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STYLE NEWS

GEENA DAVIS' TWO EASY STEPS TO MAKE HOLLYWOOD LESS SEXIST (GUEST COLUMN)

The actress and founder of her namesake Institute on Gender in Media cites data showing that there are three male characters for every speaking female in family-rated films: "We are in effect enculturating kids from the very beginning to see women and girls as not taking up half of the space."

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DECEMBER 11, 2013 | by GEENA DAVIS 🐦 📷

This story first appeared in The Hollywood Reporter's Women in Entertainment Power 100 issue.

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I never intended to become a data head. I could never have predicted it would play such an important role in my life. Yet here we are: My Institute on Gender in Media has sponsored the largest amount of research ever done on gender depictions in media, covering a 20-year-plus span.

I'll give you the basics as to how I got here, then we'll get to the fun part. Because I was fortunate enough to be cast in movies like *Thelma & Louise* and *A League of Their Own*, I developed a heightened awareness of how women are portrayed in media. Enough that when I started watching G-rated videos with my daughter about eight years ago, my "Spidey" sense caused me to immediately notice how few female characters there were in entertainments aimed at the youngest of children. Surely in the 21st century kids should be seeing boys and girls share the sandbox equally?

LIST: The Hollywood Reporter's 2013 Women in Entertainment Power 100

Now, let me just say, I take everything too far. (You should see my kids' birthday cakes.) But having comprehensive data on how female characters are depicted in Hollywood has proved to be extremely valuable. Obviously, because I'm a colleague, I can go directly to content creators and decision makers and share what we found. (The research was conducted by **Dr. Stacy Smith** at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.)

The basics are that for every one female-speaking character in family-rated films (G, PG and PG-13), there are roughly three male characters; that crowd and group scenes in these films — live-action and animated — contain only 17 percent female characters; and that the ratio of male-female characters has been exactly the same since 1946. Throw in the hypersexualization of many of the female characters that are there, even in G-rated movies, and their lack of occupations and aspirations and you get the picture.

STORY: Oprah Winfrey on Forgoing Motherhood, Being 'Counted Out' and the Meeting That Turned OWN Around

It wasn't the lack of female lead characters that first struck me about family films. We all know that's been the case for ages, and we love when movies like *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* and *Frozen* hit it big. It was the dearth of female characters in the worlds of the stories — the fact that the fictitious villages and jungles and kingdoms and interplanetary civilizations were nearly bereft of female population — that hit me over the head. This being the case, we are in effect enculturating kids from the very beginning to see women and girls as not taking up half of the space. Couldn't it be that the percentage of women in leadership positions in many areas of society — Congress, law partners, Fortune 500 board members, military officers, tenured professors and many more — stall out at around 17 percent because that's the ratio we've come to see as the norm?
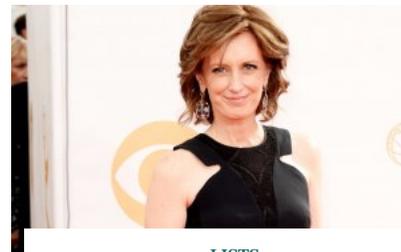
OK, now for the fun part: It's easy, fast and fun to add female characters, in two simple steps. And I want to be clear I'm not talking about creating more movies with a female lead. If you do, God bless and thank you. Please consider me for that role.

EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS: Hollywood's Most Powerful Women Pose With Their Mentors

Step 1: Go through the projects you're already working on and change a bunch of the characters' first names to women's names. With one stroke you've created some colorful unstereotypical female characters that might turn out to be even more interesting now that they've had a gender switch. What if the plumber or pilot or construction foreman is a woman? What if the taxi driver or the scheming politician is a woman? What if both police officers that arrive on the scene are women — and it's not a big deal?
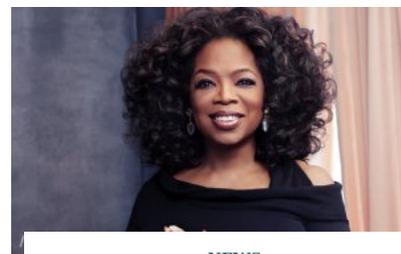
Step 2: When describing a crowd scene, write in the script, "A crowd gathers, which is half female." That may seem weird, but I promise you, somehow or other on the set that day the crowd will turn out to be 17 percent female otherwise. Maybe first ADs think women don't gather, I don't know.

And there you have it. You have just quickly and easily boosted the female presence in your project without changing a line of dialogue.

Yes, we can and will work to tell more women's stories, listen to more women's voices and write richer female characters and to fix the 5-to-1 ratio of men/women behind the camera. But consider this: In all of the sectors of society that still have a huge gender disparity, how long will it take to correct that? You can't snap your fingers and suddenly half of Congress is women. But there's one category where the underrepresentation of women can be fixed tomorrow: onscreen. In the time it takes to make a movie or create a television show, we can change what the future looks like.

STORY: The Hollywood Reporter's Mentorship Program Turns 5

There are woefully few women CEOs in the world, but there can be lots of them in films. We haven't had a woman president yet, but we have on TV. (Full disclosure: One of them was me.) How can we fix the problem of corporate boards being so unequal without quotas? Well, they can be half women instantly, onscreen. How do we encourage a lot more girls to pursue science, technology and engineering careers? By casting droves of women in STEM jobs today in movies and on TV. Hey, it would take me many years to become a real nuclear physicist, but I can play one tomorrow. (Again, in your next movie.)

Here's what I always say: If they can see it, they can be it.

You can find more information at seejane.org.

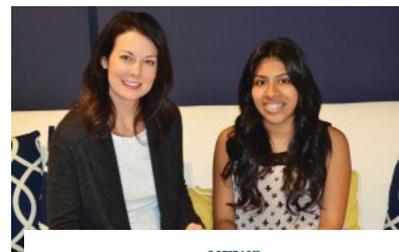WOMEN IN ENTERTAINMENT   WOMEN IN ENTERTAINMENT 2013   GEENA DAVIS

NEWS

Hollywood's Most Powerful Women Pose With Their Mentors (Exclusive Photos)

Behind every powerful woman is sometimes another woman, a male executive or Oscar-winning director, exemplified by Emma Watts and Oliver Stone; Nancy Dubuc and Abbe Raven; Sandra Stern and Jon Feltheimer; Cyma Zarghami and Philippe Dauman; Megan Colligan and Nancy Utley.

NEWS

The Hollywood Reporter's Mentorship Program Turns 5

This issue marks the anniversary of THR with Big Brothers Big Sisters, where teenagers get to learn and grow with the help of some of the industry's most powerful women.

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