

Hollywood, Etc.: Lauzen is keeping an eye on Hollywood

by Lee Grant

Martha Lauzen won't divulge her age, her marital or familial status, even her history on the faculty at San Diego State University. They are inquiries, she says, on which women for too long have been judged.

WOMEN IN FILM - Professor Martha Lauzen focuses on the representation of women in the TV and motion picture industries. Her research reports have been published in academic journals and are often referred to in Hollywood trade papers. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. Instead, it's all about the work, the annual reports she gathers on the status of women in the TV and motion picture industries.

A sample:

"In 2006, women comprised 15 percent of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. This is the same percentage of women employed in these roles in 1999 ... and a decline of two percentage points from 2005."

"Female TV characters were significantly younger than their male counterparts. Seventy percent of all characters in their 40s and 71 percent of all characters in their 50s were male. Women 40 and older comprised 9 percent of all characters. In contrast, men 40 and older accounted for 20 percent of all characters."

It was quiet on campus, a summer session winding down. In a hallway, Lauzen bumped into Greg Durbin, a professor of new media production, who had the key to a TV studio. That was an environment, rather than her cramped office, she found appropriate in which to have her picture taken.

Lauzen was teaching a class called "Women in Media." She has strong feelings about the image of women on TV, bemoaning the loss of "Commander in Chief," in which Geena Davis played the president of the United States. "A female as the most powerful woman in the world," she said. "It integrated her home life and professional life."

Then, there's the other side, NBC's "Age of Love," for instance, in which women in their 40s compete against women in their 20s for a relationship with a 30-year-old tennis pro: "Really awful," said Lauzen. "Pitting older woman against younger women ... over things like appearance, it's troubling to me, playing on every stereotype."

"On that show, 40-year-old women have not evolved more than the 20-year-olds. What it says is younger women shouldn't trust older women. The message is insidious and negative that younger women can't learn from older women."

In Hollywood, for the most part, "things haven't changed," said Lauzen. "And many women (in the industry) avoid talking about the issue (of representation) for fear of being labeled overly aggressive and liberal. It's a relationship business and they don't want to spoil that."

Her TV report - students help with the research - finds that women comprise 26 percent of all creators, executive producers, producers, directors, writers, editors and directors of photography working on situation comedies, dramas and reality programs, while women comprise 46 percent of the U.S. work force. "The numbers are moving in the right direction but still haven't reached parity," she said.

A recent account from the women's committee of the Directors Guild of America noted, "Out of the AFI (American Film Institute), USC, UCLA, NYU, comes a 23-year-old fellow who gets to immediately do two hours of episodic television and a chance for more - but not a 23-year-old woman."

"Male competence is still assumed," said Lauzen. "Look at the images in the media. Last year, we had Geena Davis as president of the United States. This year we have 'Pussycat Dolls: The Search for the Next Doll' and 'Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team' and 'The Girls Next Door.'

"And we wonder why women aren't taken seriously. The numbers are dismal. In 2001, women occupied 19 percent of the high executive positions. It's 15 percent in 2007."

Lauzen's findings, which have been published in the scholarly Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, found in film, "By genre, women were most likely to work on documentaries and romantic comedies and least likely to work on science fiction and horror pictures."

Also, on TV, "Females were more likely than males to be identified by their marital status." What that indicates, said Lauzen, "In our culture we tend to value women for how they look and who they're attached to and men for what they do."

"Women assume more power as they get older. Women come into their own professionally and in their personal lives - and their numbers on screen decline. We're not used to seeing powerful women in dramatic roles. We're uncertain how to deal with it."

In her work, said Lauzen, she doesn't use terms like "sexism" or "discrimination." "That stops the conversation," she said. "We want to improve the representation. We don't want to blame or scold, just to make it better." Meet Martha Lauzen

Martha Lauzen, professor of Media Studies, San Diego State University

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees, University of Iowa; Ph.D., University of Maryland

Author: "Boxed In: Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in the 2006-07 Prime-time Season" and "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2006"

TV show she likes: TNT's "The Closer"

TV show she doesn't: CW's "Pussycat Dolls: The Search for the Next Doll"

Key Quote: "I don't think it's a grand conspiracy of men in a darkened room who say, 'Don't hire women.' It's more subtle - the myth that women can't write about certain topics or can't handle a \$100 million budget. Men can make a movie and bring in medium box office and get a second chance; women don't."

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