Women and Gender Bias in Post-#MeToo Hollywood

LA event sparks discussion about women in media

By Megan Woolhouse

Actor and comedian Michaela Watkins recalls the day a prospective showrunner matter-of-factly told her that shows written, directed, and acted by women simply don’t succeed commercially.

He made the comment while interviewing for a job on the comedy *Benched*, which Watkins co-created for the USA Network, and the remark left a searing impression.

Can you imagine hiring someone who thinks it’s okay to say, “No one cares about you and your life”?

said Watkins (CFA’94), who spoke at a forum hosted by the BU Alumni Association on October 27, 2018, in Los Angeles.

Women’s underrepresentation in film was a key part of the discussion at BU Envisions the Future: The Ideas, People, and Media That Are Changing the World, a daylong event held at Paramount Studios. Seven panels gave participants the chance to talk about Hollywood’s reckoning in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and rise of the #MeToo movement, as well as malicious social media influencers, industry buyouts, and branding in the streaming era. They also had time to schmooze with fellow
alums, including Nina Tassler (CFA’79, Hon.’16), a producer and former CBS Entertainment chair, Jim Gianopulos (CAS’73), Paramount CEO, and Bonnie Arnold (COM’78), a producer and former copresident of DreamWorks Animation.

There was much to discuss. On the first panel, It’s Not a Secret Anymore: A Conversation with BU Alumnae, Watkins and fellow panelists, all BU alums, talked about how the #MeToo movement has increased opportunities for women in the entertainment industry. The panel was moderated by Jean Morrison, BU provost and chief academic officer.

Cultural biases can help perpetuate myths about women and hold them back, much like the idea that women-driven shows and films don’t attract viewers. Only 4 percent of the directors of top-grossing films between 2007 and 2016 were women, according to ReFrame, a group of studio executives and industry leaders who advocate for gender parity.

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Tassler and Watkins were just two of the BU alums on the panel, a group that was also the subject of the 2014 Hollywood Reporter story “Boston University: Hollywood’s Secret Female Training Ground.”

Actor Kim Raver (CGS’87, CFA’91), known for her roles in 24, Night at the Museum, and Third Watch, is producing her first film, Tempting Fate, starring Alyssa Milano. It’s also her directorial debut, and a leap of faith.

As a young actor, Raver said she often worried that if she made too much noise, she would be labeled in the industry as “the difficult one” and jobs would dry up. “This movement is about finding the mentors and the inspirers,” she said. “There are opportunities—take them.”

Former industry executive Madeline Di Nonno (CAS’82), now CEO of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, says the institute’s research has shown that women-driven films are on the rise, peaking at 27 percent in 2018. But much work needs to be done.

“We’re not at a tipping point yet, but we see dramatic change happening,” Di Nonno said.

The institute has been at the forefront of gender parity in TV and film since Academy Award–winning actor Geena Davis (CFA’79, Hon.’99) founded the nonprofit in 2004. (Davis and Tassler were roommates at BU.) Its focus is getting television creators to increase the percentage of female characters, and reduce gender stereotyping, in media targeting children age 11 and under.

Davis has been outspoken on the issue for more than a decade, appearing in September 2018 at the Toronto Film Festival, where event organizers had just agreed to sign a gender parity pledge.

Watkins, the writer, actor, and comedian who was told women’s stories didn’t matter, noted that her career has helped to turn the conventional wisdom about those women’s stories on its head.

She stars in the Hulu series Casual as Valerie, a newly divorced woman with a teenage daughter, who both move in with Valerie’s bachelor brother, Alex. The show is a comedy, but also a poignant story about a woman trying to reinvent herself—and her sex life—in middle age.

Watkins said the directorial staff is 82 percent female. Now in its fourth season, Casual was nominated for a 2016 Golden Globe for best television series. A transformation is underway, she said. “Myths have been busted.”

Writer, producer, and actor Michaela Watkins (CFA’94)