Cultural Daily

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Penny Marshall's A League of Their Own

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, December 20th, 2018

As soon as I heard about Penny Marshall's passing (December 17, 2018 at age 75), I volunteered to write a In Memoriam article for the website of the Hollywood Foreign Press. The editor agreed, and sent me a short text he had just finished writing, I added quotes from our interviews and more information about her movies and her life. I also wrote a short bio for her Golden Globes nominee's page.

I remember the many times I interviewed this trailblazing woman director: in 2001 for *Riding in Cars with Boys* with Drew Barrymore, in 1996 for *The Preacher's Wife* with Denzel Washington and Whitney Huston, in 1994 for *Renaissance Man* with Danny DeVito and Mark Wahlberg, and most memorably in 1992 for *A League of Their Own* with Geena Davis, Lori Petty, Rosie O'Donnell, Madonna, Tracy Reiner and Tom Hanks (who had the best line as the coach, "There's no crying in baseball!")

I wrote a review of the movie and an interview with Geena Davis for VENICE, the Los Angeles Arts and Entertainment Magazine. We republish some excerpts here, to honor Penny Marshall's memory. You may read the complete article at this link.

A League of Their Own by Elisa Leonelli-Venice, July 1992

Directed by Penny Marshall, in the same vein as *Awakenings* with Robin Williams and Robert De Niro, *A League of Their Own* with Geena Davis is a nostalgic and heartfelt look at a forgotten episode of American sports history, when women played professional baseball.

It was 1943, the middle of World War II. America was engaged on two fronts, Europe and the Pacific; patriotism was at an all-time high and the men were proud to serve their country by going to war; this included many baseball heroes, like Joe Di Maggio. The most popular sport in America was suffering from lack of players and shortage of money for touring, especially to small Midwestern towns. There was a concern that president Roosevelt would stop baseball, so chewing gum magnate Phillip K. Wrigley, who owned the "Chicago Cubs" baseball team, had an idea, why not start a league of women to keep the stadiums filled and the public interested in the game? He sent a scout all over the country (also to Canada and Cuba), to find the best athletes (usually among softball players), and formed the All American Girls Professional Baseball League, which originally consisted of four teams: the "Rockford Peaches" in Illinois, the "Racine Belles" and the "Kenosha Comets" in Wisconsin, the "South Bend Blue Sox" in Indiana. Slowly the game was

modified from softball, which uses a ball of 16 inch in circumference, an under-hand pitch and a shorter distance between the bases and the mound, to bona fide hardball, which is a faster, harder, meaner game, with a 9 inch ball and an over-arm pitch. The women proved that they could play real baseball, the fans cheered, the teams increased to ten in number and the League played 120 games a year, until 1954, when it was disbanded; after the popularity of men baseball had increased, with the advent of television, and money for financing women teams became scarce.

To this day there are no women baseball teams (although women play softball in non-professional college teams, as well as basketball, volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, and field-hockey), and the memory of their glory days was forgotten. Until 1987, when the son of one the original players (Helen Callaghan) produced a PBS documentary on the subject, and the All American Girls Professional Baseball League was inducted in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

In a humorous and affectionate way *A League of Their Own* makes us reflect on the sexism of the 1940s, a time when most of the decisions for women's lives were made by their husbands and fathers, when women were supposed to stay home to cook and clean and serve their men. But then, when the men went away to war, it was the women who had to step into their jobs, in factories and in the defense industry; even in baseball. When the war was over, women were sent back to the kitchen, to have babies and start families again. That's how that whole 1950s mentality of the perfect suburban family became the ideal, and it took another 20 years for women to be able to stand up and affirm their rights to develop their full human potential.

A League of Their Own is also a reflection on the true value of sports, which should be an affirmation of individual abilities in the context of a healthy competitive environment, where camaraderie and team spirit prevail. It reminds us of why baseball continues to have such an important role in the formation of our American and human values; especially now, when children of all races and colors are finally allowed to play the sport together, boys and girls alike, without sex bias, since Little League Baseball has been integrated.

Geena Davis-A League of Their Own © Sony

And here's is what Geena Davis said in our interview about director Penny Marshall: "It certainly seems appropriate that it's a woman directing this film, which is so much about women experiences, in a particular time in women's past, when they were not as appreciated as they could be; because I'm sure that Penny has had to battle a lot of the same things that these women on the team did, to get into a position of power and authority, so she probably brought a feminist viewpoint to the story. Penny is very strong and in control, absolutely capable and authoritative, smart and accomplished, and, from that point of view, she's pretty similar to any director, male or female."

Tom Hanks, Geena Davis-A League of Their Own © Sony

And what Tom Hanks said in our 1992 interview about Penny Marshall's directing style: "I think the defining aspect of a director is really their distinctly different personality, it does not come down to gender. Penny does not do thing differently because she's a woman, but because she's Penny; she is a strange entity unto herself and her sex doesn't have all that much to do with it. But I don't pretend to understand what makes Penny so special, and I've done two movies with her

(*Big* in 1988). I don't know what the collaborative process is that I have with Penny, I only know that it works. She drives me crazy, makes me mad, gets me frustrated, but she gets what she wants out of me. That's what her talent is as a filmmaker. She hires everybody to come in and she will play to your strengths, but in the course of making the movie she somehow gets something else out of you. She has the knowledge of what she needs in order to be able to tell the story, but she doesn't demand it from you. Penny doesn't put you in the movie unless you understand it together, and then she lets you do whatever you want, because she knows that you share the same vision of what the movie is."

Tom Hanks tweeted after her passing: "Goodbye, Penny. Man, did we laugh a lot! Wish we still could. Love you. Hanx.''

A League of Their Own is still very much loved as a cult feminist movie, more than 25 years later. In fact Amazon has a TV series in development based on it.

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