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Chicks behind the flicks

Ten of Hollywood's most powerful women sit down to discuss the state of the movie business -- why there aren't more female directors, why blowing things up is fun, and more.

By Rebecca Traister

Oct. 11, 2007 | On Friday of last week, movie business reporter Nikki Finke [wrote](#) on "Deadline Hollywood" that Warner Bros. president of production Jeff Robinov had issued a company edict: "We are no longer doing movies with women in the lead." According to Finke's sources, Robinov's decree came in the wake of underperformance by two summer [movies](#), "[The Invasion](#)" and "[The Brave One](#)," which featured Nicole Kidman and Jodie Foster, respectively, in starring roles. One of Finke's sources, an unnamed producer, asked, "What's next -- fire all the Warner Bros. women executives?" If so, it would be a bloody day: Three of Robinov's four executive vice presidents of production are women.

Whether or not Robinov made the remark -- a Warner Bros. spokesman told Salon, "Jeff Robinov did not make that statement, nor is it his philosophy" -- female film executives seemed to regard the sentiment as a distillation of a broader antipathy toward women in the film business. The sense that this antipathy has been building is so pervasive that few women (and these are powerful women who tend to get pissed about things like outright institutional misogyny) could even muster real shock at Finke's story.

Every female [filmmaker](#) and executive I spoke to -- all of whom declined to go on the record -- expressed surprise only that an executive would go public with what has long been accepted as an unspoken clubhouse policy. It's not, as Finke's source suggests, that the women are going to be kicked out of their studio offices, but it's no secret that [Hollywood](#) has always been a dicey industry for women, and that recent years have seen it grow increasingly inhospitable. "I don't think you can blame the Robinovs of the world," one female producer told me. "It's not something that every other studio head doesn't think."

More women than ever write, direct and produce movies. But we're in a period in which their on-screen stock is falling. This summer brought us "[Knocked Up](#)," about how a schlubby guy can land a hot successful woman and make audiences whoop in appreciation when he kicks her shrill (responsible, adult) sister from a delivery room. Hollywood has ushered in a mini-era of thinly veiled derision of women. "[The Heartbreak Kid](#)," the remake of a funny 1970s Elaine May movie, in 2007 features at its center a premise of assumed animosity toward the feminine.

But if Hollywood isn't doing much for female moviegoers, it's in part because female moviegoers have not, of late, been doing much for Hollywood. They haven't been showing up to multiplexes, at least not on the first

weekend, which is all that counts. And in Hollywood, money has always been a bigger motivator than visions of equality. You can bet that the weekend on which audiences line up around the block to get into a [Barbara Jordan](#) biopic is the weekend studios all over Tinseltown green-light a slate of movies about black, wheelchair-bound lesbians. As soon as ladies put their asses in the seats at a movie about one of their own, studios will make a zillion more, or so goes conventional wisdom. But that hasn't happened in some time.

What propitious timing, then, for the arrival this week of Elle magazine's [Women in Hollywood](#) issue (a franchise the magazine inherited from Premiere magazine), featuring among other things an [interview](#) with Robinov whistle-blower Nikki Finke and a round-table conversation among 10 of the most powerful women in Hollywood. The discussion was held in August, around a conference table at the utterly glam Beverly Hills Hotel. I know it was glam because I got to attend, and I can attest that the conversation that took place two months ago was downright prophetic in its assessment of [gender](#) conditions in Hollywood.

The panel was moderated by one of Tinseltown's great brains, producer Lynda Obst ("Contact," "Sleepless in Seattle," "How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days"). She nimbly guided panelists Nora Ephron (screenwriter, director, "When Harry Met Sally," "Sleepless in Seattle"), Laura Ziskin (writer, producer, "Hero," "To Die For," "Spider-Man"), Callie Khouri (screenwriter, director, "Thelma & Louise," "Something to Talk About"), Patty Jenkins (writer, director, "Monster"), Cathy Konrad (producer, "[Walk the Line](#)," "[3:10 to Yuma](#)"), Kimberly Piece (writer, director, producer, "[Boys Don't Cry](#)"), Andrea Berloff (writer, producer, "[World Trade Center](#)"), Margaret Nagle (writer, producer, "Warm Springs"), and that rarest of Hollywood breeds, a female studio head, Universal president of production Donna Langley, in a conversation that touched on issues that cut to the heart of the Robinov story. They spoke of the remaining handful of female movies stars as if they were the last hope of the Jedi order -- Luke ... Leia ... Julia ... Reese -- and maybe they are. If these female machers are to be believed, the business of making movies for women remains one of constant juggling between progress and regress, of compensation and compromise. Below, Salon presents an extended version of the conversation that appears in this month's Elle.

Lynda Obst: A bunch of us have had this conversation many times over the past couple of decades. What's different for young women filmmakers like Kim and Patty than it was when Nora and Laura and Callie and I were first breaking on the scene, say, in the '80s?

Laura Ziskin: Well, there are four more women directors than there were 20 years ago.

Nora Ephron: No, no, no, no. Twenty years ago there were no women directors. Zero. I was a screenwriter then, and I remember the list that my agent used to give us whenever we finished a script, and there were no women's names on it, none. Maybe, *maybe* Barbra Streisand --

Ziskin: Now there are four.

Ephron: There aren't four. There are way more than that.

Callie Khouri: But I get lists when I turn in movies, and they don't have a lot of women on them.

Ephron: We've now gotten to a point where we're at the bad plateau, but it's still way more women. It just is. So that is a difference.

Khouri: And yet, still, the good news is that whenever the annual meeting at the Directors Guild takes place, there's never a line for the women's bathroom. [Laughter]

Ziskin: I'm curious about the women here who are directors. I think it's harder for women whose peak career-making years coincide with their peak baby-making years. Directing is a job that requires 100 percent of your time and energy and it's therefore hard to have children. Well, Nora has children and she did it.

Cathy Konrad: You did it.

Ziskin: But I'm not a director. Producing is an all-engaging job, but it's a little bit different. The movie can continue in your absence if you have to go to the school play. [But] I know Elizabeth Daley, who's the dean of the USC film school, says she has trouble recruiting women into the directing program.

Obst: But we all know that it's harder for young women directors trying to get jobs than young men. What do you think, Kim and Patty?

Kimberly Peirce: I think the indie world is actually great for women, and for gay people. Because if you have a story, you're going to be able to [tell it]. That's where a lot of women get their start. But you get into your second, your third movie, and you're building a career, and it's hitting smack up against those years when you want to have a child. I mean, you can't get bonded if you're pregnant.

Margaret Nagle: Really?

Peirce: Yeah. Is that shocking?

Patty Jenkins: My mom was an active feminist and I only had a sister, so I was raised in an all-female household. It never occurred to me that I couldn't do whatever I wanted. I do think there is another generation like that coming up. When it comes to different genres, "Spider-Man" is one of my favorite things of all time. [It has] a much deeper message behind it. When films are action films without that behind it, I'm not at all interested.

Konrad: The material that gets made at studios is a function of the culture: what is branded and what makes money. I'm not saying that women only want to make dramas, but I do think that you'll find a lot more women that want to tell stories about people than cars.

Nagle: I've never wanted to make anything blow up. That was something my brothers did, and I never wanted to watch movies where people blew things up. "Spider-Man" was a revelation to me because I went, "Oh my God! At the core, this kid, his self-esteem, his identity, he's me!"

Peirce: The danger is when you earmark movies for women. You picked up on something to me that was really interesting, that women would go to what's typically a boy movie if the boys are emotive, right? There's something interesting to me about that, because it's like, "Why did they like 'The Bourne'?" It's got all that testosterone, but I imagine it appeals greatly to women, right?

Donna Langley: Yes, they don't drive it right off the bat, but they do go. They're going because of Matt.

Ephron: Yes, because they're hoping that Matt Damon will wake up remembering them. [Laughter]

Nagle: What about "[The Devil Wears Prada](#)," where they were so amazed that so many guys went to that movie, because everybody's had a scary boss ... Young boys go to the movies reliably every Friday night in droves, so it's young boys that make the principal audience.

Ziskin: But is that a self-fulfilling prophecy? The movies were made for them because they go in droves?

Khouri: It's a lot easier to get young boys out on a Friday and Saturday night than it is to get working women or housewives out on a Friday and Saturday night.

Ziskin: But the truth of the matter is those teen boys are less reliable because they have way more choices, and in fact the most reliable moviegoing audience -- and also the dirty word in the movie business -- is "women over 35." Because we have the moviegoing habit. I would go to the movies every weekend if there was something for me to see. The studios, if they were smart, would have a geriatric division.

Obst: Callie, I want to ask you this because you wrote one of the great feminist movies of all time ["Thelma and Louise"], and then we had this fabulous conversation where you told me that you were going to do a NASCAR movie because you were completely bored with the chick flick. Did you have a harder time trying to change genres or was this a career thing?

Khouri: The stuff that comes to me is still way girlier than I would go after on my own. I spent years trying to get a baseball movie made, and that didn't happen. I wanted to make a NASCAR movie. The stuff that comes to me, I'm always like, "I don't want to do this. There's crying in this." That's what sifts down to me, and it is frustrating. I would like to work outside of the female-centric world. But if it's got a woman in it, I'm going to have a better shot at [getting] it.

Ziskin: But there are movies in general, and then there are women's movies. We're still the other -- we're still a secondary audience. When they made "Little Women," my daughter was 11, she went five times in one week. That was because as a young woman, she never got to see herself and her experience on the screen. We know so much about the male experience because it's been fed to us through the literature that the men wrote and the world that the men created; it's a relatively new phenomenon in the modern world that we have power to say what we think and to express ourselves and our sensibility. But we're still considered an alternative class.

Peirce: It's fascinating that you would say that a young girl would find a reflection of herself in "Little Women" because I don't fall for that sort of typical female kind of gender thing. I love blowing things up. I just did "Stop-Loss," a war film, and there was nothing more exciting than when they set those cars on fire. People need the adrenaline. If women identify with that sensibility, if that turns them on, then they're going to make those kinds of movies.

Obst: I want to go back to something that Laura said before, which is even if it's not zero change from 20 years ago, there's certainly fewer female directors than there should be. Don't you think a lifestyle sacrifice has to be made for the amount of work we put in?

Peirce: We all need a wife.

Obst: Well said. So how do we find wives in this business?

Konrad: My husband, Jim Mangold, is a filmmaker. On one hand I have an idyllic situation, one would think, because my partner in life is my partner in business. But it's complicated. I was much more productive prior to meeting Jim. I'd made 11 films before I met him, and I was working with a lot of other filmmakers. When Jim and I partnered, I did make a choice to winnow down the amount of work I was doing because it meant if I was on that coast with that filmmaker, then I wouldn't be with my husband. I wanted to have a

family. So when I did make a choice to have a child very late -- my son is 2 1/2, I'm 44 -- that did mean not doing as much as I used to. But I am very happy to be able to have that choice.

Andrea Berloff: I have a kid, almost 2 years old, as well. I find that every day I feel, "Am I doing a good enough job as a mother? Am I doing a good enough job as a writer?" And I'm probably doing a fair job at both. I find it a struggle every day.

Ziskin: The birth of my daughter coincided with the beginning of my career on my own as a producer. I remember the exact spot on the Ventura Freeway where I started screaming in my car because I was trying to put a movie together, and I was racing home to nurse the baby, and the milk was coming and the car phone wasn't working. I thought, I am failing on all fronts: I will never have the career I want to have because I can't compete with the guys. I had to twist my head around to say that I would not be the best at anything, that I would have to make compromises. That's a hard thing to say: that I would not be the most successful producer, nor would I be the world's best mother, and that in order to have both those things in my life, I would have to look at compromise as a positive, not a negative.

Khouri: Well, I didn't have kids because I felt like, I'm not going to be able to do both things. I'm not going to fail at two things. I'm the kind of person -- it's hard for me to leave my dog. And my dog I can bring to the set and I don't feel so guilty about it. So I made a conscious decision that, well, I'm going to give that up because I want to have a career, and I don't want to just feel like I'm giving some person the short shrift every day by not being there at the most important moments of their life.

Konrad: I do think that it is more OK now to have a family. There was this period where it felt like the edict was "Do not have a family" because the men acted like their families didn't matter and they were never there anyway.

Obst: That's when we were doing it.

Konrad: It could be called a small advancement: A lot of men I know leave earlier to go home and put their kids to bed. It is very hard to get a guy on the phone between 6 and 7.

Obst: They're putting their kids to bed.

Khouri: Now, that's progress.

Nagle: I'll never forget, I was working with this producer, and his kid would have an ear infection and he'd leave the meeting, and everybody would go, "Oh, God, he's so great." And I went, "If I took that call and left this meeting because my kid had an ear infection, I'd be fucking vilified." It would be over. There would be a call to my agent. I remember just thinking, "You're probably going to see your mistress. You're not going to the kid with the ear infection."

Jenkins: My mother was a single mother trying to put herself through college and working a job the whole time I was growing up. She has been so tormented by how busy she was. When I think about my friends who had full-time parents, that was like a weird, weird phenomenon that happened for 20 years. It happened in the '50s to the '60s. And that's it. Before that, people were crossing the country in covered wagons and taking their kids on steamships and working full-time jobs. We're supposed to be working and busy, and I think it's good for kids. That's how life has worked for most of our history.

Peirce: But you know what it's like on a movie set, there is no relief. They need you; it needs you. And as the director, it's very interesting to consider what it would be like to have something else need you just as much as

this thing needs you.

Obst: I know a few of your partners, and they are among the most supportive people that I've ever seen in my whole life. A few of them are these incredibly successful nurturing writer types. I'd like to know if there is an incredibly supportive nurturing successful writers store you can go to. And what about what most single people in this town run into, very threatened men. There was that completely repulsive Us magazine cover of all of our best movie stars saying, "There's no one for these people to date," which is the story of successful women. There are what I call the great Katharines, but no Spencers. Have none of you run into this phenomenon of hostile-to-successful-women men?

Khour: It's more in the business than in the relationships. You're more likely to feel less-than in your business relationships. What we were talking about a little while ago, the fact that we still are defined as women directors or women producers, it still feels that as long as the studios see the female audience as a secondary audience or not as easy to get into the theater on the first weekend, then there's going to be a lid on us.

Langley: Obviously I'm a woman, so I'm a lot more tolerant and a lot more accepting of working with my gender. But the argument that women don't drive box office is not an argument that actually transpires at our studio. It isn't. Women drive box office. We had a movie called "[Inside Man](#)," which was Denzel Washington, directed by Spike Lee. Jodie Foster was in the movie for a nanosecond. Women [audiences] drove that movie.

Ziskin: But when you made it, were you counting on the women?

Langley: We counted on them as much as the men. My point is it wasn't part of the green-light discussion. I just want the opportunity to work with more female directors, producers and writers. I think women have all of the talents to be directors. I think they're the best multitaskers, the best psychologists, the best taskmasters. I don't know the answer to the question, why are there not more female directors?

Ziskin: The industry mirrors the culture at large. Unlike you, Patty, I don't think the blip on the radar was nuclear families and women staying home with the kids. I think the blip on the radar was the feminist movement. Our children watched their mothers and said, "Oh, no thank you. I don't want my life to be like that."

Obst: Or maybe the reaction is a blip.

Ziskin: Maybe. I hope so.

Berloff: My big question is, is it self-selection? I've gone after some very male-centric jobs, and I have gotten them, and I don't feel that I'm being prevented from getting them because of my gender. So I wonder why aren't more women trying?

Langley: I don't know many female directors that work in every genre in the way that male directors seem to. If I was thinking of a "tent pole" movie, "Bourne," "Fast and the Furious," I would love to have a female director to discover or consider for one of those movies, but they're so few and far between.

Ephron: Every so often when I speak at film schools, and I'm at a table with a group of almost entirely timid women. I ask them what they want to do, and they timidly tell me that they want to be directors. And the one thing I know is that if you want to direct a movie, you have to be possessed. You have to be insane. And that's to direct your first movie. You have to be out of your mind to get the second or the third or the fourth. And it doesn't get any easier for anybody but Steven Spielberg.

Peirce: It's a blood sport, right? I don't know how much we're supposed to talk about this, but it is a brutal process.

Ephron: This is the life we've chosen, as they say in "The Godfather."

Peirce: I love what I do, and it's incredibly tough.

Ziskin: I call it torture fun.

Jenkins: People have said to me so many times, women make first movies and don't make a second one. They didn't want to do it. I did have a project that I was working on right after "Monster," but I didn't have a personal life that was satisfying to me, and that became a priority in addition to working on my next thing.

Ephron: Can I just go back to one other thing? I'm very admiring of the guys who fall off the horse and get right back on it. One of the statistics that's always thrown around about women directors is they don't do it as often as men do. Not unlike sex, actually. [Laughter] When I started directing, I thought, "Oh, look at Woody Allen. Every single September, the trucks are out in New York and it's so fabulous because he writes the movie, then he's cutting the movie, he's writing the next movie." When I was done with my first movie it was like, "Please let me rest. Please!" I don't know how those guys do it. I really don't.

Obst: Physical stamina?

Konrad: I think women are plenty filled with stamina. It's just that there is an interest level that is about life, is about other things.

Ephron: Yes, exactly.

Obst: Well, it may not be men and women; it may be different personalities. It may be that different personalities get restored by going project to project, whereas [another] reaction is to be restored by spending time with family, going on vacation. This is something that has been said about why there are so many women quitting the business -- what's the cost of how hard the business has become?

Konrad: I think you get wiser as you get older about not being so mono-focused about one thing. It's just a shame that it has to be taken as, "Oh, she's slowing down, or she's retiring."

Ephron: I don't mean to make this about stamina. I just mean that I know men who think of the shooting process as not the blip, but what life is about. And I think what life is about is what life is about and then every so often you have to make a movie. So the thing you write can get made. A necessary evil to get to the ending, which is fun.

Peirce: Well, you direct in order to get your written stuff out.

Ephron,: Yes, exactly.

Peirce: For me, I write to direct.

Khouri: It takes every bit of you. That's the thing that's so fantastic about it: You are using everything you've got all day long. The opportunity to do that is so rare in life. I am so happy when I'm on a movie set. I find it just one of the most satisfying things I ever get to do. Even when I'm miserable. It's spectacular. I love it.

Obst: Can I ask Donna something? What's it like being inside the studio system in terms of wear and tear on your life compared to those of us who go out on location?

Langley: The difference is schedule. My job is constant. It's 24/7. And I'm not saying it in that "Oh, woe is me" way, but as a director or a writer or a producer it's peaks and valleys. In my job specifically, it is constant. It's 24/7, cellphone always on, BlackBerry always on. As such, it's a job that is a means to an end. It's a job that you psychologically feel is finite. There's a period of time in which you can do it, and then you have to ... I equate it to running on a treadmill with the incline at 20. I don't even know if the treadmill goes to 20, but [my job] goes to 20. The great thing about it is it's empowering; being able to make a decision to make a movie with one filmmaker or another filmmaker, being able to be the arbiter of how a story is told.

Ziskin: There's a cultural phenomenon that bears noting, which is there's still a ceiling. You can say, "Women can rise to be chairman of a studio." But if you look at who controls all the media in the world ...

Obst: Rupert?

Ziskin: Well, Rupert and his kind. Maybe there is something evolutionary that's going to happen, but I don't think we have yet seen women strive to be Rupert Murdoch.

Obst: Do you think Hillary Clinton doesn't have the ambition? Excuse me!

Obst: Do you ever have authority issues as a director because you're a woman?

Jenkins: Yes, but not that I've been stopped by. I've certainly felt like I was tested. Like the nicer I was, the more people got nervous that I didn't know what I was doing. It wasn't until I was like, "I'm directing this movie," that they would chill out. But I felt like, "You guys are making me a mean person."

Peirce: It's leadership. They want leadership. You have to be the alpha dog.

Obst: Have things changed, Nora, since we first started and now in terms of how crews are behaving?

Ephron: I don't know, but I feel that it's been very rare that I've had a problem with this. Before I directed my first movie, I went around to all the directors who I could force to read the script, and Rob Reiner said, "Come in with a plan. You can always change your mind, just let everyone know that you think you know what you're doing." So I don't think it's gender specific. I think people don't want to be on a set with someone they think is indecisive. Some very successful men directors are famous for being indecisive. I just think people want to know that they have given a piece of their life to someone who is going to take care of them.

Obst: I remember, Nora, on "This Is My Life" when we asked for Dr. Brown cream soda and our prop man just brought us cream soda, we thought maybe if you'd been a guy he would have brought us real Dr. Brown cream soda.

Ephron: It wasn't the prop guy. It was the second cinematographer. It was the second one after we fired the first one.

[Note to Nora: It was the prop man, the one we didn't fire -- Lynda]

Ziskin: I want to say one thing. What is extraordinary is that the movies are arguably the most powerful medium ever in history so far. And there are so many of us that you could get a quorum at this table. You don't have to have the intention of influencing your work by your gender, but you're going to. That's a really

good thing. It's really good for the culture that women are a real voice more and more, even though we're not the final say, like those guys who really control all the media in the world. We're still influencing. We can take the "Spider-Man" movies as an example. Kirsten [Dunst] and I used to joke about it, but as the women in the mix we really influenced the content of lots of things in that movie because we were in there saying, "Wait a minute." [Had we not been there], it would still have been as successful, but it would have been different.

Ephron: But if you look at "Transformers," which is an interesting movie...

Ziskin: No women involved?

Ephron: No. But Steven Spielberg was involved, and so there's this great emotional theme. I don't think this is gender-specific. I mean, who made the greatest romantic comedies in the world? Men.

Obst: Billy Wilder...

Obst: Now, "Knocked Up" is yours.

Langley: Yes.

Obst: Obviously I'm thrilled that it's yours because it means that every imaginable kind of romantic comedy is being made at Universal. Hilarious and important, in terms of its effect on romantic comedies. But anybody have any thoughts about the girls' side of the coin in "Knocked Up," since I've already [written about it](#)?

Peirce: I just love when she's having that mood swing. That is hilarious.

Nagle: I totally believed her having sex with him to begin with.

Obst: Jesus, Margaret, that wasn't what I was looking for. [Laughter]

Nagle: I did! I did! He was furry and sweet.

Khouri: I had a rough time with it.

Obst: Thank you, Callie.

Khouri: I mean, I've seen stranger things happen in this town. Fat, ugly guys get laid by beautiful women every day of the week. So based on that, I was able to go with it. But was it satisfying as a female moviegoer? It's not wish fulfillment, in a way.

Obst: Which is what the point of romantic comedy is.

Khouri: The whole time I was thinking, "She could do better." Listen, I was there the first weekend because I want to laugh. And I will give things a tremendous amount of slack if I think I'm going to laugh really hard, and I did. But I had to let out a lot of line.

Obst: It is certainly the male protagonist piece where he gets the hot girl and we get to encourage compromise on the part of the girl, right?

Ephron: Looks and brains, we're willing to give them both up. [Laughter]

Langley: The premise of the movie from Judd's perspective, and I'm not being defensive, but for me the comedic premise was: What if this guy got this girl pregnant. And, to be honest, a lot of the attempt at heart and character --

Obst: Came from you. We knew it. [Laughter]

Langley: It wasn't there in the original inception. I'm not going to take anything from Judd; he deserves all the credit. But the original intention of the movie was not to make an observational gender comedy. It was, What if this goofball guy got this really hot piece of ass pregnant.

Khouri: There's one more thing that we haven't talked about. I just did a movie with three female leads: Diane Keaton, Queen Latifah and Katie Holmes. We were able to get this movie made independently, but we weren't able to get it made with that cast at a studio. We just kept going, "OK, so which women can get a movie made at a studio? Who are the women that can get a picture green-lit at a studio if it's just women?"

Ziskin: There's one.

Khouri: Yeah, who?

Ziskin: Julia.

Konrad: Reese Witherspoon.

Obst: Kate Hudson. But also, Callie speaks to something important which I think we're discovering, too, that there's more than one way to skin a cat. If you can't take one path, we're learning to take another path. And that's a very good path for chicks like us to learn, too, that if the studio won't do it, we're learning to do it independently.

-- By Rebecca Traister

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