

The lady vanishes – yet again

Buzz-worthy female roles are suddenly in short supply. Chalk it up to a cultural shift, or maybe an unfair fight.

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Special to The Times

IT'S easy to forget that Hollywood was once a woman's town — a town owned by the Avas, Ritas and Lanass.

But the truth is that these days it is the Toms and Clints, the Heaths and Joaquins, even the Philip Seymours who rule the industry roost.

And as we move from red carpet to red carpet during this awards season, it is clear that the way this year's most admired films tell it, men alone are doing the world's — and the film industry's — heavy lifting. They are discovering America ("The New World") and each other ("Brokeback Mountain"). They are searching out terrorists in "Munich," wheeling and dealing in the Middle East ("Syriana"), and bringing down McCarthy at home ("Good Night, and Good Luck"). They are writing dark, important books ("Capote") and even harpooning the big beast ("King Kong").

But what of the women? Where have they gone? For the most part, the current fare seems to be channeling the 1950s, with female characters offered up only as accessories — ornamental but unnecessary. And so, in the movies with muscle, we see them as nurturing friends ("Capote"), neglected wives ("Brokeback Mountain," "Syriana"), pregnant helpmeets ("Munich"), and objects of lust ("Match Point," "King Kong"). Has even one heroine turned up this season who is as compelling as, say, a penguin?

Some, including Gersh Agency literary agent Frank Wuliger, contend that the scarcity of women's stories is merely a business decision. "It's really simple in Hollywood," he says. "'Show me the box office.' Where's today's 'Sleepless in Seattle'? Where are the chick flicks that are making money? Fox made a wonderful chick flick, 'In Her Shoes.' And people didn't go to see it."

The studios are nothing if not practical, suggests Michael Seitzman, the screenwriter of "North Country." "Hollywood would give a role to my dog if it would bring in an audience. The real question is not 'Why isn't Hollywood creating roles for women?' It's 'Why aren't audiences going to see them?' Men aren't interested in seeing movies about women anymore, but from the response to movies like 'In Her Shoes,' it appears that women aren't, either."

But there may be a perception problem here. Could it be that because Hollywood produces so few movies featuring women's stories, each one is held up to cold, hard and — dare I say it? — unfair scrutiny?

For instance, while some in the industry believe that "In Her Shoes" has stumbled at the box office, Elizabeth Gabler, president of Fox 2000, says, "I think that because Cameron Diaz was such a big star, there was a great expectation that it would open bigger than it did." Even so, she points out, the picture cost only a little over \$35 million and has made more than \$82 million worldwide. "And at the end of the day we are going to do quite well."

In contrast, "A History of Violence" with Viggo Mortensen, in theaters two weeks earlier, cost \$30 million but has earned only \$57 million. Yet no one's suggesting that audiences will no longer support testosterone-soaked stories.

Another case in point is "Flightplan," an action picture with an emotional underpinning. It stars Jodie Foster as a jet propulsion engineer whose young daughter disappears during a trans-Atlantic flight. While the flight crew, in an aeronautical riff on "Gaslight," insists that there is no record of the child's presence on board, Foster's distraught character, who also happens to be transporting the body of her husband back to the States, literally tears up the plane to locate the girl. The movie has grossed more than \$200 million worldwide. But who in Hollywood is claiming it as a smash hit of a woman's picture?

Indeed, though most women can relate to the nightmare of a mother whose child has vanished, Wuliger dismisses Foster's character as "a man's role being played by a woman. It's the kind of film that Harrison Ford might have made 10 years ago. It's certainly not perceived as a chick flick."

How nice, then, that women can successfully walk in men's shoes — on screen at least. They should do it more often. But the rub is that here's a top-grossing woman's movie that's somehow not associated with women.

The other side of the coin is that when women-driven pictures such as "Memoirs of a Geisha" or "North Country" disappoint financially, industry types rush to the judgment that female protagonists do not sell tickets.

"This mind-set has been around for as long as I've been writing films," says Robin Swicord, the "Geisha" screenwriter. "When I first started, the general wisdom was that no woman could open a movie. That has changed now through the power of people like Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman. And even with that, you have to argue to a studio that a picture will attract a general audience."

It's all about the material, insists Ruth Vitale, the president of First Look Pictures, who dismisses generalizations that women can't open a movie. "Julia Roberts didn't open 'Erin Brockovich'?" she asks rhetorically. "Meg Ryan didn't open 'Sleepless in Seattle'? Of course they did. You can't just blame a poor opening on women. You have to look at the whole package, at the cost versus the opening gross. 'The Virgin Suicides' was a big box-office success because it cost nothing to make. 'King Kong' was not such a big success because it cost as much as it's going to gross. You cannot assess a picture in a vacuum."

Still, says Gabler, "It helps if you have some component that intrigues a male audience. It's a matter of economics, really."

Swicord, who wrote the 1994 movie "Little Women," first discussed the idea of adapting Louisa May Alcott's novel with Amy Pascal, now the Sony movie chief, long before she became a studio executive. "But nobody was interested in movies in which women wore long dresses," says Swicord. "And it took a while. It took Amy climbing her way up at Columbia to a position in which we could set the project up. And then to get the film made, we had to enlist the help of a marketing person, Sid Ganis." Ganis, now a producer at Columbia and president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, is the father of four daughters and understood the power of Alcott's novel for every girl who had read it. The movie, made on a tight budget, eventually grossed more than \$70 million.

These days, however, there seems to be a re-adjustment of the rules of the game that, purposefully or not, reinforces a sense that there is no place



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in Hollywood's firmament for stories about women. Take romance. It is noteworthy that now that men are embracing their feminine side, the year's only potent love story, "Brokeback Mountain," is about a relationship between two cowboys.

Even on the lighter side, something is askew. Two years ago, producer Lynda Obst had high hopes for romantic comedies. "I remember being celebratory because girls were opening movies. Kate Hudson opened my movie, 'How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days,' which did so well that I'm developing a sequel. Reese Witherspoon's 'Legally Blonde' and 'Sweet Home Alabama' opened well. Diane Keaton had a big success with 'Something's Gotta Give,' even though people like to ascribe it to Jack Nicholson's presence. The movies coming out now had to have been put in development then. So I can't tell you exactly why most of these romantic comedies are now starring men, not women."

In fact, Obst points out, 10 years ago, "Men needed to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to what was always thought of as a female genre," she says. But last summer audiences swarmed to "Wedding Crashers" and "The 40 Year-Old Virgin" like ants to a picnic. Since then, romantic comedies seem to have redefined themselves as the province of guys.

"While executives say, 'We're looking for romantic comedies,'" says Obst, "they now get more excited at a male-oriented premise than a female-oriented one. The caveat is that women will go to romantic comedies starring men, but men are just not interested in movies about female problems."

There's another hitch as well. Remember Tom Hanks as Meg Ryan's romantic interest in "Sleepless in Seattle" and Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart bolstering Katharine Hepburn in "The Philadelphia Story"? No more. Today no self-respecting A-list male will costar in what is essentially the woman's story.

"You cannot cast a male star as a boyfriend," says Obst, "whereas a female star will play a girlfriend. You can only get a real male star if it's his movie. But in a two-hander, where the male and female parts are equal, there's a chance of some Tracy-Hepburn chemistry because you can at least find a great up-and-coming male star."

Judging by the pileup of recent box-office disasters starring alpha males, some of these stars might benefit from sharing the screen more equally with women. Think of Russell Crowe in "Cinderella Man" (with Renée Zellweger in a supporting role as his long-suffering wife), Colin Farrell in "Alexander" and even Hanks in "The Ladykillers."

"Frankly, the whole industry is in a terrible state," says Lili Zanuck, who produced "Driving Miss Daisy" and "Cocoon."

Sure, revenues are down; costs, especially star salaries, are up; and many super-sized, male-dominated movies — just the kind that Hollywood relishes — are tanking. So why not change the paradigm? Why not give stories about women a chance?

War-driven dominance

HERE was a time when Tinseltown celebrated — and employed — its female stars. Personalities as luminous as Mae West (who almost single-handedly saved Paramount from bankruptcy), Rita Hayworth and even Shirley Temple, who was the reigning box-office princess throughout the 1930s, helped define the industry's golden years.

It was not until the late '60s that studios discovered that male buddy movies such as "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" made cash registers sing. At the time, Jay Presson Allen, the screenwriter of "Cabaret," chalked this up to a new "masculine sensibility" pervading our culture as a result of the Vietnam War. Given the obvious parallel with the war in Iraq, is this also today's zeitgeist?

"Movies are, consciously or unconsciously, a reflection of the culture around us. And that culture has been diminishing the role of women," says director Martha Coolidge, former president of the Directors Guild of America, whose movie "Material Girls" will be released this year. "We are being overwhelmed by a very conservative, women-should-go-back-to-the-kitchen sensibility. Also, there are fewer jobs. When that happens, the fringe — that is, women and minorities — is the first to go."

This is true even though women such as Pascal; Stacey Snider, the CEO of Universal; and Gail Berman, the president of Paramount, are now running major studios. Twenty years ago women in the business imagined that such a reshuffling of the Hollywood power structure would help reestablish the presence of women on screen. What could we have possibly been smoking?

None of the above executives agreed to speak to The Times for this piece. But one player who's been in the business for decades puts it this way: "These women have had to become men. They have had to put on the suits and play the game that way in order to get and keep their jobs."

"I don't think there's a big difference between the male and female executives," screenwriter Swicord agrees. "The studios are now owned by corporations. They're all driven by the bottom line."

But even Hollywood's most reliable audience, its teenage boys, are no longer a sure thing. "They are harder to get into theaters these days," says producer Laurence Mark. "They have so many more distractions. And suddenly we are starting to perceive female moviegoers as a tad more reliable."

Mark may know whereof he speaks. He is shooting the movie version of the 1981 Tony-winning Broadway musical "Dreamgirls" with a dream cast — Beyoncé, Jennifer Hudson, Jamie Foxx and Eddie Murphy. And his comedy "Last Holiday," starring Queen Latifah, which opened Jan. 13 to a robust \$15-million first-weekend box office, has made more than \$36 million in domestic release.

Generally, however, Hollywood's obsession with opening numbers lobbies against "women's pictures." The current wisdom is that women, who have families and jobs, simply do not go to movies early enough to suit the suits. "I was once told by a big marketing research firm that the older-woman audience is the hardest to convert from interested party to ticket buyer," says Obst. "With 'In Her Shoes,' women trickled into the box office. And

that's hard on the studios. By week 22, the studio doesn't get the money; theater owners do."

Apparently, the only genre that brings women — at least young ones — out early is the horror picture. "Teenage girls are going in packs," says Obst. "They see some form of empowerment in the genre, where female characters fight off the slasers." And thus the overwhelming success of the "Scary Movie" and "Saw" pictures and the current "When a Stranger Calls," with its teen baby sitter heroine. "Stranger" cost \$15 million and opened to \$22 million on Super Bowl weekend.

It's noteworthy too that "Underworld: Evolution," the horror romp starring Kate Beckinsale as a sexy vampire, took in \$55 million in its first two weeks. "A whole genre of strong warrior women are out there," says Coolidge. "TV's Emma Peel was the first version of this idea. The comic book character was Wonder Woman, of course. And think of 'Uma Thurman in 'Kill Bill' or Angelina Jolie in the 'Lara Croft' franchise. These women are super-sexy, super-physical specimens of womanhood and athleticism; men might be scared of them, but they like to fantasize about them."

Hemmed in on the page

ALMOST all the executives I speak with say they want strong female characters these days," says Coolidge. But their definition of "strong" is open to interpretation.

Comedy writers Amy Rardin and Jessica O'Toole, who co-wrote "Material Girls," say that, in their experience, studio execs sometimes limit what female characters can do in comedy situations. "You're told that they can't be that funny," says Rardin. "Or, 'Actresses aren't going to do that because they are going to look stupid.' The way studio executives allow women to be funny is to make them clumsy. 'Oh, let's have her fall over.' They think she can fall over and still be sexy."

Sometimes too, adds O'Toole, there's a fear of female characters being unlikable. "We get that a lot. In the '30s and '40s, women didn't have to be redeemed by the end of the movie. In 'All About Eve,' Margo Channing was a bitch. So was Eve. They had secrets. They were real people. That's why we find it liberating to write male characters. We know we can get away with more in terms of their behavior. Besides, they're easier to sell."

So even as movie executives now look for strong women, they impose enough subtle restrictions for writers to want to turn elsewhere. Still, as Jack Aniel, the screenwriter for "Raising Helen," said, "I really like writing female characters. Guys, we're either holding something in or letting it out. Women are layered. They're complex. And their lives and interactions are just more interesting."

Nice sentiment. If only, then, Hollywood would allow writers to write and producers to produce these characters, perhaps women, who are glued to their La-Z-Boys night after night, would have good reason to leave Wisteria Lane for an evening — even an opening weekend — at the multiplex.

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