

## Event reviews

---

### IF SHE CAN SEE IT, SHE CAN BE IT

**Madeline Di Nonno and Brita McVeigh**

***New Zealand International Film Festival, Auckland: The Wintergarden at the Civic, July 24, 2016***

---

Geena Davis shot to fame in 1991 for her role as half of that pair of feminist icons, Thelma and Louise. Since then she has maintained a steady presence in both film and, more recently, television, but one of her lesser known roles is the founder and chair of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Although Davis had discovered that movie parts became increasingly scarce as she entered her 40s, this was not the motivation for forming the Institute. Rather, it was her role as a parent, watching children's media with her young daughter and realising the extent of the imbalance of gender roles in programming aimed at children that led her to start seriously questioning the industry and its products. Hence, the stated aim of the Institute is to 'dramatically improve gender balance, reduce stereotyping and create diverse female characters in entertainment targeting children 11 and under' ([www.seejane.org](http://www.seejane.org)). This is achieved through education and advocacy, which is backed by substantial research undertaken for and by the Institute, and enabled by Davis' considerable influence within the industry.

In July of this year, the Institute's CEO, Madeline Di Nonno, spoke to a small audience at the New Zealand International Film Festival in Auckland, at an event chaired by Brita McVeigh, an acting, directing, and writing coach, and advisory board member of the Writer's Lab Aotearoa. I attended this talk in a professional capacity, but also as a feminist parent who shares Davis' concerns about what popular culture is modelling for our children. Di Nonno presented various snippets from research undertaken by the Institute, including one of their major findings that, of the 5,799 speaking roles in the 129 family films produced in ten countries and released between 2010 and 2013, 31% of the roles were female, with 23% of the films having female leads, and only 10% having real gender balance in their characters (Smith, Choueiti, & Piper, 2014). While arguments can be made for the quality of representations being more important than the quantity – e.g. that 'strong' or 'positive' female characters have more impact than the number of girls and women on the screen – Di Nonno stated that Davis encourages writers to cast any character – whether positive or negative – as female, arguing that girls and women should be seen in all their diversity, and that the important point is that female characters take up what she describes as 'half the space' in all children's media.

However, this does not mean that the Institute encourages any and all representations, and Di Nonno was clear that they are critical of the ways in which sexy attire, nudity, and beauty (indexed in their research through another character commenting on the character's appearance) are strongly weighted towards female characters – especially when this occurs with very young female characters (Smith, Choueiti, & Piper, 2014). There is also an extreme over-representation of on-screen males with actual jobs, especially high-level jobs. As Di Nonno

noted, this cannot be argued to be an accurate representation of the ‘real world’ – while women make up half of the American (and local) paid workforce, only 20% of the speaking characters with jobs in G-rated films released between 2006 and 2009 were female (Smith, Choueiti, & Stern, 2010). Di Nonno particularly focused on the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and maths), which have notoriously low participation rates for women. However, the fictional representation of women in these occupations is lower still (Smith, Choueiti, & Piper, 2014).

Di Nonno suggested that sometimes the solution is as simple as changing a central character’s name and seeing if it makes a difference to the storyline – given that most ‘family-friendly’ films are not overtly based on romance, this would not automatically turn the products into lesbian love stories (although this would not necessarily be a bad thing, it would probably be more difficult to get Pixar on board with this notion). I was reminded of the Bechdel Test, which is a very blunt instrument for assessing the representation of women in film based on a simple rubric that a film should have at least two named female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man (<http://bechdeltest.com>). Similarly, Di Nonno suggested that the simple acts of giving female characters more clothes and a job can improve how the young girls watching these films understand their place in the world.

Di Nonno was optimistic about the effect the Institute is having, with industry professionals saying they have changed the aspirations or occupations of female characters, altered dialogue or story development, or included more female secondary characters in projects as a result of the Institute’s research (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2012). Their strategies include a positive approach – rather than engage in ‘naming and blaming’, they simply present the facts to the studios and ask what can be done to rectify the situation. This does mean that they cannot be publicly critical about specific films (although more ‘historical’ research does refer to specific films [Smith & Cook, 2008]). This industry anonymity is part of the process that has gained the trust of the studios – Di Nonno was quite clear that many of the mainstream studios in Hollywood are actively addressing the issue of gender inequality, but will not publicly state this. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to ask her why, but my assumption is that this is because of the potential for negative backlash against such an overtly ‘feminist’ agenda. Di Nonno quoted Geena Davis as stating that, at the current rate of change, gender equality will be reached in 700 years, which is a depressing thought. However, it is still encouraging that the studios – largely run and staffed by parents – are interested in moving towards a greater gender balance in the images that children consume in increasing amounts. Having more women involved in the production of the films is also an important shift, as an increase in women taking part in the creation of narratives is correlated with the increased representation of female characters on the screen (Smith & Choueiti, 2010; Smith, Choueiti, & Piper, 2014; see also Handy & Rowlands, 2014, in a recent issue of the *Women’s Studies Journal* for a discussion of gender bias in the local film industry).

Although Di Nonno did not focus on this, research conducted for the Institute also points to representational issues in relation to other axes of difference. For example, of the 101 top-grossing G-rated films released between 1990 and 2005 – i.e. those films most likely to be watched by children – just over 85% of the characters were White (Smith & Cook, 2008). As recent controversy over the depiction of Māui in the upcoming Disney release *Moana* demonstrates (‘Is Moana’s Maui a Polynesian stereotype, or are haters bodyshaming’, 2016), having non-European female leads does not necessarily resolve the problems with the representation of ‘others’ in Hollywood film. However, it is notable that the Institute’s website features very little research or material related to ethnicity, echoing a prioritising of gender over ethnicity in research on media representation, and there is

a clear lack of literature that addresses the intersection *between* gender and ethnicity (Michelle, 2012).

Most of us do not have the ‘star power’ of Geena Davis to effect radical change by directly influencing production studios. However, the conversation between Di Nonno and McVeigh that followed the main presentation made it clear that those of us who are parents should utilise our positions as one of the biggest influences on how our children see the world by pointing out gender imbalance whenever we can. The industry often argues that the reason they do not have more female-centred productions is because girls and women will watch stories centred around males, but boys and men will not watch female-centric stories (Smith, Granados, Choueiti, Erickson, & Noyes, 2010). However, my 11-year-old son (who I took along to this event) thoroughly enjoys female-centric films such as *Brave*, *Maleficent*, and *Inside out*, and one of his favourite fictional characters is Roald Dahl’s Matilda. This is obviously just one anecdotal example, but does indicate that change is possible, that we should not just accept the industry’s naturalisation of supposed ‘gender preferences’, and that this is the case for boys as much as for girls. As feminist parents, at times it can feel like we are fighting a losing battle against media conglomerates, gendered toy aisles, and the everyday sexism that pervades our lives and those of our children. However, I remember driving my child and a friend to Cubs one night, a year or so ago, and listening to him explain to his slightly perplexed friend why Barbie dolls were bad for girls’ body image. Little moments like that are salutary reminders that if we just keep at it, the messages do get through. While Davis may lament the 700 years it will take to reach gender equality in media representations at the current rate, hopefully the next generation will shorten that. By quite a lot.

Those teaching in this area are especially encouraged to peruse the Institute’s website ([www.seejane.org](http://www.seejane.org)) – much of the research is published in easy-to-read summary documents, and statistics are well presented so as to be accessible to a wide range of audiences and ages.

*JOHANNA SCHMIDT is a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Waikato. Her research interests are consistently related to the area of gender and sexuality, and her 2010 book, Migrating genders: Westernisation, migration, and Samoan fa’afafine, discusses the ways in which contemporary fa’afafine perform their identities in both ‘traditional’ Samoan culture and a more globalised context. Since having a child in 2005, she has become increasingly interested in gender as it relates to children and parenting, and is currently both teaching and researching in the areas of family, gender, and policy.*

## References

- Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2012). *Impact study*. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>
- Handy, J., & Rowlands, L. (2014). Gendered inequality regimes and female labour market disadvantage within the New Zealand film industry. *Women’s Studies Journal*, 28(2), 24-38.
- Is Moana’s Maui a Polynesian stereotype, or are haters bodyshaming? (2016, Jun 28). *New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved from [www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1501119&objectid=11664943](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=11664943)
- Michelle, C. (2012). Co-constructions of gender and ethnicity in New Zealand television advertising. *Sex Roles*, 66(1), 21-37.
- Smith, S. L., & Choueiti, M. (2010). *Gender disparity on screen and behind the camera in family films: The executive report*. Los Angeles, CA: Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, UCLA. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>
- Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Piper, K. (2014). *Gender bias without borders: An investigation of female characters in popular films across 11 countries*. Los Angeles, CA: Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, UCLA. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>

- Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Stern, J. (2010). *Occupational aspirations: What are G-rated films teaching children about the world of work?* Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>
- Smith, S. L. & Cook, C.A. (2008). *Gender stereotypes: an analysis of popular films and TV*. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>
- Smith, S. L., Granados, A., Choueiti, M., Erickson, S., & Noyes, A. (2010). *Changing the status quo: Industry leaders' perceptions of gender in family films*. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Retrieved from <http://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/>