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# All eyes on the prize

## Nothing breaks barriers like good old B.O. success

By DIANE GARRETT

This has already been a very good year for women in Hollywood, relatively speaking. In March, Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win a best director Oscar, ending the drought with "The Hurt Locker," a movie that also won best picture.

It's too soon to tell what kind of impact her historic win will ultimately have, but it surely can't hurt women. It might even help them get their projects made -- at least there's no longer any lingering doubt about women's ability to win top Academy prizes. Or their ability to tackle supposedly masculine topics such as bombs, mayhem and war.

Women in Film president Jane Fleming, a former New Line exec turned producer, is naturally pleased to see the directing barrier fall. But she's even more gratified by the strong box office performance from pics perceived as women's pictures in the past few years.

Bigelow's win was a great symbolic victory, she points out, but in Hollywood, people really respond to money.

"In success you get rid of excuses," Fleming says. "We're in a business. We're not a nonprofit industry."

Calling herself "always a glass half-full person," Fleming cites all the gains women have made at studios and in the TV biz in recent years. The feature film biz generally lags behind TV, but Fleming believes progress is being made there as well.

"Anecdotally, it's very obvious that things are getting better," she says. "There is a ripple effect."

Catherine Hardwicke, the first female director to launch a franchise with "Twilight," similarly welcomes Bigelow's victory. "How could we not be rejoicing about that?" she says.

But the director, now busy prepping "Red Riding Hood" for Warners, is quick to note that success doesn't necessarily make it easy for

women to get their next projects made. Or secure healthy budget bumps.

She, for example, lobbied for more money to make her next movie, a period tale with heavy CGI, but her \$40 million working budget is slightly higher than the \$37 million she got for "Twilight," a contempo movie that ultimately grossed more than \$400 million worldwide.

"I thought I'd get a few more pennies," Hardwicke says. "It's still a tough business. But you've got to keep trying."

Regarding "Red Riding Hood," Hardwicke describes this fairy tale adaptation, a pet project of Leonardo DiCaprio, as a mostly romantic thriller without much gore.

"It's sexy and scary. I've always wanted to create an entire world," Hardwicke says, noting that one of her first jobs in Hollywood was creating sculptures for Tim Burton. "It's a lot more complex than 'Twilight,'" she adds.

She's got several other projects percolating, including an adaptation of "Hamlet" and "Maximum Ride."

"Twilight" scribe Melissa Rosenberg is determined to use her heat from the vampire franchise to create juicy roles for women in big action movies "that have be out of our realm." Now writing the final "Twilight" film, she's eager to set up her own production company, Tall Girl Productions.

"I want to break the glass ceiling however I can," says Rosenberg, a longtime TV scribe who was frequently the only woman in the writing room early in her career. "In the last five years, the sisterhood has come up a bit. I've seen the change over the course of my career." The feature world "is a wholly different story. We've got a long way to go on that front."

Cathy Schulman, president of Mandalay Pictures, became actively involved in Women in Film to give femmes more opportunities in Hollywood. A board member for the nonprofit org, she fits those duties in with producing pics about indomitable women such as one-armed surfer Bethany Hamilton and wild life conservationist Daphne Sheldrick.

Her goal? To make movies about women that are interesting to everybody.

"I'm always frustrated and I'm always committed," says the producer, who won an Oscar for "Crash." "It's a big uphill climb. I don't stop to

think about it. I just do it."

Julie Taymor, the first woman to win a Tony for directing a Broadway musical, "The Lion King," wishes Bigelow's gender wasn't such a big deal. "I wish it were a moot point," says the helmer, who recently delivered her cut of "The Tempest" to Disney. With Helen Mirren in the lead role of Prospera, the film's other key roles are filled by Alfred Molina, Alan Cumming and Russell Brand.

"I adore Shakespeare," says Taymor, who previously adapted "Titus" for the bigscreen. "It's where my heart is, the collision of the sacred and profane, the high and the low." She believes the Bard's earthy and bawdy depiction of human malevolence is key to his longevity. "That's why it's so current," Taymor says.

Regarding the movies, it's important to Taymor that women not only keep getting opportunities but stay true to their voices.

"Films have to be good, period," Taymor stresses.

"Red Riding Hood" and "The Tempest" are only two of many femme-powered projects in the works. Here's a look at others:

Marti Noxon is writer of "Fright Night," in pre-production for a July shoot, at DreamWorks.

Noxon, a former "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" showrunner, has returned to the supernatural after a detour writing for such shows as "Mad Men" and "Grey's Anatomy." Her modern-day remake of "Fright Night" is set in Las Vegas, with a more badass vampire than the current vogue.

"He's a much more 'Jaws'-like vampire in the Amblin tradition," Noxon says.

Noxon has lined up Susan Sarandon, Topher Grace and Zooey Deschanel for her intended bigscreen directorial debut, "Box City," and is seeking financing. She also has an NBC pilot with Michael Tolkin and a few other DreamWorks projects in the works, including "Bad Baby," a family comedy in the vein of "Home Alone," and "Iron Man 4."

The good news about doing so many projects for the same studio?

"They prioritize for me," Noxon says.

Audrey Wells is writer-director of "The Fugees" for Universal, release not set. She's now in the middle of writing her first draft for the movie about a youth soccer club of international refugees in Clarkston, Ga. Project, based on a New York Times story that Warren St. John

turned into a book, revolves around the team's coach, Luma Mufleh. "It says something powerful about America's xenophobia," says Wells, who hopes to get "My Name Is Jody Williams" made next. Naomi Watts has been attached to the story about a Nobel Peace Award winner, but so far the studio has been unwilling to pull the trigger. "If the story were about a man, would it have been made by now?" Wells asks.

Focus feature has set a November release for "It's Kind of a Funny Story," which is co-written, co-directed and edited by Anna Boden. Once again, she's collaborating with her "Half Nelson" and "Sugar" partner, Ryan Fleck. Regarding "Funny Story," an adaptation of Ned Vizzini's novel about a depressed teenager who checks himself into an adult psychiatric ward, Boden says she immediately took a liking to the character, who "was so earnest and had a nice self-deprecating humor without the ironic edge we see so often in books and movies." The movie version stars Zach Galifianakis and Emma Roberts, and is the duo's first studio project.

Shana Feste is writer-director on "Love Don't Let Me Down," a Dec. 22 release from Screen Gems. Gwyneth Paltrow sings in this country music drama co-starring Tim McGraw and Leighton Meester. "It's about love and fame - I don't think you can have both," says Feste, who previously wrote and directed indie "The Greatest." "It's a throwback to movies like 'Tender Mercies' and 'Nashville.' They were my inspiration."

Aline Brosh McKenna wrote "Morning Glory," a comedy about a veteran TV anchor (Harrison Ford) brought into a morning news program with co-host Diane Keaton. Paramount had originally targeted for a summer release but pushed it back to Nov. 12. McKenna is now concentrating on another J.J. Abrams project -- her first co-scripting project with Simon Kinberg. The idea, McKenna says, is to "blend what he does and what I do," with action writing Kinberg's particular forte. "It's fun for us because we've always basically worked alone," she says. "It's like summer camp." Also on her docket: "We Bought a Zoo," an adaptation of Sophie Kinsella's "Undomestic Goddess" and "I Don't Know How She Does It," an adaptation of Allison Pearson's novel.