

## **A bigger slice of the action**

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*This Sunday could see the first woman director to win an Oscar. Why has it taken so long? Natasha Walter talks to leading female film-makers about the battles they face*

Sofia Coppola's Oscar nomination for best director this year for her second film, *Lost in Translation*, has been taken as something as a breakthrough for women. This weekend we shall find out whether she is the first woman ever to win. But how can it be that this is only the third time that a woman has even been up for this award - 30 years since Lina Wertmuller was nominated for *Seven Beauties* and more than 10 years since Jane Campion was nominated for *The Piano*? What is stopping women making the sort of films that take the highest honours? Women directors at the peak of their careers say that of course women in film have faced all the barriers that women in every sphere have faced - from encounters with outright sexism to the struggle to balance work and family life - but that the industry is now changing. Gurinder Chadha achieved a mainstream hit two years ago with *Bend It Like Beckham*, and is now about to release *Bride and Prejudice*, a Bollywood take on Jane Austen. It took her a long time to break through; after she directed her first film, she didn't direct another feature for six years. "I did meet resentment when I started out," she says, "but look, this is a hard industry for everyone. And I feel that the attitudes of an older generation have changed."

Beeban Kidron, who has just finished filming the second *Bridget Jones* film, has also felt barriers come down. "When I started it was so unusual for a woman to be directing," she says. "On my very first film I fired the assistant director after he called me 'the little lady'. But now I feel I have respect for what I have achieved. The only thing that I'm upset about is that I'd like to make a Bond film - and I know I'd do a good job - but that's always pooh-poohed."

Indeed, even if women don't face blatant sexism any more, they often say that they are still being ever so gently funnelled into making certain kinds of film. Women directors tend to complain about this more in the US,

where the big money goes into the films that glimmer with gore and shimmer with special effects - the sort the boys make. Even if they aren't itching to create those gut-wrenching spectacles, many women say that they are trusted less to handle budgets that men would take for granted.

Catherine Hardwicke, who was an experienced production designer before she broke into directing with her heartfelt film about teenage life, *Thirteen*, was struck by how hard she found it to get her first film financed. "It's harder, it is definitely harder," she told an online film magazine. "The other screenplays that I've written before this, you know, I had them really planned out ... [but] people would just say, 'You're never going to make that as your first movie. A \$5m movie, you're never going to direct that!' And I'm thinking to myself - argh! How many first-time directors have I worked with, and they had way bigger budgets than \$5m, and they're all guys? I do think it makes a real difference."

Other women echo Hardwicke's sense of frustration. Scottish director Alison Peebles, whose first feature film, *Afterlife*, was released last year, says she can already sense the same thing happening around her. "If I come up with a proposal for a film that involves more of a budget - maybe a period feature or something with higher production values - they might well say, 'Well, you haven't got the experience.' But I don't see that stopping them giving it to a man who doesn't have the experience either."

If women are being pushed into making smaller-scale, more intimate films, they are showing that they can succeed within those limits. At this year's Oscars we can measure the growing success of women directors in a way other than Coppola's nomination - and that's in the performances that women directors are generating. In 2002 only 7% of US films bore the stamp of a woman director, but this year's Oscars show that they are yielding the majority of nominations for best actress.

And these are performances you can't forget. Nancy Meyers has drawn the performance of her career from Diane Keaton in *Something's Gotta Give*, getting her to drop her actressy, brittle gestures for something more lively and vulnerable. Niki Caro got the 13-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes not so much to act her heart out in *Whale Rider*, as to live, apparently unconscious and unfettered, in front of the camera. And then there is the favourite for the award, the transformation of Charlize

Theron from glossy starlet to compelling antihero in Patty Jenkins' film about a lesbian serial killer, *Monster*. Hardwicke, whose film yielded a best supporting actress nomination for Holly Hunter, recently said: "So many movies directed by men last year are laden with special effects. Movies by women are about feelings, relationships and character." She says actors can recognise the difference between the way she directs and the techniques of her male peers. "These actors tell me, 'Male directors don't let us go there; we want to go there.'" This place that women directors are keen to take their characters is not necessarily somewhere conventionally feminine. Although Coppola was keen to focus on the feminine beauty and sweetness of her actress, Scarlett Johansson - for which Johansson won best actress at the Baftas as well as an Oscar nomination - other women directors are playing around with the usual view of women on screen.

Patty Jenkins was particularly set on breaking what she saw as traditional constraints on an actress when she started work on *Monster*. "We pushed it as far as we could go," she says. "We didn't want the sort of performance where a beautiful actress is meant to be playing an alcoholic but everything about her suggests that she isn't; you don't see the physicality of it." More unusual than Theron's bad teeth and heavy flesh, though, is her violent fury, which is neither glamorised nor excused. "Men around the film got quite nervous. They said we couldn't give audiences such an unsympathetic female character, that we needed to show her in a more sympathetic light. But I said no - you wouldn't say that to Martin Sheen. We can't shy away from this, she killed people."

All the women directors I have spoken to talk about their fascination with trying to get the sharpness and complexity of human emotion on to the screen. Peebles was an actor herself before she moved into directing, and says, "I think I am more simpatico with the actors than some directors."

Shona Auerbach is another director on the brink of mainstream success. *Dear Frankie*, a quiet and moving first film, has been bought for distribution by Miramax; it centres on the relationship between a single mother and her son. "I am very attracted to films in which human relationships and emotions take centre stage," she says. But like many of the other directors, she was wary of saying she felt that had anything to do with being a

woman. "Sure, I've been inspired by Jane Campion, but also by Kieslowski."

The challenge for the future is not just that women should be allowed to make more films, but that they should be able to make any kind of film. Indeed, what women screenwriters and directors keep saying is that they don't want to be boxed in by anyone's expectations of what they should be doing. With women from Lynne Ramsay to Gurinder Chadha and Sofia Coppola to Beeban Kidron gaining international attention, it feels as though we are only now seeing the start of a new generation of female film-makers who can work confidently across a range of styles.

This isn't happening only in the English language market; the Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf is just 24 and has already won two jury prizes at Cannes, for *Blackboards* and *At Five in the Afternoon*, both of which have political as well as personal themes.

Patty Jenkins sees the future struggle in this light. "More than just getting work for women directors, I feel that the battle line that is most difficult right now is trying to make universal stories if you are a woman. It's not about being a woman director and so feeling that you must make women's films - or, indeed, going into action films as a reaction to that. I want to make universal films with universal, powerful heroes."

Looking at it like that, it seems almost a pity that the Academy has chosen to nominate Coppola and her pretty-pretty vision of a girl in pink knickers falling for a witty older man, rather than some of the more striking visions that women directors are giving us. If only Coppola was on the list this year next to Makhmalbaf, Hardwicke and Jenkins, then the true range of women's achievements would be getting more honest recognition. That time will surely come.