

ILLIBERAL HOLLYWOOD: WHAT'S THE POINT OF A UNION IF IT DOESN'T REPRESENT MEMBERS?

This
year
contin
ues to
be a
big
one
for
women
in



film. Films featuring women as leads and/or directed by women made beaucoup at the box office. Mad Max: Fury Road, Pitch Perfect 2, Insurgent, and Fifty Shades of Grey are among the top ten films out of more than 284 released so far this year. Two of these films were directed by women; all four featured female leads. And two of these films put to lie once again the bullshit claim that 'women can't lead action films.'

The immense popularity of these movies – especially with women – demonstrates how much Hollywood underserves the female audience, in spite of repeated studies revealing how much women contribute to box office results. Women want women's stories, told by women, and they've gotten them too rarely.

You'd think that Hollywood would actively court the single largest demographic by catering to its desires – but no. The film production pipeline remains solidly weighted toward men, still chasing the increasingly distracted 18-25 year-old male demographic.

It's not as if women aren't available as actors or directors. The Directors Guild of America (DGA) – the labor organization representing

directors – counts among its ranks roughly 1200 female directors, reflecting the parity of female students who've been through film school or learned on the job in other production roles.

Which makes one wonder why actor/director/producer George Clooney said in a recent interview, *"...there's something like 15 female directors in a town of directors ..."*

If a household name like Clooney doesn't know more female directors, what exactly is it the DGA is doing for its female membership? It's clearly not representing them within their own organization, let alone to studios and the public.

The ACLU's May 12th letter to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) spelled out DGA's complicity with Hollywood's exclusion of female directors, when it asked the EEOC to investigate discriminatory practices. DGA has denied the use of short lists, but apart from preparing regular reports on diversity in hiring, it's not clear at all what the DGA does to further the hiring of women directors.

During the course of its history, DGA hasn't been entirely useless to its female members:

1939 – Screen Directors Guild (SDG) recognized as bargaining agent by major studios (SDG evolves into Directors Guild of America (DGA) over time and mergers with other entertainment industry labor groups).

MAR 1969 – U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sponsors a one-day hearing in Hollywood to discuss "patterns or practice of discrimination in violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

1978 – California Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights publishes a report of its study on employment opportunities for women and minorities in film industry in southern California.

1979 – DGA's Women's Steering Committee (WSC) formed to examine gender discrimination in employment by major studios.

1980 – DGA-WSC entered discussions with executives from film studios, TV networks, and production companies, introducing affirmative action quota recommendations.

JAN 1983 – President Ronald Reagan appoints conservative judge Pamela Rymer to U.S. District Court for the Central District of California.

1983 – Employers 'unilaterally withdrew' from the voluntary quota program; Columbia claimed DGA's contract limited ability to hire women and minorities.

JUL 1983 – DGA files lawsuit in U.S. District Court for the Central District of California against major studio Warner Bros under 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VII.

DEC 1983 – DGA files lawsuit in U.S. District Court for the Central District of California against major studio Columbia Pictures under 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VII.

1985 – Judge Rymer sides with major studios against DGA, indicating DGA is in part responsible for inequity as directors' control over subordinate production employees limits ability of studios to effect quotas.

1985-? – After Rymer's decisions, DGA establishes The Freelance Live and Tape Television Agreement (FLTTA), Article 19, to affirm with TV producers compliance with anti-discrimination laws; a provision includes appointment of DGA officers to monitor diversity in hiring.

1985-2015 – Profit! Just kidding – not for female directors. Major studios' employment of female directors crawls up from 0.5% to

16% at its highest level over three decades.

AUG 2011 – Former DGA lawyer Jill Killion sues DGA for discrimination due to inequitable pay. Status TBD.

MAR 2015 – DGA presented a proposal to count women directors employed by studios in addition to the existing measure of minority directors employed, tracking increase/decrease in employment numbers.

APR 2015 – DGA-WSC rejects proposal to count women directors employed by studios in addition to the existing measure of minority directors employed.

MAY 2015 – ACLU submits letter to the EEOC asking for federal investigation of gender inequality among directors hired by major studios

Though the DGA exerted itself in the late 1960s and 1970s on behalf of its female constituents, its work was ineffectual. Flaws in film production hiring process outlined by the failed 1983 lawsuits were never remedied. Efforts on behalf of women in television were somewhat more muscular with FLTTA's establishment, but recent gains do not appear to have anything to do with DGA role in representation.

All the women of DGA have to show for their membership dues is lip service – a handful of diversity reports affirming what they already know, and the knowledge that DGA's male leaders have pulled down millions in compensation for some nebulous representation.

Nebulous, meaning any meetings with studios in which gender equity is discussed are not shared with the membership. Do they actually have any such meetings, or is this just happy talk?

Nebulous, meaning any effort to enforce agreements with Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) or compliance with Title VII remain undisclosed, challenging the concept of "acting in good faith." Are female

members supposed to pay their rent with “good faith”?

The DGA does not appear to have used the opportunity presented by leaked information from the Sony Pictures’ hack. Female actors like Jennifer Lawrence and Charlize Theron have benefited from evidence that they have been discriminated against in compensation compared to their male cohort. But there’s no evidence of similar improvements to gender equity in director hiring.

For the amount that women directors pay in dues for DGA’s lack of progress, one has to wonder if they wouldn’t be better served by a different labor organization – perhaps one that actually does effective work on behalf of its female members, like Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The EEOC, having erred in the 1970s by leaving hiring diversity enforcement to the DGA, could rectify this by demanding other, more effective alternatives in representation.

(For that matter, what does the DGA do for ANY of its members? Have you seen any major disputes between an aggregate of male directors and studios on compensation or employment? Is it just a boys’ club with a secret handshake and a knowing wink between DGA leaders and the studios?)

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So what does this mean to you, the general public, when women are excluded from filmmaking? It’s not just a loss of women’s stories told by women, potentially making money for shareholders.

The public develops a highly skewed perception of the world. Ask yourself how much our acceptance of violence has been shaped by films normalizing it as it targets a demographic consisting of boys and young men. Or hypersexualization of girls along with society’s marginalization of women – how much can be attributed to films produced by and for the male gaze?

Women as leaders in all industries and academia are not the norm, in part because the images the public, industry, and academia have seen do not depict women in these roles in percentages weighted to their portion of the population. This persists, though women have made up more than 50% of graduates in many fields for at least two decades.

Our children acquire unhealthy perceptions of women based on tropes too often used in male-centric films – women are wallpaper, arm candy, victims stuffed in refrigerators, and not active agents with autonomy.

The challenges we face require different solutions, not more of the same. If the last 40-50 years of film excluding women behind the camera have resulted in the world we live in today, do we dare continue with the status quo?

Can we really afford that risk?

[Graphic: mash-up, Matt Olson and Ryan Gilchrist via Flickr]