

# In Film, Women's Stories Break Through At Fall Festivals

by [BILAL QURESHI](#)



Juliette Binoche and Kristen Stewart star in *Clouds of Sils Maria*, a film about a world-famous actress who is asked to perform in a revival of the play that made her famous.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

There have been debates, studies and articles about the lack of women working in film, both in front of and behind the camera. There's even a think tank at the University of Southern California dedicated to studying that absence. But NPR's Bilal Qureshi reports that the scene is shifting at the big fall film festivals, from New York to London and Toronto.

BILAL QURESHI, BYLINE: This year's Toronto Film Festival did bring major actresses to the Canadian red carpet. Julianne Moore, Reese Witherspoon and Juliette Binoche, who stars in "Clouds Of Sils Maria," as a seasoned actress wrestling with her relevance in a changing film industry.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA")

JULIETTE BINOCHE: (As Maria Enders) What's wrong with my acting?

UNIDENTIFIED ACTRESS #1: (As character) Nothing.

BINOCHE: (As Maria Enders). (Laughter). What do I need to do to make you admire me? Do I think too much?

QURESHI: Cameron Bailey is the artistic director of the Toronto Film Festival.

CAMERON BAILEY: About 5 percent of the commercial films coming out of Hollywood every year are directed by women. At film festivals - including ours - typically the number is around 20 percent. So, you know, we are doing four times better than Hollywood but just woefully inadequate compared to the human population.

QURESHI: So Bailey says this year he challenged his programmers to try harder.

BAILEY: I didn't say to them, go out and find more films by women. I said, find the best film you can. And where there are films by women, we're going to do our best to give them the best profile that we can and make sure that people pay attention.

QURESHI: One of films that got that attention was the big-screen adaptation of the best-selling memoir by Cheryl Strayed, "Wild." It stars Reese Witherspoon as a woman who goes on a hike of self-discovery.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "WILD")

REESE WITHERSPOON: (As Cheryl Strayed) Hi, my name is Cheryl. I'm walking the PCT, and I ran out of food. I was wondering if you could take me someplace I could get a warm meal.

BRUNA PAPANDREA: I loved the idea of putting this movie into the world where a woman essentially walks herself back to life.

QURESHI: Bruna Papandrea coproduced "Wild" through a company she founded with Reese Witherspoon.

PAPANDREA: We both really shared that goal of really making it our prime focus to develop roles for and about women and also really develop movies with female writers and, hopefully, for female directors.

QURESHI: One of those who made it to Toronto this year was Gina Prince-Bythewood. She wrote and directed "Beyond The Lights."

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "BEYOND THE LIGHTS")

GUGU MBATHA-RAW: (As Noni Jean, singing) Here and now...

QURESHI: It's a drama about a young R&B singer's struggles to find her place in a music industry that traffics in sex and fantasy.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "BEYOND THE LIGHTS")

AML AMEEN: (As Trey) I need you out of mind like yesterday. So we've got all hands on deck.

MBATHA-RAW: (As Noni Jean) It's not done.

AMEEN: (As Trey) Why are you playing with me?

MBATHA-RAW: (As Noni Jean) Trey, everybody says I'm special 'cause I have this voice. But I'm just saying what everybody else wants me to say. I need to say something.

QURESHI: Prince-Bythewood says she doesn't feel discriminated against by the industry.

GINA PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD: Me, as a black female who directs, I'm not discriminated against. What I feel is discriminated against are my choices, which is to focus on black women. Those are just movies that studios are not clamoring to make.

QURESHI: Prince-Bythewood says festivals are international events. And they can highlight a film's marketability to a global audience.

PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD: I mean, I cast my film specifically the way it was cast so that it would have a global feel and really trying to push aside this belief that films with people of color in the cast cannot sell overseas. So getting to Toronto and getting the reaction that we got at Toronto was really important to me.

QURESHI: Women still represent a minority of international filmmakers. But Olivier Assayas, who directed Juliette Binoche in "Clouds Of Sils Maria" says in his native France, women like Binoche have power throughout their careers.

OLIVIER ASSAYAS: I come from a history, a tradition that these independent European cinema and, more specifically, French independent cinema, where actresses have always had very strong parts - and I mean, not just

young actresses, also older actresses. You know, you have, like, major movie stars. Today, Catherine Deneuve or Isabelle Huppert or Juliette are major movie stars there.

QURESHI: And that seems to be the divide between the world of film festivals and the mainstream Hollywood multiplex, says film critic Ruby Rich.

RUBY RICH: The gender imbalances are still there. They're still around. They really set in the minute the film festival closes up shop. But for a few magic days, you really get to see a much wider breadth of the human experience. And you really can enjoy what the world might look like on screen if everybody got a fair shot at making film.

QURESHI: Bruna Papandrea, the co-producer of "Gone Girl" and "Wild" says even she gets the Hollywood treatment.

PAPANDREA: Oh, my God. It's incredibly frustrating. I mean, the figures are kind of mind blowing when you look at some of those studies. I mean, like 15 percent of protagonists in movies are women. I mean, that's - that's - no, that's mind blowing.

QURESHI: It's not just a numbers game. It's also about how women are portrayed. Twenty years ago, cartoonist Alison Bechdel came up with a test for that. And film critic Ruby Rich said it still applies.

RICH: Here's the Bechdel test. See what films you know that can pass it. One, there has to be more than one woman in a film. Two, they have to actually talk to each other at some point. Three, you've got to let them talk about something other than the male character who's going to walk into the room in a minute. Almost no films pass it.

QURESHI: One film that does is "The Keeping Room." It's screenwriter Julia Hart's debut.

JULIA HART: It's funny; I didn't even know about the Bechdel test when I wrote it. And I think that that was a good thing because it wasn't - I wasn't consciously seeing, you know, how many scenes can I put in this movie where women talk about something other than men. I think it comes from writing strong female characters that, organically, they're just talking about other things - you know, that there are more important things than talking about the men in their life.

QURESHI: The women in her film are left to fend for themselves at the end of the Civil War.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE KEEPING ROOM")

UNIDENTIFIED ACTRESS #2: (As character) She was supposed to be working with you.

UNIDENTIFIED ACTRESS #3: (As character) I can't keep my eyes on her all the time. There's work to do, and sometimes you've got to learn what's right.

QURESHI: The film is now at the London Film Festival. And it's divided critics over its feminist take on women's role in war.

HART: What we were doing with "The Keeping Room," and what I'm trying to do in other projects I'm working on, is not to take women and put them in the roles that we see men in. It's not about, like, suddenly this woman is, you know, a superhuman strength action hero, like, drop-kicking 50 assassins at once, you know? What I'm excited to see is honest portrayals of women being the heroes.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "DUKHTAR")

UNIDENTIFIED ACTRESS #4: (As character, foreign language spoken).

QURESHI: In the new film, "Dukhtar," a mother saves her daughter from a forced marriage in tribal Pakistan. It's Afia Nathaniel's first feature film, and as one of the few women filmmakers in that country, she had to overcome her own set of obstacles. But she found a receptive marketplace in Toronto.

AFIA NATHANIEL: When you're a first-time filmmaker coming from a country like Pakistan that is not known for cinema, and suddenly you're in Toronto, where you have such an embracing audience that understands world cinema, for us it was completely eye-opening of the possibilities that exist.

QURESHI: Film festivals are featuring richer portraits of women this year, says critic Ruby Rich. But she says that doesn't mean a sustainable change is on its way.

RICH: Twenty years ago, I interviewed Gina Davis on stage coming off of this little hit movie she made, "Thelma And Louise." And she talked about wanting to play complex female characters. But until we have somebody like Reese Witherspoon - no, like 40 Reese Witherspoons - actually doing something about it, actually putting production money out there for women directors, actually putting money out there for screenplays, exploring the lives and thoughts and crises of complicated women characters - until that happens, we're not going to get anywhere. We're going to be having this conversation in 10 years, in 20 years, in 30 years.

QURESHI: In the meantime, Ruby Rich she says you'll find her tucked away in her seat at a film festival. Bilal Qureshi, NPR News.

### What is the Bechdel Test?

### What are the three rules of the Bechdel Test?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



# Casting Call: Hollywood Needs More Women



*The Heat*, a female buddy-cop movie starring Melissa McCarthy and Sandra Bullock, made \$40 million in its opening weekend, but is one of the few movies in recent history with female leads.

JACKI LYDEN, HOST:

It's WEEKENDS on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, from NPR News. I'm Jacki Lyden.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD")

LYDEN: Summertime: the perfect time for a night out at the cinema.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "HOLLYWOOD HOTEL")

UNIDENTIFIED ACTRESS #1: (As character) Hollywood Hotel. Good evening.

LYDEN: Maybe you've noticed something missing at the movies - like women. I'd like to say hooray for Hollywood, but women make up a minority of movie creators: 7 percent of the directors, 13 percent of the writers, 20 percent of the producers. That's nearly five men for every woman working behind the scenes. Our cover story today: film's forgotten females.

Out of last year's biggest movies, 28 percent of the speaking characters were female. That's down from a third, five years ago. Those numbers are from the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California.

(SOUNDBITE OF CROWD CHATTER)

LYDEN: On a recent Saturday night in Washington, D.C., filmgoers milled about for a movie night.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: "Man of Steel."

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #1: "The Bling Ring."

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #2: "Monsters University."

LYDEN: And we were curious. Have they noticed a lack of X chromosomes at the cinema?

MELISSA HATTAB: Just based off of the last few movies I've seen, they've all just been really male-centric, like "World War Z" and "Man of Steel" and "This is the End" and...

LYDEN: Twenty-year-old Melissa Hattab.

HATTAB: Women see movies just as much as men do. I know that I love going to the movies. And I like seeing characters that I can relate to. But it's mostly just about - the main character is the man and then if there's a woman in it, she's just the love interest, or is there to look hot and is really passive.

CHANCELLOR GAFFNEY: I don't think the women presence is lacking.

LYDEN: And that's 22-year-old Chancellor Gaffney.

GAFFNEY: Even like, Sofia Coppola - she just directed "The Bling Ring"; and Amy Adams, she's co-starring in "Man of Steel." I really don't feel there's like a shortage of women presence in film.

LYDEN: Tabitha Belkorchi says that's just the problem.

TABITHA BELKORCHI: Everybody makes a big deal when Coppola directs a film. We're at a point in our time that it should be every day. But no, we still make a big deal about it because there's so few women doing it.

LYDEN: That's not to say no women are doing it. "The Heat" has got girl power.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "THE HEAT")

SANDRA BULLOCK: (As Special Agent Sarah Ashburn) They're my Spanx. They hold everything together.

MELISSA MCCARTHY: (As Detective Shannon Mullins) Why? What's going to come popping out?

LYDEN: This female buddy pic opened to big buzz this weekend - starring Melissa McCarthy and Sandra Bullock. The screenwriter was a woman, Katie Dippold. It echoes the ultimate female buddy movie, 1991's "Thelma & Louise" starring Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "THELMA & LOUISE")

GEENA DAVIS: (As Thelma) Let's keep going.

SUSAN SARANDON: (As Louise) What do you mean?

DAVIS: (As Thelma) Go!

LYDEN: I asked Geena Davis about the buzz that surrounded "Thelma & Louise."

DAVIS: Every time there's a movie starring women, the media is very excited to say well, this changes everything, and that certainly happened with "Thelma & Louise." Now there's going to be so many female buddy pictures. And nothing changed. And more recently, "Bridesmaids" and "The Hunger Games" - well, now everything has changed. And it's not going to.

LYDEN: Lately, Davis has been busy trying to figure out why women aren't better represented in film, and how to turn things around. She founded a think tank in 2004, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

DAVIS: When my daughter was about 2 years old, and I started watching G-rated videos and little kids' TV shows and things, I was floored to see a huge dearth of female characters. I had assumed that surely, we are showing boys and girls sharing the sandbox equally, by now. I knew that there were fewer female characters in general, in Hollywood. I - you know, I'm in the industry, and I've experienced that; but I didn't know that it applied to what we show to kids.

LYDEN: You commissioned a dozen studies on women in media, from the Annenberg School at USC. Some of the figures just really boggle the imagination when you think that women are half of all moviegoers. If we didn't go to the movies, maybe this would make more sense. But we turn out in droves.

DAVIS: I know. It really does boggle the mind. In family films and kids' television shows, for every one female character, there are three male characters. But lest people think that it's all bad news, we were able to see an increase in the percentage of female characters in family films such that, if we add female characters at the rate we have been for the past 20 years, we will achieve parity in 700 years.

LYDEN: (Laughing)

DAVIS: And my institute, we have dedicated ourselves to cutting that in half. And we will not rest until it's only 350 years. (Laughing)

LYDEN: And why is this the case?

DAVIS: My theory is that since all anybody has seen, when they are growing up, is this big imbalance - that the movies that they've watched are about, let's say, 5 to 1, as far as female presence is concerned - that's what starts to look normal. And let's think about - in different segments of society, 17 percent of cardiac surgeons are women; 17 percent of tenured professors are women. It just goes on and on. And isn't that strange that that's also the percentage of women in crowd scenes in movies? What if we're actually training people to see that ratio as normal so that when you're an adult, you don't notice?

LYDEN: I wonder what the impact is of all of this lack of female representation.

DAVIS: We just heard a fascinating and disturbing study, where they looked at the ratio of men and women in groups. And they found that if there's 17 percent women, the men in the group think it's 50-50. And if there's 33 percent women, the men perceive that as there being more women in the room than men.

LYDEN: Oh, my goodness.

DAVIS: So is it possible that 17 percent women has become so comfortable, and so normal, that that's just sort of unconsciously expected?

LYDEN: Why else, Geena Davis, do these kinds of disparities matter?

DAVIS: What we're, in effect, doing is training children to see that women and girls are less important than men and boys. We're training them to perceive that women take up only 17 percent of the space in the world. And if you add on top of that, that so many female characters are sexualized - even in things that are aimed at little kids - that's having an enormous impact as well.

LYDEN: That's Geena Davis, on her work with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Longtime producer Lynda Obst has watched Hollywood undergo some seismic changes, and they haven't been good for women. When she began in the industry three decades ago...

LYNDA OBST: You could make up an idea, pitch it to your boss, and if you were lucky and he liked the idea, and you had a good writer, you could sell it; and it might even get made into a movie.

LYDEN: Obst calls those days the old abnormal - when she produced numerous hits including "Flashdance," "Sleepless in Seattle" and "One Fine Day." These days, says Obst, it's the new abnormal trying to get studios just to pick up a movie.



OBST: What they want are ideas that are known around the world before they even get made because it makes marketing the ideas even easier - which is, of course, why they want to make ideas that can easily become sequels, and then become franchises.

LYDEN: Obst calls these movies tent poles: dependable, blockbuster brands like "Spider-Man," "X-Men" and "Harry Potter." And she writes about the changes in her new book, "Sleepless in Hollywood." So what, exactly, accounts for the new abnormal?

OBST: Between 2006 and 2009, the cushion that had allowed all of these one-off movies to get made - the DVD cushion that accounted for 50 percent of the profits of the movie business - had utterly collapsed, in the wake of downloading and piracy. And people were no longer buying DVDs.

And with that profit margin gone, the studios were paralyzed until they realized that there was only one revenue stream that was replacing the revenue stream that the DVDs had represented. And that was the international audience.

At the same time as the DVDs were disappearing, the emerging markets of Russia and China and South America were taking their place. So they had to start making movies that were similar to the ones that were breaking so hugely abroad.

LYDEN: How has that affected films about women and for women?

OBST: Well, not very well. (Laughing) The kinds of movies that they like abroad are movies with huge special effects, movies with gigantic explosions. And moreover, they don't like movies with too much dialogue; so that what they like are movies without cultural nuance, movies that are essentially universal in your ability to understand them. And now, 80 percent of the business is overseas.

LYDEN: Wow.

OBST: And when I began in the business, it was 20 percent. So women's movies - that is, romantic comedies, dramas - they don't play well overseas.

LYDEN: You write that in 2011, "Bridesmaids" was the only original story in the top 15 films. Women are half of all filmgoers. Why haven't we seen other films challenge the dynamics that you've been speaking of?

OBST: There is a shibboleth - a rule - in the movie business, and I can see it in the marketing of the new Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy movie; that women will go to men's movies, if they're good, but men won't go to women's movies. Now, it's just not true. But as I was told recently, when you market a movie - listen to this, it's kind of amazing - do not risk losing a single male viewer by catering to women in your advertising and marketing...

LYDEN: Wow.

OBST: ...because women will go anyway.

LYDEN: Is it going to be possible to see movies that women see themselves in, and are not just going because it's an action movie and it's date night?

OBST: This is about making them for less, and this is about great scripts. You know, I can always get a great script made. I just can't get it made at the same price point I could get it made for in the old abnormal. You know, my movies used to be 30, \$40 million. I'm going to have to make those movies for \$20 million now or even, in some cases, \$8 million.

So what I think we need to do is maybe make one less marginal tent pole a year for \$200 million, at the studios; and break that \$200 million down into 10 \$20-million movies that serve another audience. And then also, we have what I call tadpoles, which are the opposite of tent poles. There are a tremendous amount of young producers making movies for much less money. And we're going to have to starve those movies, but then prove that there's an audience.



And women have been incredibly supportive in showing that there is an audience. And we have to be conscious of making those movies good enough for the audience to show up for.

LYDEN: Lynda Obst - she's the author of the new book "Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business." And consider this: "The Heat" did way better than expected, coming in a strong second place in the weekend box office. It raked in 40 million bucks. That beat out the action-adventure flick "White House Down."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "THAT'S WHY GOD MADE THE MOVIES")

PAUL SIMON: (Singing) That's why God made the movies...

LYDEN: This is NPR News.

**Why are there fewer women in film than men?**

