

**MOVIES; Women directors give themselves a break; The group Girls Reeling It Together offers support and screenings.**

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Quick: Name five female directors. Now name five more. If you can't think of one, let alone a handful, don't beat yourself up. Women directors are a minority, having directed only 6% of last year's 250 top-grossing films.

Yeah, yeah. Whine, sob, sniffle. You've heard this one before-- women just aren't taken seriously in Hollywood. Why should anyone care?

Because they're getting gypped, that's why. Moviegoers may not realize it, but fewer women directors mean fewer viewpoints, and fewer viewpoints mean less diversity in storytelling and less choice at the box office.

That's part of the reason Shawn Tolleson gathered up her friends and formed GRIT -- Girls Reeling It Together. The collective of five independent female directors is screening three of their films this evening to raise awareness of the problem and, of course, promote their work.

"If I was living 30 years ago, I probably wouldn't even be considering being a director," said Tolleson, who wouldn't give her age. "I'm grateful that I can even consider this career right now, but there's a lot further to go."

When Tolleson, who lives in L.A., formed GRIT in 1999, she had just finished "Hide and Seek" -- a black-and-white short about a man who comes to L.A. to find his sister and discovers she's a prostitute. Although proud of her accomplishment, Tolleson was frustrated to have worked so hard only to wait for someone to give her permission to show it at a film fest. She called all the female directors she knew -- all four of them -- and put together "the Lilith Fair of short films." Subsequent GRIT films have gone on to play at RESFEST Digital Film Festival, South by Southwest, even Sundance.

Tonight's screening is GRIT's second and will be hosted by "Shrek" co-director Vicky Jenson. Its offerings include "Zenith," a full-length feature about a Kansas farming community staging a Passion play; "Missed," a short film about a man who loses his daughter to child services when he's sent to prison for a fatal bar fight; and "The Cone," a short that follows a traffic cone's inadvertent travels.

Although directed by women, the three movies are hardly chick flicks. GRIT is not the Lifetime channel. The themes are not gender-specific. It's about quality storytelling, whatever the subject.

"If you take the temperature in Hollywood, it's not like everyone's satisfied with films -- that they're delving into interesting subjects and doing it well," said Genevieve Anderson,

33, who directed "The Cone." "Everybody's complaining about how bad movies are, and yet they keep being made."

Have you seen the film about the guy and girl who hate each other and end up falling in love? How about that one where the underdog with a chip on his shoulder grabs a gun and gets the girl?

Exactly.

"The reason we have such bad storytelling in indie films is because it's white men under 25 writing these scripts, and those guys have grown up playing Nintendo," says Kirsten Tretbar, a GRIT member whose film "Zenith" will air on NBC next spring. "One of the reasons I want to encourage women to write and direct films is they have a different take on life than men."

GRIT isn't alone in its mission. Other industry organizations -- CineWomen, Women in Film, Step Up, even the Directors Guild of America -- are interested in the same goal.

The Directors Guild has been working on the problem for a "very long time," President Martha Coolidge said.

It has screened films by women, helped finance their films and mentored them, but progress is slow.

In hopes the industry could be embarrassed into nudging the numbers upward, the guild released statistics last spring that showed how few women were directing prime-time television series. In the 2000-01 season, only 7% of the top 40 series were directed by women. As for the number of women directing "humongous-budget" pictures, Coolidge said, "we can count them on one hand."

Whether GRIT can help to change that remains to be seen.

"We just want to create a group that gets the word out to other women in the industry that if we can do it, they can do it," said Tretbar, 36, who joined GRIT this year.

"Let's support each other. Let's show our films. These are good films. They deserve to be seen. Let's use the fact that we're women as a starting point."

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See the films

Where: Los Angeles Film School Screening Room, 6363 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood.

When: 7:30 tonight.

Cost: Free.

Tickets: By reservation at

(310) 772-8122.

**[Illustration]**

Caption: PHOTO: FOUNDER: Director Shawn Tolleson helped form the support group GRIT: Girls Reeling It Together.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Gary Friedman Los Angeles Times