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## Girls on Film: Women, TIFF, and the Future

by Monika Bartyzel Sep 14th 2009 // 7:30PM

There's an interesting phenomenon going on at the Toronto International Film Festival this year. Female filmmakers were a big part of the festival's opening weekend. (The fest might be 9 days long, but that first weekend is the time that packs the punch -- the time when the stars descend, the parties commence, and the big films have their premieres.) But this isn't only relevant to festival goers. These fests showcase tomorrow's films, so in some ways, TIFF is a peek into the future. And it's one where women defy what's expected of them.

At the moment, I'm calling it the Anna Kendrick effect. While she might be one of the youngest Tony Award nominees ever, this actress shot into the public eye with a supporting role in that incessant, sparkly piece called *Twilight*. Her performance was fine, but she really wasn't given enough for a large buzz to commence, especially while under the shadow of Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson. But now she's got a co-starring role in Jason Reitman's new *Up in the Air* -- a role where she must hold her own against George Clooney and Vera Farmiga. And she does. In fact, she's so good that her performance has been getting a lot of buzz up here in Toronto -- and it's proved one thing: We might see women and blow them off as nothing more than the crazy jealous friend, but there can be a lot of other talent in there if given a solid role to prove it.

To be fair, however, I do have a problem with *Up in the Air*. For the most part, it's a real film about real life -- one that defies expectation and provides a refreshingly modern take on life and love. But when it falls into the cliches we're used to, it falls hard, colliding with the film's promise and bringing everything down a notch. Kendrick does a wonderful job both holding her own against Clooney's charisma and tackling the subject matter. An impressive job, really. She plays a overly wound-up and ambitious young woman with the drive to succeed -- but in one quick moment, she gets upset and falls into a public, screeching scene of unhinged-young-girl. (It's like an out-of-nowhere cliched fit to get the film into a little-too-romantic last half.)

Nevertheless, Kendrick has just blown beyond mainstream expectations, held her own against one of Hollywood's seasoned pros, and it's only her sixth film and second truly mainstream production.

And she's only a small part of the female talent oozing out of TIFF. The New York Times has written a piece called "At the Toronto Film Festival, Directing is Women's Work" outlining just that. Director Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody naturally lead the piece with discussion of *Jennifer's Body*, a film that's simply oozing women -- director, writer, stars... But it's also gotten a very mixed bunch of reactions, so let's move on.

Jane Campion is back with *Bright Star*, a film that follows the romance of poet John Keats and his muse Fanny Braun. Reviewing from Cannes, THR called it "a gorgeous film about romantic love and fine poetry." Lone Scherfig is offering *An Education*, which Karina Longworth called "an extremely classy film." Plus Samantha Morton's first directorial gig -- *The Unloved*, Drew

Barrymore's likewise jump with Whip It!, Niki Caro's The Vintner's Luck, Rebecca Miller's The Private Lives of Pippa Lee, Ruba Nadda's Cairo Time, Andrea Arnold's Fish Tank, Sook Yin-Lee's Year of the Carnivore....

The list goes on and on. (Melissa Silverstein lists 14 other female directors here.) Some are horrific, some are classic love stories, one has girls kicking roller derby butt. And then there are also the female-centric films directed by men, most definitely led by Alejandro Amenabar's Agora -- a film where the woman isn't the figure wrapped up in romance; a film about one of the great female thinkers in history; and a film wholly unlike the epic tales we're used to.

It's easy to get cynical being a woman writing about movies -- writing over and over about the new prostitute projects in production, the crappy and formulaic rom-coms that never seem to end. But in the middle of this year's fest, I've got a strange feeling burrowing into my gut: hope. Could this really be a sneak peek into the future? Might we see more solid, big buzzed-about films come from female directors and have female casts without them being niche films? I don't want to amp up my hope and be disappointed, but the tide seems to be changing.

Look out for these films. Some will hit public screens in no time, and others might take a while, but this is our chance. Good films are on the way, and we'll only get more if we make the most of this tide.