

ADJUSTING THE SET - GENDER EQUITY FOR WOMEN IN THE AUSTRALIAN SCREEN INDUSTRY

by Sue Maslin

I think it is fair to say that over the thirty-five or so years that the gender equity issue for women in the screen industry has been on the table, the equity and the cultural diversity arguments have failed dismally to shift the consistently poor representation of women in creative and business leadership roles - directors, producers, writers, distributors and exhibitors.

I am a recipient of the affirmative action programs of the early 1980's that kick started my career with a film titled, ironically, *Thanks Girls and Goodbye*. I have been involved in many affirmative action programs since including setting up Women In Film and Television (Victoria) in the early 1990's, running Women Applying To Film School programs and Taking The Next Step leadership programs for The Australian Film Commission aimed at advancing women in television middle management. All of these programs were targeted at increasing the representation of women at the *supply* end of the value chain and were largely effective.

What has not shifted is the number of women leaders at the *demand* end of the value chain. That is, amongst the exhibitors, distributors, sales agents, investors, and broadcasters who drive the business and decide what should be programmed upon our cinema and television screens. These are the people who ultimately green light and approve the key creatives on any project. We need to take the argument up to these business executives for anything to change over the long term.

How do we achieve this? I have come to the conclusion that nothing will shift unless we can effectively make the business case – that is, demonstrating that having more women in positions of leadership will be good for audiences, box office and the bottom line of the screen industry.

Quotas set by screen agencies will not work in isolation from the business realities because film funding applications will not get to the table unless they have the necessary market support to trigger production investment. We therefore need to look at the bigger picture. There is an incredibly complex ecosystem which shapes the current screen industry landscape and it is largely shaped by the management of risk and opportunity, capital and cultural policy, audience taste and by the flow of ideas.

The leaders and decision makers in this landscape - the exhibitors, distributors, sales agents, investors, producers, directors and writers - are overwhelmingly male. These are the people who shape what gets made and what appears on our screens. They are also the people who care passionately about making good films that make a good return on investment – be they cultural returns or commercial returns.

Most films require a high level of risk to be taken at every stage of the value chain. It's a miracle that any film gets made - it is just that hard! As the late Laura Ziskin famously said, "Films are not made – they are *forced* into existence".

It is basic psychology that male decision makers (and they are mostly men), in a high risk business environment will feel more comfortable backing people they have affinity with – that is, other men - on stories and genres they understand.

In order to convince screen business leaders that there is a business case to include more women in their ranks, we need to show them that opportunity exists to build capacity. That is, there is talent within their organisations and behind the camera that is currently being overlooked and there is potential for market growth by making more films that appeal to women.

The latter is self evident from all of the data emerging which shows that women buy more than 50% of all movie tickets and women 35+ is one of the only demographics that continues to grow worldwide at a time when cinema audience numbers are trending downwards. In fact, female-focused films like *Fifty Shades of Grey* (\$547 million worldwide) and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (\$752 million) have been credited with rescuing the looming downward US box office projections last year.

It is patently absurd in the face of this market demand that year in year out, less than 25% of all films in the market are about women or have female protagonists.

This opportunity has been effectively exploited by companies such as Universal Pictures with films like *Mama Mia*, *Bridesmaids*, *50 Shades*, *Train Wreck* etc well before it became fashionable to talk about the female demographic. In fact, when I was financing *The Dressmaker* four years ago and speaking to a number of local distributors who had an interest in this film, I chose Universal Pictures because Mike Beard, Managing Director of Universal Pictures Australasia, was the only distributor who would talk to me seriously about the female demographic as a commercial market. *The Dressmaker* went on to open at number one position in the Australian box office taking \$12 million in its first three weeks.

So who is actually taking the risk on women's stories? For a start, female directors are. Their films are overwhelmingly about female protagonists. But as we know, they represent only 16% on average of the total number of directors at work in Australia.

In Australia, it is very unlikely that a woman will get to direct a film unless she has at least one female producer on board. In fact, in the past five years 90% of women directors who directed a feature film had female producers. Male producers overwhelmingly work with male directors and are not taking the risk on engaging women directors. Why not?

Once again, you have to look higher up the chain and go back to the problem of perceived risk. The distributors, sales agents and investors want to be comfortable about where they place their money and their confidence and unsurprisingly, will repeatedly select projects with male protagonists and male directors.

I experienced this challenge when financing *The Dressmaker*. Even with Kate Winslet and Judy Davis, arguably two of the greatest actresses of our time cast in the film, the film was still considered too high a risk for international buyers. In a film about a woman dressmaker targeted primarily to a female audience, the exclusively male sales agents and buyers needed A-list male actors to secure the sales estimates.

But if we are to make the business case, we have to ask if women filmmakers have been focused enough upon commercial returns to investors. If we look at films produced in Australia over the past five years with a woman director attached, the material is overwhelmingly about relationships and can be readily categorised as dramas. In fact 23 of the 30 films directed by women during this period were dramas. Anyone in distribution and exhibition will tell you, that drama is the toughest genre to make money in. The most commercially successful genres like comedies, thrillers, horror, family films, animation – tend to be originated by and directed by men.

That said, women filmmakers have been very successful over the years in providing cultural returns and enjoyed a disproportionately successful run at film festivals, in awards ceremonies and the like. The best director at the Australian Film Institute and Academy Awards has been won five times by women in the last 12 years.

Women *producers* on the other hand appear to be working across a more diverse range of genres. The most commercially successful films produced by women in the past five years reflected a wide range of genres - comedies, horror, suspense thrillers, family films including *The Sapphires*, *A Few Best Men*, *Oranges and Sunshine*, *Wolf Creek 2*, *Felony*, *The Rover*, *Paper Planes*, *Red Dog* and *Snowtown*. Interestingly, all of these films had male directors. And to be honest, most women producers like their male counterparts tend to work with male directors. Over the past 5 years, only 23% of all female producers engaged a female director.

So if women are going to run the business case about increased market opportunity for films by and about women, we need to start thinking more ambitiously and strategically about the work we write, produce and direct and the markets this work is intended for.

Secondly, we need to ensure that there are more women in the ranks of the key decision makers. Men in these leadership positions are often in place for years and are not going to politely give way and stand aside. Women need to step up and be counted. Just as we force our films into existence, we must force our selves into the business landscape as leaders. It is for this reason I became a founding member of the Natalie Miller Fellowship, an organisation which aims to increase the number of women leaders in the Australian screen industry by offering an annual fellowship. It is

no coincidence it is named after Natalie Miller, to this day one of the only women owners of an exhibition company in Australia. We have worked hard to force the debate onto the business agenda and it was a significant milestone when we were asked to share the stage at the Australian International Movie Convention in 2015 to present the Fellowship Award*.

In order to affect any change, we have to ALL acknowledge there is a problem – men and women alike. We need to collectively agree that the status quo is not serving the industry or the audiences at all well. I welcome Gillian Armstrong’s call to arms on this issue and the seriousness with which the Australia Director’s Guild call for quotas is being taken by Screen Australia and the state agencies. Personally, I am not in favour of quotas as they really only address the supply end of the value chain and have the potential to divide the industry at a time we most need to unite on this issue. We need to also address the demand end as well and I would prefer to see the whole industry to get behind targets we can all sign up to as an industry.

There is no silver bullet solution. There needs to be many strategies put into place in order to achieve equity. We need smarter evidence based policy and the data to support it. We need to immediately survey the representation of women in all key leadership roles in the screen industry – not only creatives, but also exhibitors, distributors, sales agents, investors and investigate the barriers to entry for women in these sectors.

We need to come together as an industry and say “retaining the status quo is not in anyone’s interests” and encourage businesses and agencies alike to take immediate steps to redress imbalances within their own organisations.

If the whole industry is to grow into the future and prosper, it cannot ignore the untapped creative talent and leadership potential of women. We are all part of the big picture – filmmakers, exhibitors and distributors, broadcasters, policy makers, critics and audiences alike - and we must adjust the set.

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Her latest film, The Dressmaker directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse and starring Kate Winslet was released nationally on 29 October 2015.

**The 2015 recipient of the Natalie Miller Fellowship was Courtney Botfield*