



MOVIES

Cannes: Can Female Directors Break the Action-Thriller Glass Ceiling?

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Julian Parker/UK Press via Getty Images; Rodin Eckenroth/Getty Images for AFI; Slaven Vlasic/Getty Images; Thomas Lohnes/Getty Images

From top left: Tina Gharavi, Nina Menkes, Tanya Wexler, Ana Lily Amirpour



A handful of female-helmed genre pics are vying for distribution at the festival, but the filmmakers say standing out in a field traditionally dominated by men is a challenge: "It's often a subconscious bias."

Nowhere is the gender gap between male and female filmmakers as glaring as in the thriller genre. Of the more than 160 thrillers on offer at the Cannes Film Market this year, just nine — less than 6 percent — are directed by women. The figure reflects the industry at large. When it comes to action, it seems, female helmers need not apply.

"The main obstacle is clearly budget," says Daphne Schmon, the CEO and co-founder of Breaking Through the Lens, an initiative that aims to connect women directors with financiers. "There are so many talented female filmmakers making great work, but we lose them [as] budgets increase. It's often a subconscious bias, but women are automatically viewed as a 'higher risk' prospect."

In Cannes, two women will present their thrillers in development at the Breaking Through the Lens pitching: Tehran-born British filmmaker Tina Gharavi with *The Good Iranian*, and American filmmaker Nina Menkes with *Heatstroke*. True to Schmon's maxim on budgets, both projects are at the low end of the scale, budgeted at about \$3.5 million. Elisabeth Bentley O'Neal, a producer on Menkes' film, says tired gender stereotypes still play a role. "The default thinking is 'Women can do rom-com; they can do *Little Women* and family stories about the value of hearth, home and connection,'" she tells *THR* via email.

And yet *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins, earned \$821 million worldwide. *Captain Marvel*, which Anna Boden co-wrote and co-directed with longtime partner Ryan Fleck, has grossed more than \$1.1 billion to date. On the indie side, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (\$49 million worldwide gross on a budget of \$11 million) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (\$132 million on a \$40 million budget) are textbook examples of how to thrill audiences and financial backers.

This might explain why some producers are taking a bet on female filmmakers to kick ass onscreen. StudioCanal and Rocket Science have signed up Ana Lily Amirpour (*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*) to helm a female-led reboot of Renny Harlin's adrenaline-packed actioner *Cliffhanger*. Millennium Media — a company known for its mucho macho *The Expendables* and *Olympus Has Fallen* franchises — picked Tanya Wexler, the director of *Hysteria*, a period comedy about the invention of the vibrator, to direct the action comedy *Jolt*. Kate Beckinsale stars as a bouncer with anger-management issues who goes on a revenge-fueled rampage.

"We sent the *Jolt* script out to 93 directors, men and women, and Tanya was simply the best person for the job," says Jonathan Yunker of Millennium Media. "She brought a certain nuance and a levity that the film really needed."

"I think what's happening now, with all that is happening in society at large, is that female directors are starting to stand up and say, 'I want to make these kinds of movies,'" adds Millennium's Jeffrey Greenstein.

Menkes herself is cautiously optimistic: "Women have been excluded from the cinematic canon on every level, and thrillers are no exception. [But] after the revelations of #MeToo and Time's Up, there is a new awareness of the powerful value films by women



Four Female Directors With Thrillers in the Market

Tina Gharavi

The Tehran-born Brit is taking on the gangster genre with *The Good Iranian*.

Nina Menkes

Her film *Heatstroke*, a political thriller straddling the worlds of Cairo and L.A., is in development.

Tanya Wexler

She will direct the kick-ass action film *Jolt*, which has been called a female version of *Crank*.

Ana Lily Amirpour

Amirpour will helm a female-led reboot of the '90s actioner *Cliffhanger*.

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MOVIES

MGM Picks Up Channing Tatum's Road Comedy 'Dog'

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The moves comes on the heels of an international sellout of the project at AFM, where Tatum and Carolin delivered their presentation to a packed room of distributors. It also marks the first big acquisition by Michael De Luca in his new role as MGM's motion picture group chairman.

Dog tracks two hard-charging former Army Rangers paired against their will: Briggs (Tatum), and Lulu, a Belgian Malinois, as they race down the Pacific Coast in hopes of making it to a fellow soldier's funeral on time. Along the way, they drive each other crazy, confront the possibility that pet psychics are real and begin to reckon with the one thing they were trained never to do: surrender.

The script was written by Carolin and based on a story by Carolin and Brett Rodriguez. Gregory Jacobs will produce along with Peter Kiernan and Rodriguez via Free Association. Ken Meyer and Betsy Danbury will executive produce.

Dog is set to begin principal photography in May, with MGM setting a release date for Valentine's Day weekend 2021. Tatum has had good fortune with that date, as two of his previous films, *The Vow* (2012) and *Dear John* (2010), scored big openings in that release corridor.

"Having known and admired Reid and Chan for years as great guys and natural-born storytellers, I couldn't be prouder and more excited to work with them, Greg Jacobs and Glen Basner on this, their first film as directors," De Luca said Monday in a statement. "The story's strong heart, humor and power reflect not only their talent but their humanity, and all of us at MGM hope this is the first of many."

Cassidy Lange will oversee for the studio.

FilmNation repped the international rights, with CAA and CAA Media Finance Group brokering the domestic license to MGM. Tatum, Carolin and Free Association are repped by CAA and Hansen, Jacobson.

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