

WOMEN DIRECTORS: A HISTORY LESSON

By Renne Leatto

Okay ... I give you the clues and you guess who this is ... a film director ... who made blockbuster after blockbuster ... signed by Universal Studios and paid more than most other directors in Hollywood ... popular enough to be "elected" the honorary mayor of Universal City ... landed an exclusive studio deal with carte blanche on all film contents and budgets ... eventually formed an independent production company and continued to make hit after hit.

Steven Spielberg? Good guess, but off by seventy years and one gender. These events occurred in the career of a *woman* director named Lois Weber. She was the Steven (or Stephanie!) Spielberg of her time. From 1914 until 1934 she made more than 400 films, most of which are now forgotten or lost to deterioration. In honor of Women's History Month, I resurrected some facts about Lois Weber and her small circle of colleagues - those brave women who ventured into one of the most male-dominated careers between 1900 and 1960.

Before anyone realized how much money could be made in motion pictures, the field was wide open to women. Pre-1920, more women held creative and decision-making positions in Hollywood than at any time since. In addition to Lois Weber, about two dozen other women directors made Hollywood films in the silent era with at least as much commercial success as their male counterparts. The studios still used the real names of women directors in the credits, not afraid (as they later became) that audiences would have a problem "accepting" a woman-directed film. The only woman director who didn't get credit in the 1920's was Mary Pickford, who frequently took over the helm when her regular director went on an alcoholic binge. The studio thought that "America's Sweetheart" could only preserve her little-girl image if the public remained unaware of her real abilities!



Lois Weber and film crew

By the 1930's, only one American woman still directed regularly — Dorothy Arzner. If you saw a list of her films, I think you'd agree that she wasn't offered the hottest properties. Not one of her titles is recognizable, even to an old-movie buff like me.

Then, in 1949, enter Ida Lupino. If you've seen any of the films she directed, you probably didn't realize it. During the cultural dark ages of the 1950's, the studios insisted that the public would reject films by women directors, so they forced Lupino to use a male pseudonym in the credits. Only a few of her later films proclaimed her name on the directing credit, where it belonged.

A report by the Women's Steering Committee of the Director's Guild of America says that, between 1949 and 1979, " ... 7,332 feature films were distributed by major companies. Of those, 14 were directed by women. Of the 14, half were directed by one woman, Ida Lupino, who had her own production company and therefore was not hired by anyone — she 'hired' herself."

So that's it - the whole story on pre-1960 women directors. The good news is, things have changed. The bad news is, they haven't changed much. Today's women still direct less than one per cent of professional movie, TV, video, and commercial projects.

Should women who are not directors care? I think so. If you see all media as subtle (or not-so-subtle) social propaganda — each program promoting its creator's point of view — then you realize how much influence film and TV directors have on society. Next time you see a movie that portrays women as sex objects, airheads, and/or second-fiddles to the men, check the credits. A hundred-to-one, a man directed it. Intentional or not, certain points of view, those held by the (male) majority of directors, get more play in all media.

What about the writers? Isn't sexism written into scripts? Sometimes. But directors interpret scripts, sometimes drastically changing the writer's intent. A chauvinist director can take a script written by Gloria Steinem and turn it into a movie that looks like it was written by Chauvin himself. On the other hand, women directors often empower and dignify female characters, even those supporting male leads.

Entertainment has a powerful social influence, especially on children. Can our society be healthy and balanced if one gender's perspective dominates? Would the world change for the better if our collective consciousness had more exposure to the female point of view? Tune in next century when, hopefully, a new generation of visionary women will dare to tell stories from their own perspective.