

'Twilight' director advocates for women in film

Catherine Hardwicke, guest at Portland film festival, is concerned about gender disparity in Hollywood

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Catherine Hardwicke doesn't call her first movie, "Thirteen," a "job." It was a labor of love between her and then-14-year-old Nikki Reed, who wrote the script with Hardwicke and starred in the film.

It was a labor of love built with "blood, sweat and tears," she said. She pulled together the money and did everything she could to get it off the ground. And get it off the ground she did.

After its 2003 Sundance premiere, it won six awards and was nominated for almost a dozen more.

Now, 13 years and a \$400 million movie deal later, Hardwicke still struggles to get the films she envisions off the ground.

Only 4 percent of the top-grossing films in the 12 years leading up to 2014 were directed by women, a University of Southern California study found. The same study found that less than a third of speaking roles in more than 400 feature films went to women. What's more is that these statistics have not changed significantly in the past 10 years, and some — such as percentages of female screenwriters — have even regressed.

These issues have not only been highlighted by media outlets, celebrities and scholarly articles, but also through the American Civil Liberties Union's call for federal investigation into gender bias in the film industry, which was spurred by the testimony of director Maria Giese.

In Portland, the Portland Oregon Women's Film Festival, or POWFest, has been elevating the voices and visions of female directors locally through an annual festival of woman-directed films, monthly viewings, and director workshops for teenage girls. This year the festival returns March 3-6 with Hardwicke as the guest of honor. She will hold an interactive discussion at the festival, as well as screen her films "Thirteen," "Twilight" and the 2015 "Miss You Already."

Sarah Hansell: Why do you think the gender disparity is so severe in the film industry, even now in the 21st century?

Catherine Hardwicke: I guess it is so ingrained. People want to hire their mini-me or whatever. A lot has been said about the new "Jurassic Park" and Steven Spielberg and the kid that they hired to direct it — and "he looked just like me at that age, he wore his baseball cap and everything. He's like me at

that age." You know, so let's hire him to do this \$200 million movie and support him.

But they didn't look at a young African-American girl and say, "That really reminds me of me at that age; let's give her \$100 million" — even though she might have made a wonderful movie at Sundance too.

People are just used to supporting and mentoring and hiring people that look like them. But on another level, we've all got this unconscious gender bias built into our systems. Even women too; even conscious women. We have generations and generations of looking at a male as an authority figure, and not a woman.

The film business really lags behind because we have less criteria. It's much more subjective. You can say, I want to hire the best person for the job. But the best person for the job would be somebody who's already directed three action movies, maybe, or three high-grossing films.

Well, we know that every single year, 96 or 97 of the 100 top-grossing films in the U.S. are directed by men. So every year there's going to be 96 or 97 more men have directed a big, high-grossing film.

S.H.: You've said that you thought your success from "Twilight" would carry you into other good jobs, but that wasn't the case. What happened, and do you think it would've been different if you were a man?

C.H.: Oh yeah, I think we know by looking at statistics that it would've been different. We know that guys who direct a big blockbuster

or start a big franchise like that, direct a \$400 million movie, have traditionally gotten a three-picture deal. Also somewhere, some kind of support. That didn't happen for me.

I'm sure if I'd done things that were in my kill zone, they call it, like another young adult, romantic story, I probably pretty easily could've gotten a job — if I wanted to do that.

So it's probably unfair to say that I didn't get any opportunities from it, but I definitely didn't get the opportunities that I'd thought, all those stories that you hear. You know, so-and-so got a car, they got a cool office and they got a deal. They were asked, "What do you want to direct next?" That did not happen.

S.H.: What do you think the impact of this overwhelmingly male, particularly white male, point of view has on both male and female audiences?

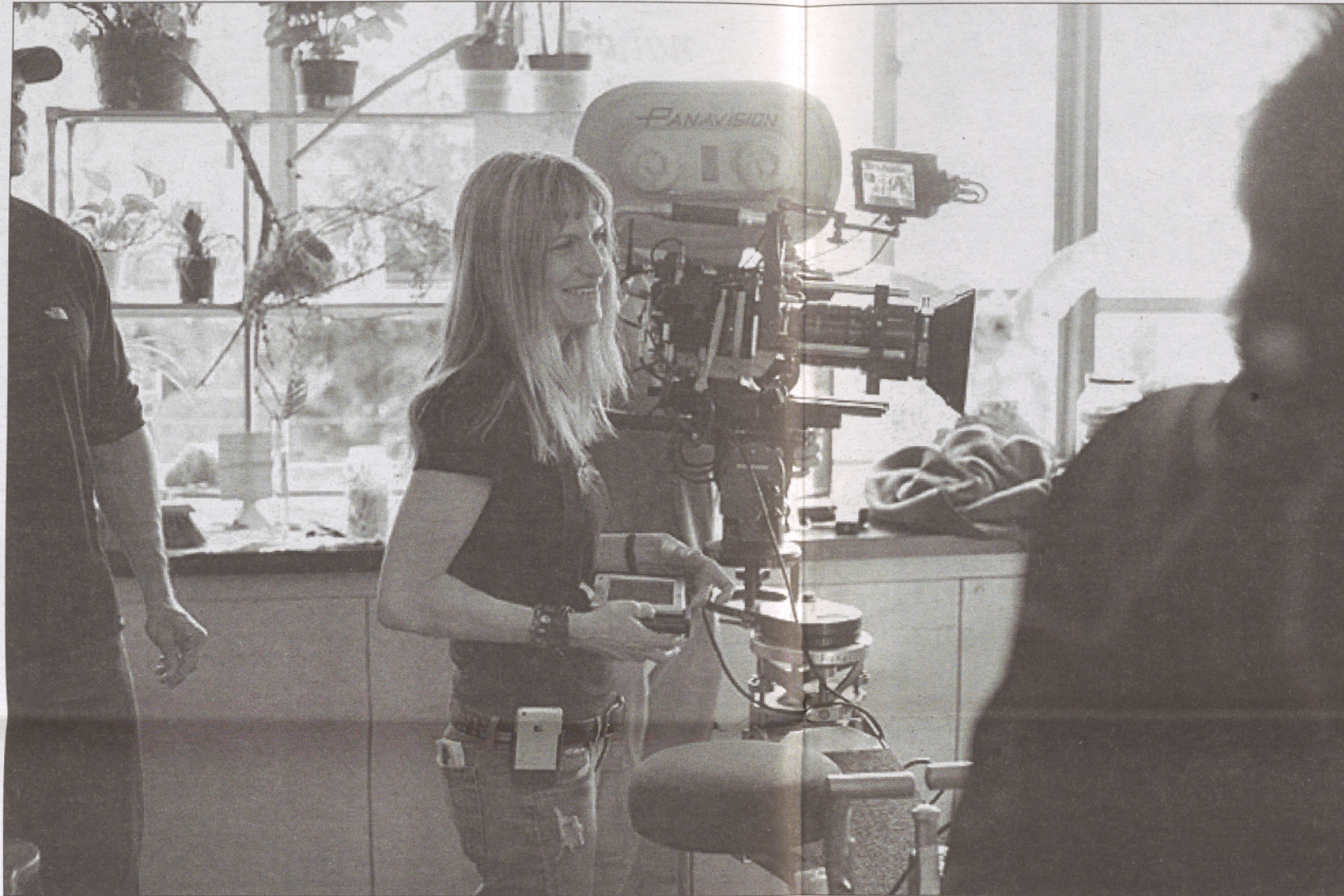


PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHERINE HARDWICKE/TWILIGHT

C.H.: I do think we are limiting what kind of stories are told. And when somebody does break through these barriers and tells another story and gets it seen at Sundance, we've seen studies that show that those "women's films" don't get as much distribution. They don't have as many marketing dollars behind them, so they don't do as well, either. It's harder for female directors to get to direct their next films.

They've figured out very well how to market to white teenage boys, but they haven't figured out how to market to a huge segment of the population, which is women. There are so many reasons for those problems. I mean, Meryl Streep pointed out how Rotten Tomatoes is skewed — 760 male critics on it and 170 women. So if anybody says, what movie are we going to see this weekend? You're going to go on Rotten Tomatoes and see, oh, that didn't get such a great review.

Because the male gaze maybe didn't like it, or the male gaze immediately slammed it as a chick flick, or immediately didn't like the storyline, didn't even give it a chance sometimes. We have to work on every level.

S.H.: Also, kind of a similar question, but how do you think that these stories created by and for overwhelmingly white men affect the development of both young girls and young boys

who are surrounded by this media?

C.H.: If you have cool images out there of multidimensional women who have interesting jobs and interesting lives, and actually have lines of dialogue with other women, you show these wonderful possibilities for people — it just gives hope. It gives kids all over the world a more realistic view, more exciting opportunities.

Last night I was at an event called Stop Cancer. They were honoring the movie I just did, "Miss You Already," because Toni Colette's character gets breast cancer in the film. And all the scientists that were honored at this event, they're doing impressive, amazing cancer research.

Almost all of them were young women. And they were just vibrant; they were doing radical research. And I was thinking, wow. This is so cool. I wish girls out there, and boys, were seeing these examples, of these brilliant people working in a scientific field and doing something amazing — very creative stuff.

Now do we see those characters very often? Not really. We see a much more limited view of what certain men think other men want to see. So I think telling these great stories is just going to expand people's outlook on life, and ideas, and possibilities for the future.

S.H.: The ACLU has also looked into this huge disparity, taking testimony from people in

the business, and even called for a federal investigation into the gender disparity in the film industry. Do you support that?

C.H.: Yes, I did seven hours of testimony myself.

I've been there two different sessions, actually, with them. They are very diligent about trying to understand our industry and get to the bottom of it, because it's not an easy thing to sort out, as you can imagine.

They were saying to me, if you go to McDonald's, you could say this person had three years' restaurant experience, yet they hired this other guy instead of her. Why did they not hire her? She's got more experience? And that is a much more clear-cut system. Whereas our business is a lot more complicated. So it was fascinating to actually walk them through each job that I got hired for, and how did I get that job.

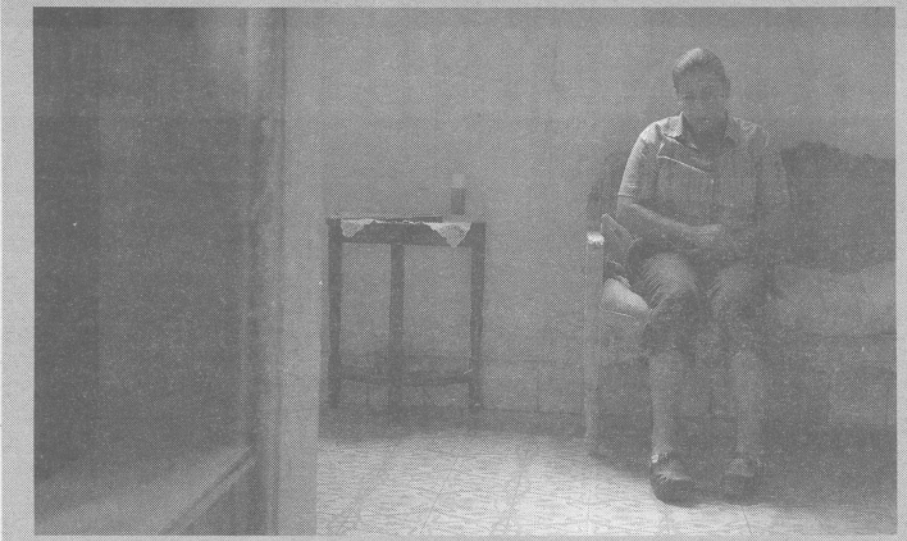
Some jobs, of course my first movie "Thirteen," that wasn't a job. Nobody hired me for that. Nobody wanted to make that movie about a 13-year-old girl. It was my blood, sweat and tears. I wrote it with Nikki and then just went out, did everything I could to get the money, pull it together and make it.

And that's how a lot of films are made. It's not like you're hired for it. So that's a little bit unique. But still, even in those cases, in an indie film like that, it still is easier, obviously,

Filmmaker Catherine Hardwicke is the director of "Twilight." Despite the success of the franchise, Hardwicke didn't receive the filmmaking opportunities she had expected. Hardwicke will be the guest of honor at the Portland Oregon Women's Film Festival in March.

"It still is easier, obviously, for a man to get that money together to make a low-budget film than it is for a woman. It is still easier for a man to get an actor to sign on to that movie than it is for a female director. All the way, the odds are still stacked against us."

CATHERINE HARDWICKE



COURTESY PHOTO

Estela, a film directed by Joacnith Vargas, will be presented at POWfest in March. Estela finds a moment of peace and balance in her life, between dementia and loneliness, while sexuality and illness join two elderly people.

POWfest to feature women's films

After a five-year hiatus, the Portland Oregon Women's Film Festival, or POWFest, relaunched in 2008. Eight years later it is still going strong. This year, the festival is March 3-6 at Hollywood Theatre. It will showcase films directed by women, education panels and discussions with the mission to strengthen "the community of women in film," according to the festival's website.

The festival lineup includes numerous shorts from directors across the world, a showcase of films by the young women who have participated in POWFest's workshops for high-school-age girls, and screenings of three films by guest of honor, Catherine Hardwicke, including "Miss You Already."

In addition to the annual festival, POWFest also runs seasonal POWGirls workshop series that teach high-school-age girls about film and media production, as well as monthly screenings of woman-directed films at the Clinton Street Theater.

The festival begins at 7 p.m. March 3 with Abigail E. Disney's film "Armor of Light." The films follows an evangelical minister grappling with the question, "Can you be both pro-life and pro-gun?" and his unlikely partnership with a woman who is pro-choice and grieving the death of a son who was shot and killed while unarmed.

As part of the POWFest, photographs by Ruth Harriet Louise, the first female photographer active in Hollywood and in charge of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer portrait studio in the late 1920s, will be displayed March 1-7 at the Hollywood Theatre, Hotel deLuxe and Alma Chocolate.

— Sarah Hansell

this company actually does support gender parity — not just talk about it; they did it. For every movie they make with a man, they make one with a female.

I think the more people get inspired and say, hey, this is a new world, there's diversity in the world, there's other stories, it's going to open up more markets. So it's not just only whatever comic book movies, or only movies where somebody kidnaps your daughter and you have to go looking for her and kill all the bad guys. I mean, we've seen those movies; that's fine. "Taken 6," or whatever. But let's see other stories, you know.

S.H.: Having experienced a lot of success with "Thirteen" and "Twilight" and then also having a lot of your ideas and attempts to make movies denied, what would your advice be to women who are trying to get started in this business?

C.H.: Well, I think the same old advice that we always have to say. Obviously, get your skill set to as high a level as you can. Just be as good as you can at your job. Work as hard as you can so that you're bulletproof on one level, that you understand story, you understand cinematography, you understand costumes,

you know.

Take all the classes. Go volunteer on other people's films. Get as much experience as you can. Put the effort in; do your homework; try to understand the business. Everything so that you're as good as you can be. So that if you get that shot to walk in the door and impress somebody at a company, that you impress the hell out of them.

When I came here, there wasn't so much talk about mentors, but what I did was volunteered all the time. I would be interning at this and doing that for free. That way I wasn't just sitting around hoping someone would hire me. I would be working all the time on shows or videos, whatever, trying to work with the best people I could.

I think it's the same advice, of course, if you're a writer-director. Of course you want to look for the most interesting material, and work hard on it and develop it and come up with a great idea and a great script. Network with other people, film festivals, meet actors, meet directors. I think it's the same stuff. You've just got to work super hard.