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the hot flashes

Brooke Shields

This ageless star handles her new role much like the rest of her life, with grace and compassion.



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AFI Directing Workshop For Women

ROUND-TABLE

The Directing Workshop for Women at the American Film Institute is a remarkable and one of a kind program. Since 1974, AFI has offered a tuition free training workshop and an opportunity to direct a digital short, which has launched the career of many working directors. We were honored to visit with the 2013 female directors and get their perspective on the program and the state of female directors in the industry.

Question

There is a seven year requirement to achieve acceptance into the program. What has been your specialty the past seven years



I have been a working actress for over twenty years. I love the work that I do and have been so fortunate to have been in many wonderful films and TV shows, but the industry does not grant tenure, and I found myself with fewer and fewer options as I crossed over the

line to 40.



I've worked on commercials, documentaries and narrative films all over the world.



I came up through the theater world. After graduating from Northwestern University's theater program, I founded a company in Chicago. With them, I wrote, directed and performed new plays. A day job as a receptionist in a screenwriting MFA program opened me up to film and television. I

moved to L.A. and got a job as an assistant at a production company that worked in one-hour television. I went from there to work as a writers' assistant on several TV shows. Meanwhile, I kept working to develop my own voice as a screenwriter and began to direct ultra low-budget short films. Eventually, I found out about the AFI program and decided it was the right time to apply.



I started my film career taking tickets at the Sundance Film Festival when I was 15 years old. That led

to my first career as a film festival programmer, but I was always making films and performing on the side. I took a leap about five years ago to pursue writing and directing full time. I currently work on "The Glades" on A&E, and am also developing a feature of my short.



I started working as a production assistant and second assistant director in Bogota, Colombia for a major prime time television series in the mid 1990's. In 1998, I moved to the U.S. to do a Master's Degree program in Film and Video. After graduation, I started freelancing as a production assistant and production coordinator. In 2003, I produced my first independent film, "Trip Out", for writer/director James Hausler. I produced two more features for him: "Wild Seven" and "Kalamity". In 2009, I opened my own production company, "Hidden Village Films", to develop and produce films with strong social messages. I am currently producing the feature documentary film, "Landfill Harmonic", which is an amazing story about a recycled orchestra.



ANTONETA KASTRATI

My background is in documentary films. I have directed documentary films for a decade now, exploring social issues in post-war Kosovo; traditions of marriage, women in politics, domestic violence, homophobia, deforestation, etc. I never thought I wanted to do fiction. I always felt like the set environment and repetition killed the spirit, but a few years ago after I moved to the U.S., my sister who studied Cinematography at American Film Institute wanted me to direct a four minute short MOS (without dialogue) for her school project, and here I am. I loved the entire process so much. I wrote a script after that and directed in Kosovo in 2011. Through fiction I found the freedom to reflect upon things that deeply matter to me, that I was not able to do justice to in a documentary form.



LISANNE SARTOR

I started out in the entertainment industry as a Directors Guild trainee, aka glorified indentured servant, and then became a DGA assistant director. All in, I worked seven or eight years in production until I finally admitted to myself that I hated having no creative input on a set. I went to UCLA and got an MFA in screenwriting and have been writing ever since. My screenplay, "Cleaverville," was produced by Don Enright at Alexander/Enright and aired on Lifetime Television. I've also written an MOW for the DeAngelis Group in Italy, had a script optioned by Hearst Entertainment, and developed projects with Roth-Arnold Productions and other companies.



ANTONETA KASTRATI

Growing up in a small village in Kosovo, in a highly patriarchal society where women weren't even allowed to pursue higher education, my dream as a little girl was to become a doctor, an educated woman, financially independent from men. I was studying to become a nurse and planned University studies to become a doctor, but then came the war. My family suffered severely. My mother and 24-year-old sister were killed just two days before NATO came in and the war was ended.

I survived. I was seventeen years old and the world I knew had shifted forever. I knew I had to not only live again, but find a way to reconstruct a world again, understand and draw meaning from it all. Not just from the massacre or the war, but from all the confusion, frustration and complexity I now saw in humankind. It was through filmmaking that I began to find the vehicle for this journey. So, I started making documentary films. Initially, I didn't think of it as a profession. I just kept having ideas for new documentaries and making them. Now, I cannot live without making films. It makes me feel normal and most importantly, makes me feel alive. For me, filmmaking is my therapy.



CATHERINE DENT

I decided to learn another skill and applied to AFI to learn how to direct. I was shocked at how little I knew, even after 20 very busy years on one side of the camera, but it has also been gratifying to find directing to be an evolution of all I've learned as an actress rather than a change or transformation.

From the very beginning, like most people when they begin in this business. Then I discovered the craft of the Cinematographer and was drawn to that profession. As time passed and I gained experience as a Cinematographer, I again became interested in directing. As much as I love my work as a Cinematographer, I felt unfulfilled as a visual storyteller; I wanted to have more of an influence over the stories that were being told.



STEPHANIE MARTIN

Question

When did you know you wanted to become a director



LISANNE SARTOR

I was ten and had just seen "The Sound of Music." I was addicted to it. I somehow convinced my teacher to let me use the entire class to put on a play version of it. No script. No sets, just me, thirty-five kids and an empty library. The result wasn't exactly Shakespeare or even remotely "The Sound of Music", but suddenly I'd found my true calling, storytelling and bossing people around (directing).

I knew at age 9 that I wanted to be a filmmaker. I was born in Cucuta, Colombia in 1976, a city located along the border with Venezuela. The social, political and economic background of my country is part of what defines me today.

My country was undergoing challenging political times in the 1980's, and 1985 was a very influential year in my life. That year, I remember watching television and seeing images of the Palace of Justice being taken over by the revolutionary group M-19. I also remember watching violent images of army tanks shooting the building where many innocent victims were trapped.

Months later I watched an adventurous children's movie, "Goonies". That film made me feel as if I were being transported to a totally different reality, a world where everything could be possible and where dreams could come true. I wanted to experience that same amazing positive feeling again and again. I wanted to make other people experience that as well. Since that age, I knew I wanted to make movies.

I focused my career on producing, and now after years of supporting other directors' ideas and projects, I know I am ready to embrace the directing role. The AFI gave me the chance to start preparing for this new role.



JULIANA PENARANDA-LOFTUS



LAUREN LUDWIG

I've always been a storyteller. It took me much longer to realize film was my medium. I was naturally drawn to theater and acting first and as I travelled along that path I realized that the act of creating and shaping the story was more compelling to me. I naturally drifted towards playwriting and directing. When I started to get interested in film, I was intimidated at first, but I've come to see my background in theater as an asset in a medium that's often taught entirely from the technical perspective.

I knew when I was 15 and watching movies at the film festival. I used to grill the filmmakers about their favorite movies and make long lists of films to see. There was only one art house, so sometimes I would have to drive to San Francisco from Salt Lake City to track them down.



SHAZ BENNETT



Round-Table

Film/Directing

“Wild Horses” have long been a symbol of our Western heritage. At the beginning of the 20th century, more than two million wild horses roamed the American West. Today, there are more wild horses in captivity than there are in the wild. Thousands of horses are sent to Canadian and Mexican slaughterhouses every year. As you read, the roundups continue and dozens of herds are being forever removed from their lands.

“Wild Horses” is the story of two generations of women who bear witness to the brutality of wild horse roundups in the American West. In writing the screenplay with my friend Jessica Walsh, we were inspired by a quote by Anna Sewall, the author of Black Beauty, “If we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.” “Wild Horses” represents my voice as a filmmaker, and it is my call to action. Just as this quote served as our inspiration, I hope our film will serve as the motivation for people to stand up for what they believe in.

In making “Wild Horses”, we were blessed with the collaboration of a stellar cast and crew. This was thanks to our ever-growing “film family” that extends and grows with every new film, and to the fact that many of those approached were touched by the issue explored in our film. Our “little” short counted with the participation of some of the best in this business. Starting with our lead actress Mireille Enos (“The Killing”, “World War Z”) to Brooke Shields, Cinematographer, Robert Richardson (“The Aviator”, “Platoon”, “Django Unchained”), Horse Trainer, Rex Peterson (“Hidalgo”, “Seabiscuit”, “The Horse Whisperer”), Sound Mixer, Mark Ulano (“Titanic”), Post Production Supervisor, Ron Ames (“Star Trek”, “Avatar”), and Composer, Hauschka to name a few. Our film was a true example of collaboration, which brought together all of the best aspects of this business, which I am grateful to be a part of.



STEPHANIE MARTIN



LAUREN LUDWIG

“Burn Brightly” is the story of Andy Shaw. He’s 14 and allergic to the sun. This has shaped his entire life. He spends 95% of his time in his house. From his bedroom window he watches the world outside and it’s from there that he first saw ‘The Woman’. She 40 years old, jogs every day, and he’s fallen in love with her. The day of the film is the day Andy decides he’s going to talk to ‘The Woman’ no matter what.



CATHERINE DENT

My film, “Silk”, is about, Rani, a woman who was forced into marriage at age 11 when she was traded by her family in order to settle a family dispute. Now a middle aged woman living with a man she never loved, Rani finds a unique opportunity to reclaim her life.



JULIANA PENARANDA-LOFTUS

“Learning to Fly” is about the innocence and imagination of a child in contrast with the harsh reality of life in urban America. The story takes place in East Los Angeles.

It is a short film about an 8-year-old child, Charlie, who believes his odd neighborhood handyman, Ernie, has super hero powers. Charlie finds something no one else sees in his neighbor, not even his best friend Billy. As his curiosity grows, Charlie forms a friendship with socially stunted Ernie, which reinforces Charlie’s belief Ernie may have super human abilities. Jealous of Charlie’s new friendship with Ernie, and eager for tangible proof that Ernie is what Charlie says, Billy comes up with a plan that has dire consequences.

I believe in finding magic in unexpected people and unexpected places, and I wanted to convey that message with this film.

Question

Can you tell us about your short film



LISANNE SARTOR

“Six Letter Word” stars Rumer Willis as an unlikely mom who’s forced to confront her young son’s autism after an unexpected encounter with one of her johns. My older son has high functioning autism and was diagnosed when he was seven, the age of the little boy in the film. When I first wrote the script I had the day my son was diagnosed with autism in mind, but the script didn’t work well. The mother simply didn’t pop. Then I remembered a couple I’d met in an autism parenting class who seemed more likely to be perps on “Cops” than class participants. They turned out to be the best parents in the room. They loved their kid to exhaustion, and they instinctively knew what she needed; they were blunt about their shortcomings and dubious about their ability to handle all that life had thrown at them. Yet their humor, warmth and love for their child rose above their doubts and challenges. When I wrote my protagonist Zoe with this couple in mind, I found my true story. So “Six Letter Word” isn’t just about autism, me, or even a mom grappling to accept her child’s challenges, though those elements remain. It’s about self-doubt, the discovery of inner strength through surprising sources, and the fact that the people who are best at parenting often come in unlikely and very human packages. Most of all, it’s about the multi-faceted ties that bind parent to child.



ANTONETA KASTRATI

My short film “She Comes in Spring” is a story about a mysterious young woman who appears at the steps of a middle-aged father in a Serbian village, compelling him to uncover a dark secret buried in his wartime past. It explores the circumstances that drive normal human beings to commit murder and confronting yourself after such actions.

“She Comes in Spring” is the third short story in my collection of war stories I have made in the past two years. Although at the core this is a fictional story, it is inspired by the story of my mother and sister and many other stories I heard during the Kosovo war. It was a very hard film for me to write. The most challenging project I have done so far. It is a beginning of a process of dealing with the painful part of the past, which I have put behind for so many years.



SHAZ BENNETT

It’s about a kid working in a fish cannery in Alaska who day-dreams of becoming an international superstar. Leo stands out in a crowd and that’s not always a good thing in Alaska. The core of the story is of an outsider who finds a friend.



I am honored to be part of this incredible program, and grateful to have collaborated with such giving gifted women. Just like there has always been an old boys' network in Hollywood, I believe the DWW is the beginning of a new network that I can look to for guidance, support and advice.



In terms of helping me achieve my goals, what the AFI DWW gave me were parameters. Along the way, many individuals asked me why I decided to make my film within the confines of the program. The fact that I was presented with parameters helped immensely. When you're on your own, it is more difficult to stick to a certain shoot date or a budget for instance. Because AFI delineates its expectations so precisely, it makes it easier to respect them. Of course, there are countless other parameters which I challenged, but I think that's what makes one a better director. It's the parameters one decides to challenge. I did what I needed to do to make "Wild Horses" the best possible film it could be.

Question

How has the Workshop and AFI helped you achieve your goals



The Workshop has helped me in so many ways. Firstly, it was such an honor to be in the midst of such a talented group of women who have become like my sisters now. Regarding the workshop, I have learned so much from all the wonderful classes on acting, screenwriting, visual storytelling, boot camps etc. All the classes have taught me how to focus my story and how to use all the elements from production design to camera in telling the story in the best possible way. AFI upholds such a high standard for filmmaking and it truly prepares you for the industry.

Secondly, I gained experience on how to make a film in L.A. and go by the rules. I had done my previous film in Kosovo, and over there you can do anything you want. You can have all the locations you want and it is very cheap, which is why I am making my first feature in Kosovo. In L.A. it is very different, you are much more restricted in all aspects of filmmaking, but then you have access to the right equipment and professional crew that you cannot find in Kosovo. There is a strong work ethic here in Los Angeles that I appreciate so much.

Also, now I belong to a community of filmmakers from AFI. I still take classes sometimes.



The AFI workshop gave me the structure I needed to go out and direct my first project. It is not a perfect program, but it has been a terrific start. I don't think I ever would have gone from start to finish without this program. The idea of a short film was thrilling, but daunting. They made it more palatable, and I found a tremendous support group with the seven other women. I could not have gone through the year without their professionalism, encouragement, critique and friendship.



It helped me make a better movie. I could've gone out and shot this on my own, but it wouldn't have been even half the film it is now. Because of the AFI DWW, I beat my script in and out of shape and then back in again. I took fantastic directing classes with Joan Darling, and I went through a regime of classes that ranged from production design, to editing, to costume design that forced me to think about every minute detail of my movie. I learned about myself as a director and pushed myself far harder than I would have on my own. Best of all, I met seven incredible women in the DWW who've become a major force in my life. I know I can turn to them or anyone else who's been through the DWW for advice, resources, referrals, you name it. That's a helluva support network.

For me the workshop gave me a community and lifelong collaborators in my fellow fellows and in the advisers we worked with. It gave me the tools to make a professional film with a full crew and the courage to speak up for my vision.



The AFI DWW program gave me the opportunity to transition from Producer to Director, an opportunity I was searching for. In order to be accepted into the program the participant should have at least seven years of experience in other aspects of filmmaking. As much as I love production, I really wanted to direct as well. After years of supporting other directors' visions, I was ready to support my own vision. The AFI DWW program is outstanding in ensuring you have a vision to stand for. They prepare you the best they can during the program by exposing the participant to the different aspects a director needs to take into consideration when preparing a film. The program is



Lauren: The AFI DWW has been a transformational experience for me. I didn't attend film school, so the three weeks of workshop classes were incredibly helpful. The use of AFI's equipment and resources made the film possible. I also found the mentors in the program very helpful. They were able to answer questions and create a safe space for learning. It's so essential women feel able to fail and look stupid in front of others without it becoming a referendum on female directors in general. All artists of all genders need space to fall on their faces. That's how learning happens. The DWW is a place where that can happen.



really hands on, and by the end of it you have to direct a short film to be able to complete the workshop. "Learning to Fly" was the film I directed as part of the program. I will always be eternally grateful to the AFI DWW program for giving me a chance to be part of it.

That's difficult to say. For one, this still is an old boys' network. As a Cinematographer, I encounter this every day, not so much from my peers, but from the old establishment represented by the Union for instance. I tend to forget how male-biased this business is. I also think it doesn't get us anywhere to make these distinctions, as they often then sound like excuses for why we aren't working, but when you look at this business strictly in numbers, it's quite depressing and there's no negating them. Even though things are changing, there are still many more men in high-power positions than women, but dwelling on this issue won't get us anywhere. I think it is up to us to change the course of events and we can only do this by doing the best possible work we are capable of doing and let that work speak for itself. For those women in decision-making positions, it is up to them to give other women opportunities.



STEPHANIE MARTIN

Question

Why do you feel the industry overlooks female directors when considering them for mid to large budget features



It is ironic; I come from a patriarchal society where I had to fight sexism every step of the way, that "Mad Men" type of open sexism. I came to Los Angeles and the same thing is happening, although it appears as though America has long passed that kind of problem in gender equality.

I am very new to L.A. and the film industry here, so I cannot really speak yet from my experience. To answer the question as to why I think it is the way it is; just as in any other field, women had to work really hard for equality. It just happens to be that we are dealing with the film industry, where a large amount of money is involved. It is not a coincidence that only 1 % of the world's property is owned by women even today. Where there is money, there is power. So, they (men) don't really want to give up their power. I think this is the underlying reason.

The more obvious reason as to why they don't trust women with bigger responsibilities is that they are not used to seeing them do the bigger films. But, by now we've had a few women who have done big films, so it should change. But also, you can't see them if you don't give them the chance. What I don't like that I hear often are excuses and how women are less authoritative on set or more emotional, because it is simply not true. While women may bring a whole range of stories untold before and a new set of skills on set, in reality every director whether male or female has a different way of directing and they bring their own persona on set. I am very different on set than my other female colleagues.



ANTONETA KASTRATI

I have to start by saying that women wear so many life hats. We are filmmakers, and we are also wives. We are mothers, and we are citizens with social and moral responsibilities that we put upon ourselves, and we are very good at handling all roles efficiently. I am currently pregnant (expecting twins), and finishing the production of my feature documentary. I know many other working women in similar positions. I think the industry should value the role of women in all aspects, and value the experience we bring to the table when interpreting stories. We can bring a fresh perspective, but we are also prepared to work within the rules of the game. The world needs to see and hear our perspective on events.



JULIANA PENARANDA-LOFTUS

People need to be exposed to stories conceived of and told by women in order to widen everyone's horizons to create a more understanding and equal world. I haven't worked on large budget features, however I have worked in the independent world, and I personally don't feel overlooked at that level. In the independent world you need to make sure you have good stories to tell and a work ethic to stand for. As a female filmmaker, you have to always be willing to work double to be able to exceed in all the facets of life, and we love it.

I had a lot of time to think about that when I was an assistant director, because during all that time (eight years) I worked with four female directors. I worked on everything from big budget studio movies, to MOWs, to sitcoms. To me, the biggest part of the problem, aside from the fact that Hollywood is still run by more men than women, is that big tentpole movies are aimed toward teen boys and I think there's a preconception that only men can direct those kinds of movies, and that women don't get action, or super heroes, or violence, and can only guide a film that's a "woman's movie," which of course isn't true.

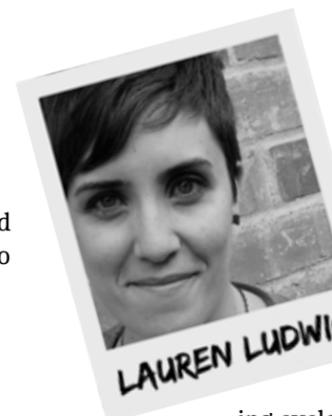


LISANNE SARTOR

I have no idea, women are excellent at getting people to work together; that is the core of what it takes to direct a film. Some people want to keep the status quo but things change, it's inevitable.



SHAZ BENNETT



LAUREN LUDWIG

I think the problem starts back in school, where young girls aren't pushed into artistic leadership roles. It's also a problem of role models and mentors. Because there are so few female directors, people can't picture women as directors. It's a self-perpetuating cycle. We have to break that cycle with the young. We need to encourage our daughters to helm projects and create things from scratch. We need to encourage their voices and stories and teach them how to be bold as businesswomen and entrepreneurs. You need all these skills to direct films. Women are as capable as acquiring them as men; they just need encouragement. I believe as the old guard of Hollywood retires, younger generations will be far more likely to hire female directors. The sea of change will happen.

I think women are not given the chance to direct larger movies simply because there are not more women in charge. If more women had leadership opportunities, they would hire other women. It's a known and proven statistic that women hire women; there are just not enough of us in those positions. It's a numbers game as much as it is a gender disparity.



CATHERINE DENT

My advice applies to both men and women alike. I believe that if you want it badly enough and you are willing to work at it, it is possible to make it in this business or any other for that matter. Do not let any opportunity go to waste, for it might be your only break. I've always believed that this business is about luck; the idea of being at the right place at the right time. When you find yourself in that rare scenario and are presented the chance to do what you have dreamt of, you then have to deliver.



With this idea in mind, be prepared. Work at it, watch people you respect at work whether through your own work or through a mentorship or internship, and pay attention, so that when you are finally given your chance, you ace it. There's something to be said about not embarking on this career too soon. I knew I wanted to direct long before, but I didn't embark on this journey until I truly felt ready. You might not be presented with the opportunity again. I worked for over a decade as a Cinematographer, honing my skills, until I came up with a story I NEEDED to tell.

And to this end, make the film you want to make. Tell the stories you want to tell. Your passion will translate to your collaborators, and your film will take the shape you envisioned. There is nothing more rewarding than the pride you take in your film once completed. Most importantly, enjoy every step in the journey.

Question

What advice would you give aspiring female directors



Get out there and direct. Don't wait for someone to ask you or give you permission to do it. Write a script, find one, pick up a camera and point it in the right direction. Use your iPhone if you have to. Make a webisode, a birthday video, a love note to your dog, but make sure whatever you make is uniquely you. No one else will ever tell a story the way you do. That's the beauty of individuality. Once you make that "you" film, the rest will follow, but nothing's ever going to happen until you take matters into your own hands and your own career in motion.



set



Get out there and direct. Don't wait for someone to ask you or give you permission to do it. Write a script, find one, pick up a camera and point it in the right direction. Use your iPhone if you have to. Make a webisode, a birthday video, a love note to your dog, but make sure whatever you make is uniquely you. No one else will ever tell a story the way you do. That's the beauty of individuality. Once you make that "you" film, the rest will follow, but nothing's ever going to happen until you take matters into your own hands and set your own career in motion.



I would recommend for any upcoming filmmakers, not just women directors, to focus on developing stories that convey strong messages. For me, the main purpose of filmmaking is to entertain the audience, but also leave something with them. I think the success lies in finding strong stories and characters that the audience can relate to. Don't focus on the gender difference; focus on having the best story you can tell. Focus on working hard, because there are many competent filmmakers out there. The question is, "What makes us stand out?" Be strong and persistent. Hard work and passion will pay off. You just need to believe in yourself, in your stories, and have a plan of action that gives you direction.



First, learn and invest in projects you believe in and do not give in. As a filmmaker you go through a lot of rejections and are up against a lot of competition; it is important to always keep in mind why do you do it in the first place and believe and cultivate your creative powers that are yours only. The amazing thing about art and filmmaking is that no one else can tell the stories you tell in the way you tell them.



Don't wait to make films. Make them now. Don't wait for a million dollars or someone else's permission. Just start. And then be dogged about sharing what you've made with others.



The only advice I would give to another up and coming director, as I am still learning myself, is to learn the basics, the classics and the craft. So many people are getting out there with cameras, but real and truthful storytelling is a true art form. I wish I knew more about the craft of storytelling before I turned on the camera....it's harder than it looks!