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Geena Davis: Contributions to the Future of Equality in Film

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### **Introduction**

Geena Davis is an American actor, athlete, and activist. Although she is relatively young (59 at the time of this writing) to be considered a long-time influencer in the media landscape, her actions both in front of the camera and behind it have been shaping perceptions of women and girls for decades. The roles she has chosen have often been those portraying smart, strong, independent women. This alone has had a great impact on audience perceptions of females in film.

Beyond that, she's also put time and effort into acquiring the hard data necessary to demonstrate just how far out of balance media representations of women and girls are. Her research behind the scenes has revealed what a rarity good roles for women are – and she's working to change that. Using her contacts within the entertainment industry, she's begun to advance the cause of women and girls, both on-screen and off-screen, in Hollywood. Her work will have a lasting influence for years to come.

### **Biography**

Virginia Elizabeth “Geena” Davis, born 21 January 1956<sup>1</sup>, is best known for her performances in popular Hollywood films and television shows. She is also a former model, member of Mensa<sup>2</sup>, producer, writer, and semi-finalist for the Olympic archery team<sup>34</sup>. Her

1 ‘Geena Davis - Biography - IMDb’ <[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000133/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000133/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)> [accessed 18 April 2015].

2 ‘Fact Sheet - American Mensa, Ltd.’ <<http://www.us.mensa.org/reach-our-members/sponsors/amlfacts/>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

3 ‘About Us - See Jane’ <<http://seejane.org/about-us/>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

4 ‘OLYMPICS - Geena Davis Zeros In With Bow and Arrows - NYTimes.com’

first screen role was in *Tootsie*, with Dustin Hoffman. She's had a number of well-recognised parts in films such as *Beetlejuice*, *Thelma & Louise* - for which she was nominated in the category of Best Actress in a Leading Role at the Academy Awards – and *A League of Their Own*. In 1989 she won an Oscar<sup>5</sup> for Best Supporting Actress in *The Accidental Tourist*. In 2006 she won a Golden Globe<sup>6</sup> for Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series for her portrayal of President Mackenzie Allen in *Commander in Chief*.

While growing up in Wareham, Massachusetts, Davis had a strong interest in music, developing her skills highly enough to become the organist at the First Congregational Church<sup>7</sup>. According to her mother, "She was very much into crafts. She'd buy leather and make pocketbooks."<sup>8</sup>

Davis earned an undergraduate degree in drama and, contrary to conventional wisdom, travelled to New York seeking to break into movies. She says nobody told her that Los Angeles was the place to go instead. While in New York, she decided to break into modelling as a stepping stone to becoming a screen actor. "At the time Christie Brinkley and... Lauren Hutton were getting cast in movies, and I thought, well, I'll just become a model first. ...then they'll just hire me to be in movies." She went on to say, with her characteristic self-deprecating humour, "cause, you know, it's much easier to become a super model." Yet, she did, in fact, do well as a model, even gracing the pages of a Victoria's Secret catalogue.<sup>9</sup>

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<<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/06/sports/olympics-geena-davis-zeros-in-with-bow-and-arrows.html>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

5 '1989 | Oscars.org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences'

<<http://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1989>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

6 'Geena Davis - Awards - IMDb' <[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000133/awards?ref\\_=nmbio\\_ql\\_op\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000133/awards?ref_=nmbio_ql_op_1)> [accessed 18 April 2015].

7 'Trends in Photography - Latimes' <[http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-14/news/vw-3598\\_1\\_geena-davis](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-14/news/vw-3598_1_geena-davis)> [accessed 18 April 2015].

8 'Trends in Photography - Latimes'.

9 'Geena Davis on Jack Nicholson Hitting on Her - YouTube' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK7v7an4nMs>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

The shoot for Victoria's Secret ended up opening an important door for her acting career. She was sent on an audition for *Tootsie* and told to wear a bathing suit under her clothes. If she read well, she was told, they would ask to see her in the bathing suit. She did read well, but the casting team forgot to ask to see her in the bathing suit. By the time the mistake was realised, Davis had already left for modelling work in Paris. In lieu of bathing suit photos, the production team was presented with the Victoria's Secret catalogue. Davis got the part and, for her first on-screen role, ended up working with Academy Award winner Dustin Hoffman.<sup>10</sup>

For the next three years, Davis picked up a number of parts in television series and made-for-TV movies. Her roles included one time guest appearances on shows like *Knight Rider*, *Fantasy Island*, *Family Ties*, and *Remington Steele*, as well as a recurring role on the show *Buffalo Bill*. She even filled the title role of the short-lived series *Sara*.

In 1985, she returned to the big screen alongside Chevy Chase in *Fletch* and Jeff Goldblum in *Transylvania 6-5000*. She and reunited with Goldblum for the remake of *The Fly* and, later, *Earth Girls Are Easy*. The two were married from 1987 to 1990. Davis thanked Goldblum, referring to him as "...my other wonderful acting coach and darling husband" during her Academy Award acceptance speech for *The Accidental Tourist* in 1989.<sup>11</sup>

Davis has worked continuously as an actor since then. Her television work has ranged from a guest spot on *Will & Grace* (2004) to starring in the short-lived, eponymous *The Geena Davis Show* (2000-2001), and from the titular role in *Commander in Chief* (2005-2006) to her recent recurring role on *Grey's Anatomy* (2014-2015). Her roles in both film and television have continued to garner attention and nominations for BAFTA, Emmy, Golden

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10 'Geena Davis on Jack Nicholson Hitting on Her - YouTube'.

11 'Geena Davis Wins Supporting Actress: 1989 Oscars - YouTube' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XD74gQOTx30>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

Globes, and Academy Awards.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the years, Davis has filled the position of co-executive producer on a number of projects.

### **Notable Feminist Films**

#### *Thelma & Louise*

Two of Davis's most recognised feminist films, *Thelma & Louise* and *A League of Their Own*, were released in 1991 and 1992, respectively. The former has been called, “the last great film about women”<sup>13</sup>. It was lauded by many for its authentic portrayal of women's experiences, as well as the power of friendship. As with many depictions of female empowerment, there were detractors who labelled the story misandrist, deliberately mistaking the celebration of powerful women as a call to disempower men. Despite the claims, the film received six Academy Award and three Golden Globe nominations, winning one each for the screenplay. Davis and her co-star, Susan Sarandon, were each nominated for their acting in both award shows.<sup>14</sup>

Even with so much positive attention, as well as being an undeniable profit maker for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (over \$45 million US domestic gross against a \$16.5 million budget<sup>15</sup>), Hollywood, rather uncharacteristically, did not jump on the copycat train. Nor did the film's success do much to change the immediate prospects for women working in moviemaking at the time. Melissa Silverstein, writer, blogger, and film festival founder, stated, “*Thelma & Louise* is still a touchstone for so many people because it has never been recreated. ...When a movie is successful, it's usually recreated over and over and over again.”

Raina Lipsitz, writer for *The Atlantic*, speculated “As the reactions of certain critics in 1991

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12 ‘Geena Davis - Awards - IMDb’.

13 “‘Thelma & Louise’: The Last Great Film About Women — The Atlantic” <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/thelma-louise-the-last-great-film-about-women/244336/>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

14 ‘Thelma & Louise - Awards - IMDb’ <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103074/awards?ref\\_=ttrv\\_ql\\_op\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103074/awards?ref_=ttrv_ql_op_1)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

15 ‘Thelma and Louise (1991) - Box Office Mojo’ <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=thelmaandlouise.htm>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

revealed, even smart, educated people are disturbed by female characters who assert control over their lives and bodies and aren't punished for it.”<sup>16</sup> Essentially, Hollywood is still a very misogynistic place.

### *A League of Their Own*

The year after the release of *Thelma & Louise*, Davis starred in *A League of Their Own*, a film about the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. Directed by Penny Marshall, it continued Davis's work as feminist icon and role model for gender equality. The story illustrated points about women's sexuality, capabilities, camaraderie, and choices, as well as the fact that women can be their own worst enemies when it comes to equality. As Myrna Waldron writes on the site BitchFlicks, “One sequence involves a snooty middle-aged woman decrying the 'masculinization' of women on the radio, complaining that things like the girls' baseball team will have [long-standing] effects on home, children and country. She even calls the league 'sexual confusion' and wonders what kind of girls the men overseas will come home to.”<sup>17</sup>

Like *Thelma & Louise*, *A League of Their Own* was popular, well-received, and financially successful. In fact, with a domestic gross of \$107,533,928, against a production budget of \$40 million, the latter was even more profitable than the former.<sup>18</sup> The United States Congress established the National Film Registry in order to preserve films that are “...culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.” Recognising the excellence of *A League of Their Own* and the importance of its subject matter, the National Film Registry selected it for induction in 2012.<sup>19</sup>

16 “‘Thelma & Louise’: The Last Great Film About Women — The Atlantic’.

17 ‘Women in Sports Week: Five Reasons Why “A League of Their Own” Is “Feminism: The Movie” | Bitch Flicks’ <<http://www.bitchflicks.com/2013/08/women-in-sports-week-five-reasons-why-a-league-of-their-own-is-feminism-the-movie-2.html#.VTO8WSEQpD8>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

18 ‘A League of Their Own (1992) - Box Office Mojo’ <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=leagueoftheirown.htm>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

19 ‘National Film Registry Selects 25 Films for Preservation - Latimes’ <<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/19/entertainment/la-et-mn-national-film-registry-20121217>>

## *Cutthroat Island*

Not all of Davis's forays into feminist film met with success. *Cutthroat Island* is a notable box office flop, with a domestic gross of just over \$10 million returned against a production budget of \$98 million.<sup>20</sup> On the surface, it is a classic adventure – pirates, treasure, betrayal, chases – with the only notable difference of casting the lead character as a female. With Davis's track record up to this point, it would have seemed possible to flip the pirate genre on its head to bring in box office gold. However, visual storytelling is a fickle beast; at times it's only through apparent miracles that a film comes together at all. Sadly, the production of *Cutthroat Island* was not one of those times.

Director Renny Harlin, married to Davis during the film's production and release, reportedly pointed out in a 2011 interview (video currently unavailable) that Carolco Pictures, the production company, was in financial difficulty at the time they should have been promoting the picture.<sup>21</sup> The trouble, he said, had started before shooting had even begun. That being said, the film currently holds a 37% rating at Rotten Tomatoes<sup>23</sup>, while Amazon customers weigh in at a more generous 3.9 out of 5 stars<sup>24</sup>. It's hard to say how it would have fared had it been released today, with more digital channels available for marketing, distribution, and viewing. In any case, the film's failure may have put a dent in both Harlin's and Davis's careers, as well as the pirate film genre, for several years.

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[accessed 19 April 2015].

20 'Cutthroat Island (1995) - Box Office Mojo' <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=cutthroatisland.htm>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

21 'Cutthroat Island - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia' <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cutthroat\\_Island#Release\\_and\\_reception](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cutthroat_Island#Release_and_reception)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

22 'COMPANY NEWS - CAROLCO PICTURES FILES FOR BANKRUPTCY PROTECTION - NYTimes.com' <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/11/business/company-news-carolco-pictures-files-for-bankruptcy-protection.html>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

23 'Cutthroat Island - Rotten Tomatoes' <[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/cutthroat\\_island/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/cutthroat_island/)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

24 'Amazon.com: Cutthroat Island: Geena Davis, Matthew Modine, Frank Langella, Maury Chaykin, Patrick Malahide, Stan Shaw, Rex Linn, Paul Dillon, Christopher Masterson, Jimmie F. Skaggs, Harris Yulin, Carl Chase, Renny Harlin, James Gorman, Bruce A. Evans, Marc Norman, Michael Frost Beckner, Raynold Gideon, Robert King: Movies & TV' <<http://www.amazon.com/Cutthroat-Island-Geena-Davis/dp/B00005OW04>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

*The Long Kiss Goodnight*

Neither Harlin nor Davis let the failure of their previous outing stop them. The following year New Line Cinema released *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, with Harlin and Davis reprising their roles as director and main character, respectively. (Davis is also listed as an uncredited producer on the Internet Movie Database.<sup>25</sup>)

The plot relies on the amnesia trope framework. It has more of a “gotcha!” punch than some, however, due to the fact that the character with the affliction is 1) an assassin currently living a happy, domestic life, and 2) is female. By contrast, Jason Bourne, of Robert Ludlum's *Bourne* series, while an enjoyable character to watch on screen, only has half the surprise power, considering that the character is a man who is rescued at sea after being gravely injured. Samantha Caine (later revealed as accomplished killer Charly Baltimore) is introduced to the audience as the mother of a little girl – albeit a slightly scary mother who offers harsh life lessons during an ice skating lesson – who appears to be not much different from her contemporaries in the suburbs. Although later revealed, *Bourne*-like, to have been found in the sea after her memory loss-inducing accident, the setup was clearly designed to lead the viewer down a path of initial assumptions about stereotypical suburban bliss. It seems clear that both Harlin and Davis enjoy thumbing their nose at convention.

This outing, unlike *Cutthroat Island*, did manage to coalesce into a unified piece that both entertained and pulled in money. The \$65 million budget was not fully offset by domestic receipts (\$33 million), but together with foreign gross (\$56 million) managed to do well.<sup>26</sup> It was not quite profitable enough that a sequel was immediately called for, though there have been rumours of sequel circulating for years. In 2009 Renny Harlin mentioned a

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25 ‘The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996) - IMDb’ <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116908/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116908/?ref_=nv_sr_1)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

26 ‘The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996) - Box Office Mojo’ <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=longkissgoodnight.htm>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

possible sequel starring Samuel L. Jackson<sup>27</sup>, whereas Davis's IMDb page features an *Untitled Bounty Hunter Project (2013)* that lists her character's name from the original.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media**

The term “glass ceiling” may be defined as “...an unacknowledged discriminatory barrier that prevents women and minorities from rising to positions of power or responsibility, as within a corporation.”<sup>29</sup> In Hollywood, the phenomenon is known as “the celluloid ceiling.” It is a very real and acknowledged problem.

An article on CNN.com states: “It's clear that Hollywood has a woman problem. It's not just that they don't trust the vision of a woman to direct; they don't trust that people want to see our stories. There's a prevailing sense that male stories are universal, for everyone, and that women's stories are just for women... Another problem is that because there are so few movies about women, the ones that are released are held up to absurd scrutiny. If you fail the entire gender is blamed and we take two steps back, but on the other hand, if you are a success you can't get a sequel made because women's successes are still seen as flukes. We are stuck in a catch 22.”<sup>30</sup>

Many women have benefited from feminist progress throughout the years, but do not always recognise it as part of their experience. Awareness of equality issues is usually achieved through a process of growth in awareness, with turning points sometimes reached entirely by accident. Drawing attention to the language surrounding sexism is often part of the proceedings. Clarifying the definition of the word “feminist” – one who believes in the equality of men and women, rather than one who believes in the superiority of women – for

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27 ‘Harlin Talks Long Kiss Goodnight 2 – Moviehole’ <<http://www.moviehole.net/200918159-harlin-talks-long-kiss-goodnight-2>> [accessed 19 April 2015].

28 ‘Untitled Bounty Hunter Project (TV Movie 2013) - IMDb’ <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2750524/?ref\\_=nm\\_film\\_act\\_6](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2750524/?ref_=nm_film_act_6)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

29 ‘Glass Ceiling - Definition of Glass Ceiling by The Free Dictionary’ <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/glass+ceiling>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

30 ‘Hollywood’s Glass Ceiling: Why Doesn’t the Film Industry Trust Women? - CNN.com’ <<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/01/business/hollywoods-glass-ceiling-women/>> [accessed 18 March 2015].

example, often leads to greater understanding of the situation. To that end, Davis and a number of other female thespians have begun referring to themselves as “actors” rather than “actresses”. Paraphrasing Davis's explanation, journalist Ruth Graham explains, “We no longer use 'authoress' and 'poetess' for female writers, so why are women who act still called 'actresses'?”<sup>31</sup> Online print media has quietly begun to acknowledge this shift by changing their style guides.<sup>32</sup> Since language serves to reflect as well as define our society, making this small change is an important step in seeking parity.

Getting cast in *Thelma & Louise* had a great impact on Davis. “It was a small budget film and hardly anyone had wanted to do it. We thought it was unusual because it had two great parts for women but other than that, we didn't realize there was anything so special about it. But when it came out, the reaction was explosive.”<sup>33</sup> All of the attention given to the film, including the debates about women in power and course of the future, made Davis realise how sparse roles like this were. She went on to say, “I had previously chosen movie roles on a selfish basis – roles that seemed interesting or challenging to me to play. But after this movie, in choosing a role, I gave serious consideration to what women in the audience would think about my character. So it changed my life.”

Although already a feminist icon herself by the time she had her daughter, it took watching television with her for Davis to recognise the lack of female representation in children's programming.<sup>34</sup> Realising that changing attitudes about depictions of women and girls begins at a young age, in 2007 Davis founded the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in

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31 ‘Geena Davis Wants To Be Called An Actor, Not An Actress’  
<<http://www.thegrindstone.com/2012/09/25/mentors/geena-davis-wants-to-be-called-an-actor-not-an-actress-938/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

32 ‘The Readers’ Editor On... Actor or Actress? | Comment Is Free | The Observer’  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/sep/25/readers-editor-actor-or-actress>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

33 ‘From Actor To Activist, Geena Davis’ Story Of Discovery | Nina Kotick’  
<[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nina-kotick/from-actor-to-activist-geena-davis\\_b\\_1594612.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nina-kotick/from-actor-to-activist-geena-davis_b_1594612.html)> [accessed 19 April 2015].

34 ‘About Us - See Jane’.

Media. The website, SeeJane.org, describes the Institute as “...the only research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to engage, educate, and influence the need to dramatically improve, gender balance, reduce stereotyping and create diverse female characters in entertainment targeting children 11 and under.”

The tagline for the Institute is, “If she can see it, she can be it.” A video promoting the work of the organisation provides some surprising statistics, using “Jane” to stand for women and girls everywhere. Although half of the world's population is comprised of “Janes”, you would not know it to watch children's television programming. “Onscreen, Jane is outnumbered three to one. When she is there, a lot of time [sic] it's purely as 'eye candy'.”<sup>35</sup> Ken Borsuk reports that Davis revealed “...in G-rated films, the female characters wore the same amount of sexually revealing clothing as in R-rated ones, she said, which leads girls as young as 6 to see themselves as sexual objects and leads boys to believe sexist things about the value and role of women.”<sup>36</sup>

In a piece she wrote for the Hollywood Reporter, Davis elaborated further. “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.” Behind the camera, the ratio is likewise unbalanced, with 5 men present for every woman. Davis further adds, “This being the case, we are in effect enculturating [sic] 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

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35 ‘Seejane.org If She Can See It, She Can Be It - YouTube’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BumIt2pIRuw>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

36 ‘Actor, Activist Geena Davis Speaks on Women in Media at Luncheon - Connecticut Post’ <<http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Actor-activist-Geena-Davis-speaks-on-women-in-6190682.php>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

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?”<sup>37</sup>

The Institute has partnered with the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, commissioning more than 12 studies on gender representation in media. Dr. Stacy Smith, Ph.D., leads the research, which has repeatedly displayed the evidence of inequality and stereotyping prevalent in entertainment.<sup>38</sup> The data was presented as part of a study by the Institute, UN Women, and The Rockefeller Foundation. The conclusion was that sexism in film and television is a world wide issue, or “Global film industry perpetuates discrimination against women”, as the press release put it. Davis herself had strong words about the findings. “The fact is – women are seriously under-represented across nearly all sectors of society around the globe, not just on-screen, but for the most part we’re simply not aware of the extent. And media images exert a powerful influence in creating and perpetuating our unconscious biases.”<sup>39</sup>

With the problem defined in statistical terms, what, then, can be done about it? Davis has two very simple, practical steps to suggest to media creators. “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 unsterotypical [sic] 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

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37 ‘Geena Davis’ Two Easy Steps to Make Hollywood Less Sexist (Guest Column) - Hollywood Reporter’ <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/geena-davis-two-easy-steps-664573>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

38 ‘Research Informs & Empowers - See Jane’ <<http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

39 ‘Geena Davis Study Press Release | UN Women – Headquarters’ <<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/9/geena-davis-study-press-release>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

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 [assistant directors] think women don't gather, I don't know."<sup>40</sup> Davis goes so far as to say she's not suggesting that lead characters be changed from male to female – though, of course, that would be great – but simply showing the population balance in a more accurate light would be fantastic.

Has the Institute made a difference? “Every studio has a diversity department,” says Davis. “They’re always shocked and mortified when we present our data. No one ever says, ‘so what.’ They want the work produced to be positive for kids.”<sup>41</sup> After conducting a survey about the impact of the work, the results were encouraging: 68% of people in entertainment industry who had heard the Institutes’s presentation said it had impacted two or more projects; 41% said it had impacted four or more projects. So, yes, there is progress, but there is clearly more room for growth.

With that in mind, the studies and education efforts of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media continue. Additionally, Davis has launched the Bentonville Film Festival in Bentonville, Arkansas, which will take place for the first time from May 5 – 9, 2015. Partnering with Arc Entertainment as well as a host of big name corporate sponsors, the mission of the festival is “...to be a positive and proactive influence in filmmaking to ensure that the American entertainment industry represent the national audience and the growing diversity of the United States.” In a video introducing the festival, Davis says, “Entertainment greatly influences how we think. Let's make sure young minds watch content that reflects the world around them with great characters inspired by all walks of life.”<sup>42</sup> The slogan of the

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40 ‘Geena Davis’ Two Easy Steps to Make Hollywood Less Sexist (Guest Column) - Hollywood Reporter’.

41 ‘Geena Davis: Taking a Stand | Diversity Journal’ <<http://www.diversityjournal.com/14217-geena-davis-taking-stand/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

42 ‘Bentonville Film Festival - YouTube’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vzpj6M7aZxg&feature=youtu.be>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

event succinctly sums it up as, “Championing Women and Diversity in Film”.

For the inaugural year, entries will be limited to feature-length films and screenplays. There is no mention of plans to include other media – animation, shorts, documentaries, etc. – but the wording on the site may imply there will be expanded options in the future.<sup>43</sup> The festival is further described on SeeJane.org as “...the first and only film competition in the world to offer guaranteed theatrical, television, digital and retail home entertainment distribution for its winners.”<sup>44</sup> It seems it is intended to be groundbreaking in more ways than one. Not only will winners benefit from exposure, bringing much needed attention to the talents and abilities of female and minority filmmakers, professional distribution deals will help to solidify their positions.

### **Speeches, Accolades, and Appointments**

Geena Davis's work on behalf of women, girls, and diversity in entertainment media has not gone unnoticed. In addition to the hopeful survey results from Hollywood insiders indicating that the message is getting through, Davis has been invited to be a keynote speaker at commencement ceremonies<sup>45,46</sup> and community organisations.<sup>47,48</sup> She inspired MAKERS, “a digital and video storytelling platform that aims to be the largest and most dynamic collection of women's stories ever assembled,”<sup>49</sup> to “...feature other women who focus on

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43 ‘Bentonville Film Festival’ <<http://bentonvillefilmfestival.com/2015-film-festival/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

44 ‘Academy Award® Winning Actor Geena Davis and Arc Entertainment Launch Bentonville Film Festival with Founding Sponsor Walmart and Presenting Sponsor Coca-Cola - See Jane’ <<http://seejane.org/gender-in-media-news-release/academy-award-winning-actor-geena-davis-arc-entertainment-launch-bentonville-film-festival-founding-sponsor-walmart-presenting-sponsor-coca-cola/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

45 ‘Address by Geena Davis | Commencement | Bates College’ <<http://www.bates.edu/commencement/annual/y2009/honorands/geena-davis/geena-davis-address/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

46 ‘Westridge School’s 2014 Graduation in Pasadena Features Geena Davis as Commencement Speaker’ <<http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/social-affairs/20140609/westridge-schools-2014-graduation-in-pasadena-features-geena-davis-as-commencement-speaker>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

47 ‘Actor, Activist Geena Davis Speaks on Women in Media at Luncheon - Connecticut Post’.

48 ‘The Fund for Women and Girls Annual Luncheon - Fairfield County’s Community Foundation’ <<http://fccfoundation.org/community-impact/issues-opportunities/women-girls/annual-luncheon/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

49 ‘About | MAKERS’ <<http://www.makers.com/about>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

changing the media industry.”<sup>50</sup> In 2014 she was awarded the Bette Davis Lifetime Achievement Award for both her acting and her activism.

She is not limiting her work to the United States. Considering the global impact that media sexism has, it is fitting that the message be taking to a larger stage. “Davis was appointed Special Envoy for Women and Girls in ICT [information and communication technologies] for the UN's International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Davis is also an official partner of UN Women, working toward their goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women worldwide.”<sup>51</sup> Not only does her message make sense from the standpoint of simple equity, it also makes sense in terms of world economic needs. The United Nations' ITU “...estimates a global skills shortfall of over two million ICT jobs in the coming 10 years.”<sup>52</sup> By encouraging more inclusive and supportive policies in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, we create a more robust economy with increased opportunity for innovation. If she can see it, she can be it – and she can quite possibly change the world.

## **Conclusion**

Geena Davis began her career in entertainment as a model. She's moved on to be successful actor and producer. She's evolved throughout the process, not just honing her skills as an actor, but as an aware human being and feminist. She has put activism square in the centre of her work.

A number of actors and media moguls are noted for their philanthropic undertakings.

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50 'MAKERS: Movie Star and Media Activist Geena Davis | AOL Advertising' <<http://advertising.aol.com/blog/makers-movie-star-and-media-activist-geena-davis>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

51 'About Us - See Jane'.

52 'ITU, UN Women Announce New Global Awards for Outstanding Work in Technology for Gender Equality | UN Women – Headquarters' <<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/7/itu-awards-for-gender-equality>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

They give money to organisations supporting cancer research, bringing clean water to impoverished areas of the world, and land mine removal. Some work as spokespeople for good causes and charitable organisations. Only a few, however, have actually gone out and founded a research organisation of their own.

Davis has gone above and beyond the norm in her work for gender equality. She not only recognises the power of image and media, she harnesses that power and puts it to good use. Collecting hard data for presentation to people in a position to make positive change requires insight, determination, and skill. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, as we have seen, is already influencing gender portrayals in popular media. The Bentonville Film festival continues the work for both children and adults. Her political endeavours as a United Nations Special Envoy brings all of that to the global stage. Her efforts on behalf of equality for women and girls, as well as diversity for all, is still unfolding. It's hard to see how it will all play out from here, but if the progress so far is any indication, the significance of her work will have positive reverberations for generations to come.

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