

An open letter from a female director, to her friends and allies - 1

June, 2009

Dear friend and ally,

On June 30th this year I'll be turning 38. It was twenty years ago that I used to sneak out of school in order to write my first screenplay. In lieu of a literary criticism paper, I handed in a 260-page epic screenplay about the childhood and adolescence of John Lennon. He was my hero at the time because no matter what people thought about him, he knew he was good. I received an "F" on my term paper, but my English teacher took me aside during lunch and said: "I had to fail you, but I know you'll win no matter what we do to you in school."

When people learn that I'm a filmmaker, they often ask me some version of: "Do you want to be a star? You want to be Stephen Spielberg?" With practice, I got good at answering:

"No, I don't work this hard to be a star. I've put in thousands of hours of unpaid labor because I care deeply about the artwork that I create. The stories I tell, and how I tell them, really matter to me. I think my work will make a difference to people."

Twenty years later, I sit to write this letter, facing two shelves filled with over twenty screenplays. Modesty aside, I would need many pages to recount even a portion of the positive feedback that I've received over the years; the enthusiastic phone calls, the awards, the requests for meetings. A judge at the IFP Market¹ told me that of the 150 scripts she read that summer, mine ranked among her top three favorites; another judge resigned in protest after the jury didn't select my script as one of their five finalists; a manager called to say that he couldn't get my script out of his head; an agent told me that my script had her laughing out loud; a producer of hit movies implored me not to revise my script because it was perfect. When I began to direct short projects, the response was the same: "Shorts this perfect are so rare, I just want to weep" was a comment I received from a festival director.

And yet, the past years were marked with tears and heartaches. One enthusiastic response after another would lead me to hope and end with a bout of weeping on my husband's shoulder. No matter how familiar and by now, routine, the disappointments would be, the tears would come each time. And after a good cry, or two, or several, I would get up, wipe my knees, and keep going.

I often tell other filmmakers who lose heart: when it comes to pass letters, you're in great company, from Van Gogh to the Beatles to Stephen King to J.K. Rowling.

But the million dollar question remains, as one of my writing students asked after reading two of my scripts: "Why are these scripts not made? What better scripts could people *possibly* be reading?"

After years of learning, practicing, and teaching, after hundreds of hour devoted to each script, after years of query letters, phone calls, meetings, film markets, panels, classes, LA trips, networking, more networking, even more networking, my scripts – those ones that this reader liked better than the 150 scripts she read that summer – those scripts sit on a shelf. After years of trying and failing and getting up and trying, something finally dawned on me: maybe I'm not the most unlucky bastard that ever lived. Maybe I'm female.

I have an Iranian friend living in New York who told me that women in her country are stronger because there is no pretense about sexism. It's overt. It's policy. It's "the way things are". The women there know they have to fight. What's hard about being a western woman, she said, is that we are disempowered by the myth that we've been liberated. The glass ceiling hurts every time we bash our heads against it but it's entirely invisible. Have you ever run smack into a pane of glass?

¹ Independent Feature Project

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Little hints of this invisible blockade pop up on occasion: a male student of mine with a fraction of my experience gets hired to direct a feature film; the manager who couldn't get my script out of his head tells me that he can't sell the script because the lead is a girl; an executive won't read my road movie because it's an ensemble with three female leads and, according to this executive, "women on the road has already been done."² One producer urged me to pass my script to another director since I haven't made a feature before; this conversation took place while her husband was line-producing a \$7M movie starring Bruce Willis, directed by a first-time male director.

Overall, however, society's message to me as a woman born in 1971 is that sexism is a thing of the past. But if I'm ever so liberated, why is it that no matter which direction I turn, I walk into a glass pane and land on my ass? The answer, I'm convinced, is not out there; it's inside myself.

I teach screenwriting and consistently notice the different regard that I feel for my male and female students. No matter how "enlightened" I think I am, I find myself having higher expectations of the guys. I just assume that they have more experience, more confidence, more intelligence...? I've recently noticed that when I receive quality work from a woman, I feel a sense of surprise. When I see amateur work from a man, I think "hmm... for some reason I had him pegged as an experienced writer." For some reason.

So if I, a woman filmmaker, the liberated one who's not afraid to use the word "feminism" in a sentence, if I myself carry misinformation about women that has me question our competence and intelligence, what thoughts do other people carry? What "feelings", stemming from centuries of fear and prejudice, and mistaken for intuition, dictate their decisions? What do the well-intended producers, executives, agents, managers and investors, feel when my script comes across their desk? With what concern do they thumb through my script, the one with the name "Ela" on it, the one with a female in the leading role?³

If they're anything like me, enlightened and all, they glance at the script and expect amateur work. If they get as far as reading a few pages, they're pleasantly surprised that I can write. If they get as far as reading it entirely, if they get past the fact that the lead is female (unlikely), if they get far enough to even consider packaging or selling or producing my film as an even remote possibility – and I'm happy to say many have gotten that far – then they have to muster up the confidence that I, a first time *female* director, could complete a meaningful, powerful and – profitable – movie.⁴ Beware of glass panes.

I once had a notable producer pick up my work and tell me that mine was the strongest script on their slate. The higher-up in the company, however, while working to attach "bankable names" (ie. movie stars) to their other projects, refused to package my script. "If an investor takes interest in it without us packaging it, then we'll produce it," they explained. We parted ways.

There is no petition to draft. There is no policy to fight. Yet, of the 250 top-grossing films⁵ in any given year, 6% are directed by women; of the 50 top-grossing movies each year, roughly 5 star or

² Men on the road is a *genre*. There've been hundreds of films with men on the road.

³ It's too late for me to go by E. Thier because I already have some film credits, but this is still common practice among my female colleagues, no different than what 18th century female writers were doing. The author of *Harry Potter* went by J.K. Rowlings to help her get published.

⁴ A frequent question is whether I would be willing to hand my scripts off to another director. I spent years trying to sell my scripts without attaching myself as a director. I find that this was even harder to do. Industry response has increased overall since I began to present myself as a writer-director and, based on the short works that I directed, I've come to realize that I'm the best director for my own work.

⁵ Top-grossing doesn't necessarily mean most popular. How much money a film grosses depends on how much resource a studio funnels into its distribution costs.

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focus on women. In 80 years of Oscar history, with roughly 250 directors receiving a nomination for best director, 3 nominations went to female directors. No woman director ever received an Oscar.⁶

It would be so much easier if someone would just flat out say it: "You're not a director. You're a girl."

Unfortunately, there are no bad guys to blame. Men are good and caring people; my own husband is my greatest ally in the world. Women are intelligent and powerful. But all of us carry the scars of centuries of misinformation, and we all make decisions, often without awareness, that stem from a sordid history.

So now what? Given the reality in which I exist, what do I need to do to move forward? Statistically, I have twenty times less of a chance to get a film made than my male colleagues. But this doesn't mean that my goal is impossible, it just means that I have to work twenty times harder. So I will.

I know my films will get made. I know that I'm a wise investment, that my films will have wide appeal, and dare I say: wide impact. But how do I get my films to their rightful owners – to their audience?

I decided to follow in the footsteps of writer-director Deborah Kampmeier, who after years of throwing herself at glass ceilings and windows and walls, decided to quit waiting for a greenlight. She contacted every person she knew and asked them for money. Dollar by dollar she collected \$35K and made the film "Virgin". The film was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award and she went on to make her second feature for roughly \$4M, starring Dakota Fanning. She is now in development on her third feature. It took her several years to find backing for her second feature; this was no easy feat. But the traction that her first feature created, coupled with her persistence, began the momentum that is now her career.

Thinking I would do the same, I sent out a plea to my email list: if I raise \$100 from 1000, I explained, I can make my film. My email list consists largely of people who attended my workshops, so I offered a \$150 workshop voucher in exchange for the \$100 contribution (good deal, no?) I sent this notice to the 2100+ people on my email list and one week later (drum roll please...!) I received 3 contributions. One of them from my sister. I suppose that \$300 is a start...?

I was due for another bout of tears, and when I was done, I got up to wipe my knees and engineer the next idea. I decided to make it personal.

That's where you come in.

I went on to make a list of every human being I could think of that I ever had meaningful contact with. You're receiving this letter because we know each other, because we had an impact in each others' lives. As I compiled my list, I saw your face in my mind and thought about the experiences that I shared with you: you were my 6th grade classmate, teacher, student, employer, fellow activist, synagogue-goer, or we met on a blind internet date before I was married. You may be a producer I met at a film market, an agent I queried who sent me an encouraging word; you're a lawyer who gave me advice and didn't charge me, or a festival director who took the time to tell me how you feel about my work. You may be the English teacher who gave me an "F" and told me I would win. Wherever and however it is that we crossed paths, I thought about you, specifically, and felt hopeful that you would back me.

If you received this letter through a friend, or a friend of a friend, a newsletter, know that I'm thrilled to welcome you to my circle and to be part of yours. I'll look forward to meeting you down the road.

⁶ From www.WomenAndHollywood.com, "statistics"

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If each person that receives this letter contributes only \$100, I'll be able to direct my first feature.

This is all I ask.

For some of you \$100 is a large sum; some of you are raising children, or are struggling artists yourselves. If you don't contribute, please know that I will assume you want to but aren't able. If you're in a position to contribute more than \$100, you would offset folks who can't contribute.

Either way, what you can do is forward this letter to *your* list and tell everyone *you* know that by contributing only \$100, they'll have a hand in making a meaningful and entertaining film, the catalyst to the many more rich and significant films that will follow. Post this letter in your blog? Embed the link to this letter in your facebook status? You can join me on facebook at:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Thier-Productions/52213524772>

If you're a writer or filmmaker yourself, and you'd like to learn more about the craft, your \$100 contribution will earn you a \$150 voucher towards any of my workshops, valid for one year. In the fall, after I complete the production of this film, I'll be offering weekend workshops in screenwriting, directing, and film producing. For descriptions, check out www.TheIndependentFilmSchool.com

If you're not interested in workshops, what I can offer is to thank you with a film credit. Based on logistics and scheduling, I may also be able to invite you to visit the movie set as a background actor or a production assistant, should this interest you. If you have children, I'll be particularly enthusiastic about having them on set. (We have several school scenes!)

Dear friend and ally, I sat down at 8am yesterday morning to write this letter. I was terrified. Even though I'm a writer, I don't have the words to capture what this really means to me. How do I sum up my life's work in a letter? It's what I've devoted every waking (and sleeping) hour to in one form or another from the time I began this journey. I wish I could find a poetic and irresistible way of saying it, but truth be told, it's simple: even a minimal donation will make waves. It will change my life and have a ripple effect beyond that. It will be the catalyst to intelligent and inspiring films – ones made by a woman. Please don't assume that someone else will pick up the slack. Given the small amount that I'm asking for, it will take every person who receives this letter to respond favorably. This is one time in our relationship with each other that I ask you not to procrastinate, not to be apathetic, not to assume that you can't make a difference, not to fall for my façade of "the successful artist" when in truth, I'm in need of help. I dare you to care. I will think of you and remember you when I see your name on the list of donors. And if I haven't met you yet, I will want to. It is now 8am the following the morning. It took me all day to draft this letter, to write and re-write it, giving it my all to try and find the words that might reach you.

June 30th will mark twenty years from the time I wrote my first screenplay. I hope to celebrate it on July 1st by walking into my production office and beginning the work that I was born to do.⁷

With love and appreciation,
Ela Thier

For information about the short film and to watch a movie clip:

http://thierproductions.com/a_summer_rain.html

For information about the feature and to contribute:

http://ThierProductions.com/current_production.html

⁷ Because our leads are two school-age girls, the film has to be produced over the summer while my actors are on break. We will not be able to film once the school year begins.