand. Speak to these women and many are terrifically positive about the possibilities for women in Hollywood today.

"It's always tough," says Lansing. "But I prefer to think of the glass as being half-full. It's not a perfect world and we still have a long way to go, but from where I started in the business, women have made enormous strides."

"So many women are doing so many great things now," adds Pascal. "We've got Amy Heckerling and Betty Thomas and Nora Ephron all doing films here. The only thing women are not is (studio) owners, and that's my one complaint. And when women are owners, then we'll really have arrived."

"I think that there's a natural tendency for both sexes to feel more comfortable with those of their own gender," notes Elizabeth Gabler, president of Fox 2000. "On the other hand, I find I'm sought out not only for my opinions as an executive, but also for my sensibilities as a woman, because there is such a large female audience. Look at the success of Erin Brockovich."

Still, alongside this rosy picture is a parallel reality that is much more disheartening, in which the giant steps taken by producers and executives have not been matched by others toiling in the Hollywood trenches. Statistical studies make this clear. According to figures compiled by Women

in Film, in the top 100 box-office films of 1997 there was not a single female cinematographer; on average, one woman works for every eight men in behind-the-scenes roles; 45% of the top 100 films in selected years between 1987 and 1997 had no women executive producers, producers, directors, writers, cinematographers or editors; in 1996, women comprised only 9% of working directors; and in 1998, women comprised only 14% of the American Cinema Editors membership.

“When you look at the statistics of everyone on a crew, they really are shocking,” says Doran. “People lull themselves into a false sense of security by saying, ‘Betty Thomas is so successful, Nora Ephron is so successful’ — but when you see those statistics, in most cases it’s less than 10% (of women on a crew).”

This is true across the board, from writers to directors to technicians. The Writers Guild of America says the situation for female scripters has actually gotten worse over the past few years. In its latest report, issued over two years ago, the WGA observed: “There was virtually no change in women writers’ representation in feature film for the entire decade from 1987 to 1997. [Over that time], women’s representation among feature-film writers remained between 16% and 18%.” More troubling was the fact that in 1997 the median male writer earned \$75,663, while the median female writer earned \$60,000 — a reversal of the situation four years earlier, when the median female writer actually earned \$2,500 more than the median male. Nowhere was the gender gap more evident than at the major studios, where in 1997 women writers earned 70 cents for each dollar earned by white male writers. Indeed, from 1991-97, women’s share of the writing jobs actually dropped at four studios: Columbia, Disney, Fox and Paramount.

Many of the studios are trying to compensate for such discrepancies, at least in their internal activities, and almost all of them have specific policies designed to improve “diversity.”

“We have a manager of diversity within human resources, and part of that job is to make sure that we recruit from women and minorities in a representative fashion,” says a Sony Pictures Entertainment spokesman, who notes that high-level Sony execs range from Pascal to Chief Administrative Officer Beth Berke to Helene Michaels, president of Columbia TriStar Television Production. However, neither Sony nor any other studio has any kind of quota system, and, almost despite these studios’ efforts, the bias continues.

Thus, when Columbia unveiled a list of some 31 top scribes in 1999 who were slated to receive 2% of gross profits for the first time in history, only six of them were women. “And that’s an extremely high percentage when you look at the general statistics on women,” laments writer Swicord, one of the Columbia six. “(In 1999), when you look at how many writers (had motion picture credits), there were 320 writers’ names on the screen, and of them only 34 were women.”

Worse, Swicord says, is the material these women are being offered. “What you tend to see is women being offered movies like *My Favorite Martian* and *Never Been Kissed* — non-Academy, lower-status fare, comedies, movies about dogs and baby geniuses. I get offered things all the time where they say, ‘We want a female voice.’ Well, I don’t write with my vagina.”

She adds: “There is an illusion that, because there are many female executives — some of them in positions of ‘almost’-power — things have gotten better across the board. But there is an unrecognized cultural bias that still pervades the film business.”

Veteran writer Dalene Young, who last year received an Emmy Award nomination for Showtime’s *Locked in Silence*, is resigned to the disparities that are ongoing in the industry.

“There is a pay-scale difference,” she says. “My agent is always saying ‘You can never get as much as a man.’ And they type us. I once went to pitch the story of Mike Tyson, and they didn’t see me doing that kind of story. I’ve never been offered an action film. They do type us — but they type everybody.”

It's even worse for DPs. Of the 400 members of the American Society of Cinematographers, the organization that represents the top cameramen in the industry, approximately eight are women. "It never occurred to me that it would be such a small group of (women)," says Judy Irola, ASC (Northern Lights), who is also head of cinematography at the University of Southern California film school.

But Irola attributes this to the women themselves rather than any prejudice. "A lot of girls start out being very interested in cinematography because it's so creative. Then they don't like the way they are treated when they shoot films for directors, and they are maybe more sensitive than men. It's also difficult physically — there is a reason most gaffers and grips aren't working over 40. There are very few of us who have the stamina."

But stamina isn't the only reason, she says. "It's the brutality of the hours. It's almost impossible to have a family. Who wants to work 20 hours a day?" ASC President Victor J. Kemper wishes the situation were different, but he doesn't believe it has to do with sexism. "In the old days when I was in New York, it was definitely a man's world and I witnessed sexism," he says. "But I haven't seen that in 25 years." Kemper says there are other reasons for the dearth of women cinematographers: "Women generally don't go into the crafts jobs on the set as readily as into producing or directing. My own daughter wanted to be a cinematographer in the worst way, and I helped her get jobs as [a] gofer. She worked very hard and found that she could not keep up with the physical requirements. She is now a costume designer."

There is another reason, he adds: "Very few women want to be cinematographers, and even fewer want to be a grip or a gaffer. You go to colleges and ask who wants to do those jobs, and hardly any hands go up. But a whole lot of hands go up saying they want to be directors." Yet of the 11,825 members of the Directors Guild of America (which encompasses directors, assistant directors and unit production managers), only 2,539 are women — just 21.5% of the total. And few women are hired to direct the kind of films usually associated with men. Even among actors, there are far fewer working women than there are men. Reps for the Screen Actors Guild note that of the 13,025 roles cast in movies in 1998, 63% were taken by men and only 37% by women. Women fared slightly better in leading roles, where they took 40%. Those numbers don't come close to giving a true picture of the woeful employment situation for older actresses — older meaning out of their 30s.

But it is in their salaries that the egregious differences between actors and actresses are most apparent. True, as noted, Julia Roberts is now getting \$20 million a picture, but she is the only woman to do so. The other women being paid the really big bucks can be counted on one hand: Meg Ryan and Jodie Foster receive around \$10-17 million a picture, while Sandra Bullock gets an estimated \$12 million.

The salary differentials become all the more glaring when one looks at couples' relative incomes. For every \$20 million Tom Cruise makes, his soon-to-be ex, Nicole Kidman, makes less than \$5 million; for every \$20 million Bruce Willis earns, his ex, Demi Moore, takes in a fraction of that. Last year's Oscar nominees make the point abundantly clear. Whereas Russell Crowe, nominated for his role in *The Insider*, is now asking upwards of \$15 million per picture, Hilary Swank, who actually won an award (Best Actress for *Boys Don't Cry*), gets a fraction of that. Inside the studios, the women at the top seem to be making few moves to change this, perhaps restricted by a corporate culture that is heavily male-dominated. Aware that their jobs are dependent on the men above them, they are continuing to make the same kind of films as their male predecessors.

Even in the bad old days of Hollywood's golden age, studios seemed more tuned in to women, developing a whole roster of strong female stars from Greta Garbo to Bette Davis to Barbara Stanwyck. That's far from the case today. Columbia's Pascal, after taking a risk on such female-skewing disappointments as *Girl, Interrupted* and *End of the Affair*, steamed ahead with Paul

Verhoeven's special-effects opus *The Hollow Man* and sequels to actioners like *Men in Black* and *Bad Boys* — all as macho as any of the projects initiated by her predecessor, Mark Canton. The one exception to that, the female-studded *Charlie's Angels*, was taken from an era when the "angels" were designed more to titillate men than be their equals.

Similarly, Paramount's Lansing has bet heavily on male-targeted films like *The General's Daughter* and has made relatively few forays into traditional "women's films" like *Angela's Ashes*. But she maintains that women's stories have been on the rise. "I go back to *The First Wives Club* and *Little Women* and *Clueless*," she says. "There are women's stories that have been coming up more and more. As these pictures become consistently successful, more and more will be made." The upcoming Angelina Jolie starrer *Tomb Raider* may be a test case — though again, the sexuality of the lead character is skewed as much to men as it is to women.

Laura Ziskin, who served as Fox 2000's president for three years, admits there were inevitable difficulties in making films for women in an organization dominated by men. "If you're pitching to a roomful of men," she says, "their own taste is going to color their reaction to the material." In the case of *Anna and the King*, one of Ziskin's most high-profile projects, she adds, "although the movie did OK, it's not what we expected (given that) it had the highest test scores of any film in my career, including *Pretty Woman*. It was marketed by men who initially tried to say, 'How do we make this movie appeal to men? How do we not turn the men off?'"

"Don't turn the men off." That remains the mantra of Hollywood, behind as well as in front of the camera. And perhaps it is inevitable that Hollywood will continue that way, at least for now. Real, deep, all-encompassing change in the entertainment capital may not occur until there are far more extensive changes in society at large.

Rebecca Farmer, a rep for the National Organization of Women, points out that women's salaries throughout the country are still below men's: in 1998, the median annual earnings for men were \$35,345, while for women they were \$25,362 — a 73% difference. By those standards, Hollywood is ahead of the game.

There is no arguing with the fact that Hollywood has progressed light-years from the dark ages just two or three decades ago when Lansing — a pioneer in so many ways — was the only high-ranking female production executive around. (Indeed, when she was named president of production at 20th Century Fox just over 20 years ago, the news ricocheted in headlines across the world.)

But the bad old days have not entirely vanished. Like so many things in Hollywood, there is still vast room for change.

"There isn't a woman (studio) owner," says Ziskin. "There is no woman Rupert Murdoch or John Malone or Michael Eisner, so there is still a ceiling waiting to be broken. Whether that ever will be broken, I don't know."