

Q & A

Geena Davis talks of gender roles in media

By **Joseph P. Kahn** | GLOBE STAFF MAY 20, 2013

Oscar-winning actress Geena Davis returns to Boston Tuesday to raise awareness of an issue she cares deeply about: gender disparity in media programming aimed at young children.

A Wareham native and Boston University alum, Davis, 57, made her mark playing strong, independently minded women in such films as “Thelma & Louise” and “A League of Their Own.” The mother of three, Davis, 57, founded the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to bring attention — and hard data — to this issue. In partnership with the Independent Television Service, the institute has created a series of short videos titled “Guess Who?” that challenge kids’ assumptions about gender stereotypes.

Davis’s itinerary includes stops at WGBH; Brighton’s Winship Elementary School; and BU, to lunch with members of a student-run production company, Hothouse Productions, that worked on the “Guess Who?” series. Co-sponsoring her trip is the Women and Girls Lead initiative, a multiyear public media campaign funded by ITVS.

Davis checked in by phone from Southern California.



ERICA MUELLER/ABIMAGES

“I noticed that movie after movie rated G or PG had one important female character, at most,” says Geena Davis on what led her to found the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

A. Watching with my young daughter, I noticed that movie after movie rated G or PG had one important female character, at most. Perhaps because I'd played [movie] roles that resonated with women, I was super-sensitized to this. By 2006, we'd undertaken the largest study ever done on gender depictions in media made for kids.

Q. Television and movies, primarily?

A. Yes. The original study covered G-rated movies and TV programs for kids 11 and under. Our research now covers a 20-year span, from 1990 to 2010.

Q. One goal was to share these numbers with content creators, correct?

A. That was *the* goal. Being in the industry, I was perfectly positioned to bring this to their attention, although this wasn't my life mission [laughs]. In meeting with a producer or studio exec, I'd casually say, "Have you ever noticed how few female characters there are in G-rated movies?" They all said, "Oh no, that's been fixed." And I thought, wow. I just don't *see* that. So I wondered: If I had the numbers, would that impact them?

Q. What does the landscape look like today?

A. Nothing has changed in the period we studied. I shouldn't say "nothing." The number of female characters rose .7 percent. At that rate, I've figured it will take us 700 years to achieve equality [laughs]. I do plan to push that along a little faster, however.

Q. We've also seen grass-roots campaigns against Photoshopping and airbrushing female images in popular magazines. Do protests like these also move the gender-awareness needle?

A. I'm thrilled that girls are rising up and saying, "We don't want to see this." My approach is different, though, in that I work directly with content creators.

Q. What part is your BU connection playing?

A. [Film & Television department professor] Garland Waller's class helped create the video series. In one, the "The Baker and the Mathematician," kids are asked what a mathematician would look like. Their answers are all "he." "He would wear a blue suit." What would a baker look like? "He has a big moustache." Each is then asked, "What if you were told the baker and mathematician were the same person — and she's a woman?" They're like, "No way. Is that *possible*?" That might make sense if this were a 1950s film. These days, it's shocking.

Q. You're an activist and a mom. Do you have a better handle than most on what your kids

A. First, I call myself an advocate, not an activist. But I probably do have a keener sense of the gender disparity than most. I know how many female characters in PG movies have jobs, for instance. Some parents allow their kids very little TV or even no TV, which are great ideas. I use what's called "mitigating language," commenting on what they're seeing so they don't absorb stuff mindlessly.

Q. Your kids do watch, then.

A. Yes, but rarely without my husband or I being there. One of my boys, if he's reading a comic book or playing a video game, will say, "Mommy, you might want to know about this and use it in your work." I'm not sure he knows exactly what I do, but he's always trying to help. If I say, "Hey, did you notice . . . ?" my daughter might say, "Yeah, I noticed. There aren't enough girls."

Q. She's 11. Does she give you the eye roll, too?

A. A little [laughs]. They're actually pretty proud of what I do.

Q. Will the Brighton grade-schoolers know you're a movie star?

A. Maybe. Thanks to DVDs, as many kids ask me about "Beetlejuice" now as when it came out.

Q. We haven't seen much of you onscreen lately. Too busy raising a family?

A. I have to say, not at all. It's really about waiting for something good to come along. The older you get, the longer that takes, as you learn to your chagrin. I'm very picky, too.

Interview was condensed and edited. Joseph P. Kahn can be reached at jkahn@globe.com.