

Spotlight on the **fade-out** for women of a **certain age**



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No one puts it better than Goldie Hawn's character, an aging movie diva, in the film "The First Wives Club." When this star's much-relied-on Botox doctor asks why she doesn't just play characters her own age, she replies: "There are only three ages for women in Hollywood: babe, district attorney and 'Driving Miss Daisy.' Right now I want to be young, science-fiction young."

That lack of substantial roles for women of a certain age is at the root of a new 28-minute documentary called "Invisible Women," to be screened April 17 in Manhattan. The 7 p.m. event at New World Stages is co-sponsored by the Screen Actors Guild and Coalition of Professional Women in the Arts & Media. (For information see www.nycwam.org.)

The whole idea, say the film's producers, is to heighten public awareness and pose the question, particularly regarding women: "Will baby boomers, the largest and most powerful generation that's ever lived, allow themselves to become invisible on the screen?"

"Boomers really have the chance to turn this around," says Susan Davis, co-producer with Susan Valdes and Steve Mills. She's referring to the dramatic dropoff in television and movie roles for women older than 40. According to a 2004 report from the Screen Actors Guild, roughly 70 percent of female parts go to women younger than 40 and 30 percent to women older than 40. (Corresponding approximations for men: 60 and 40 percent, respectively.)

As women reach a certain age, they "drop off the prime-time planet," communications professor Martha Lauzen says in the documentary. Deborah Harmon, 54, who describes herself as "never a big star, but a medium-size [television] star," says in the film she hasn't had a role in over a year: "I got pink-slipped and no one told me."

There's no doubt that women in the entertainment world find this frustrating and disheartening. But such marginalization also ripples out to the rest of us. People of all ages, bosses included, need to see women not just playing minor roles, such as the background mom or quirky aunt, but with "360 degrees of



In a scene from "Invisible Women," a short documentary, women older than 40 discuss trouble getting substantial TV and film roles. From left above, Michele Lamar Richards, Deborah Harmon, Julie Carmen, Susan Davis and Deborah M. Pratt.

personality traits," says Janice Grackin, a social psychology professor at Stony Brook University. "If characters in pop culture are not reflecting... women over 40, it makes it even easier for employers to express biases — to put you into a little box based on gender stereotypes." Grackin co-chairs the project for gender equity in education for the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls.

Younger women, too, benefit from seeing images of older women partaking fully in life. "We need to shine a light on all segments of society," Valdes says, pointing to the value of multi-generational programs such as the WB's "Everwood" and "7th Heaven."

Television's emphasis on youth, she says, illustrates advertisers' drive to reel consumers in while they're young and forming brand habits. But Valdes sees that model as out of sync with the times. "We change brands all the time," she says of baby boomers, many of whom are looking to redefine themselves as they also look to reinvent what was for their parents a rocking-chair-style retirement.

Add to that the financial clout of women in that age group, and the dimming of focus on such a powerful group seems "almost a little sinister," says Grackin.

What Mari Lyn Henry, a Manhattan talent agent, coach and author, would like to know is this: Where are women's

voices in stories about the generation gap? Where are stories about women pioneers, suffragettes, scientists making medical breakthroughs, feminists fighting for equal rights? These subjects, she says, are ripe with opportunities.

If anyone can turn things around, say the film's producers, it's the baby boom women who have already fought for equal rights, equal pay and equal opportunity and who, in so doing, changed forever the landscape of the workplace.

The big question posed in the film: With such a cultural revolution already under their belts, "Will they do it again?"

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Show time: Rising to new heights 'over the hill'

These actresses have garnered accolades in programming that portrays the struggles, successes and multidimensional nature of women older than 40:



S. Epatha Merkerson, 53, Golden Globe and Emmy for HBO's "Lackawanna Blues."



Geena Davis, 50, Golden Globe for ABC's "Commander in Chief."



Jane Alexander, 66, supporting-actress Emmy for HBO's "Warm Springs."



Felicity Huffman, 43, Golden Globe, "Transamerica," and Emmy, "Desperate Housewives."



Mary-Louise Parker, 41, Golden Globe for Showtime's "Weeds."

Getting them more roles

There's a value in seeing older women take on positions of power, even if it is onscreen. It's one more way to shift perceptions and pave the way for real-life changes. If you want to influence those with the power to "green-light" programming by and about seasoned, empowered women, here are some suggestions from Hollywood insiders:

- Hollywood is fixated on an opening weekend box-office sales, says Susan Davis, co-producer of the documentary "Invisible Women." Seeing the movie provides evidence that an older actress can successfully "open" a movie.

- Connect with friends or members of a professional group to catch the flick early and en masse.

- Learn about "movies for grown-ups" at the AARP site, www.aarpmagazine.org/entertainment/movies/

- What used to be "the power of the pen" is now "the power of the e-mail," says Susan Valdes, co-producer of "Invisible Women." Let ad agencies, advertisers and film studios know what you like or don't like, she says, and tell them that you want to see more older women onscreen.

- Share your views at a film or TV show's chat room. Some ad agencies and networks employ people to monitor Internet buzz, says Adam Moore, associate director of diversity at the Screen Actors Guild.

- Make choices "with activism in mind," says Leslie (sic) Shreve, past president of the New York Coalition of Professional Women in the Arts & Media and producer of the April 17 "Invisible Women" screening event. The film encourages women to boycott sponsors of shows that diminish or ignore older women.

- Take a page from Gail Sheehy's new book, "Sex and the Seasoned Woman: Pursuing the Passionate Life," says Manhattan talent agent and coach Mari Lyn Henry.

- Look into a related site, www.seasonedwomansnetwork.com, to engage in conversations on the vitality of women older than 50.

— PATRICIA KITCHEN