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PREV

women Negotiate the System at Pepperdine's 'Women in Hollywood Conference'

Two-day conference features some of the top women in film industry.

By Michelle Vartan / Special to The Malibu Times Nov 20, 2013 Updated Jun 9, 2016



Pepperdine University



"Twilight" films screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg, speaking at last weekend's "Women in Hollywood" conference at Pepperdine University, echoed a common theme Saturday as panelists discussed challenges for women working in entertainment.

Rosenberg stressed the importance of women taking on nontraditional roles in the coming years.

"Tony Soprano or Don Draper, those characters have not existed yet for women...I am dying to write the first female Tony Soprano. I am dying to write the first female Iron Man," said Rosenberg.

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Statistics cited at the conference showed both good and bad news for women in the industry. On one hand, women are making slow and steady strides in gender equality in Hollywood. According to a 2011 Catalyst study, "Females accounted for 33 percent of all characters in the top domestic grossing films." A shocking number, considering the recent blockbuster "Gravity" starring Sandra Bullock has grossed \$5 billion to date.

On the other hand, speaking roles for women have declined in recent years, and only 15 percent of successful agents are women.

The conference was held Friday and Saturday at Pepperdine's Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution. More than 20 panelists and speakers in Hollywood's top director, producer and writer roles participated, including Brenda Chapman, writer and director of "Brave," Lesli Linka Glatter, executive producer and director of "Homeland," and Rosenberg.

Panelists discussed a variety of challenges for women working in entertainment, from negotiating a compensation package to the importance of non-traditional female characters in film. Chapman pointed out "Brave's" Princess Merida as female leads that defy the woman's societal role. Meanwhile, Lucy Fisher of "Divergent," set to release in March of 2014, noted the lead heroine Beatrice, the opposite of a damsel in distress, sets an example that women will be regarded for—confronting the female stereotype.

"The man wants her because she is brave and tough, that is what makes her attractive to him," said Fisher.

An especially apropos speaker was Nell Scovel, co-author of Sheryl Sandberg's "Lean In," which encourages women in the workplace to "sit at the table." Scovel commented that although women are appearing in new-traditional roles, the industry still has a long way to go before reaching parity.

"In the 25 years I have been in the business, we have seen enormous technological changes—cable, the creation of the internet—but despite the explosion in opportunity in media this one thing has barely budged. Women gaining their fair share of decision-making jobs," said Scovel.

Scovel shared some sobering statistics on women in entertainment, stating that women make up only one-third of the speaking roles in features and that, in fact, those female roles have dropped from 16 to 11 percent in the past 10 years. She went on to recite more stats to illustrate that the entertainment industry is a boys' club—for example, only 15 percent of successful agents are women.

"Lifetime [TV network] is now run by a man, and I'm fine with that, it's just that one day I would like to see Spike ran by a woman," said Scovel.

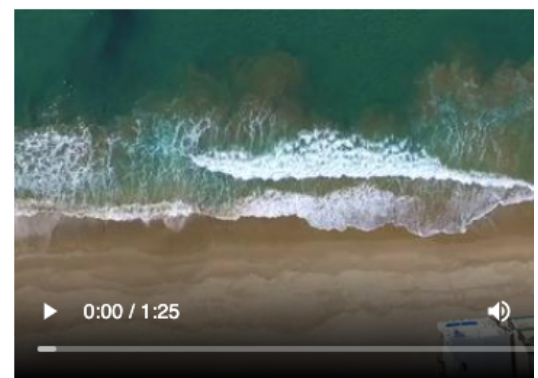
Scovel referenced popular films to help articulate her vantage point.

"I don't think the ceiling is made of glass. I think it's made of Terminator metal, where it shatters but then instantly rebuilds itself. This would explain why women have to fight to gain ground over and over again," said Scovel.

Panelists discussed the obstacles of making a picture with a female lead. Some offered



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up the disheartening reality that producers think the boys would rather stay at home and play video games than go to a movie starring a girl. That theory was disputed by the 2012 "Hunger Games" blockbuster.

"In an ideal world, it would be a story about a human being and that would cross over on all fronts," said Fisher.

One panel was solely dedicated to how to find a mentor or sponsor in Hollywood's intimidating and competitive landscape.

"The women who are working need to grab the hand of the next generation," said Glatter.

Attendees included 200 entertainment industry professionals and Pepperdine students. For Kim Denney, a Pepperdine master's student in media production, the conference was a reality check. She now understands the strength and determination it takes for a woman in show business.

"These women who have been working for so long and have phenomenal careers are still struggling in their careers, and I think it's amazing to learn from them and to learn that they are learning every day," said Denney.

The conference explored the idea of establishing a "new-normal," where women run the show. It wrapped up with the question, "Where do we go from here?"

Thomas Stipanowich, executive director of Pepperdine's Straus Institute, called the institute's collaboration with the university's Center for Entertainment, Media and Culture on the conference "a success beyond our expectations."

"To me the whole program was filled with new surprises and new insights," Stipanowich said. "I think everybody's excited to do more of it. More with the entertainment industry and more with the issues affecting women."

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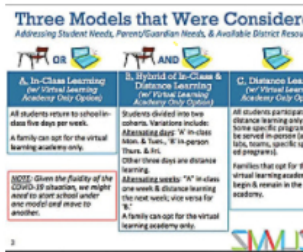


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Before becoming an actor, Hugh Jackman had a stint as what?


- Mechanic
- Truck driver
- High school gym teacher
- Masseuse

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