

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Women Directors

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, December 11th, 2019

We admired and appreciated many movies directed by women in 2019, that told female-centered stories.

The most assured directorial debut was *Booksmart* by actress [Olivia Wilde](#). It's a comedy about two BFFs (Best Friends Forever), Molly (Beanie Feldstein) and Amy (Kaitlyn Dever), who studied so hard in high school that they forgot to have fun, so they try to make up for lost time during one night of partying the day before graduation. The script was written by women, with Katie Silberman updating previous version. Wilde said: "The most incredible thing about the Times Up movement has been how it has linked all women in Hollywood into a community that acknowledges the impact of that connection, of our shared power. We want to nurture and support each other, make a lot of noise together. We are all encouraging each other to tell our stories, write and direct our movies. This is the time, they're listening, and I hope it does last."

We saw original work from other first-time directors from a diversity of backgrounds, who explored difficult issues in our society in movies inspired by their personal history.



Lulu Wang © HFPA

[Lulu Wang](#), born in China, raised in Miami Florida, told a heartfelt autobiographical story in *The Farewell*, starring Awkwafina. When their grandmother (Zhao Shuzhen) is diagnosed with terminal cancer, the family organizes a wedding as an excuse to visit her in Changchun without letting her suspect that she's dying. The director said: "The film was a way for me to explore my own conflicting feelings, when this happened to me in my real life. As an American I believe in truth and I felt that it was very wrong to lie to my grandma, but at the same time I couldn't go against my family. We are now living in a world that is so polarized, whether you are a Chinese-American or even a non-immigrant, that what I wanted to say is that you can respect the differences in your family, even if you don't agree with them, find a way to disagree in a respectful way." Thankfully Wang's "nainai" is still alive years later.



Melina Matsoukas © HFPA

[Melina Matsoukas](#), a graduate of AFI with an MFA in cinematography who had directed music videos, made a striking feature debut with *Queen & Slim* from a script by [Lena Waithe](#). Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith play a Black couple that feel forced to go on the lam after killing

a white policeman in self-defense. They become doomed heroes like Bonnie and Clyde or Thelma and Louise. Matsoukas said that their goal is to help create empathy for communities of color and the struggles that they go through, to honor brown and black bodies that were lost at the hands of law enforcement.



Alma Har'el © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Alma Har'el](#), born in Israel, directed *Honey Boy*, from an autobiographical script by actor Shia LeBeouf, about the difficult relationship of the child actor with his abusive father. She said: "After Shia got arrested, he was sent to a court ordered rehab/mental health facility, where he was diagnosed with PTSD. I'm a child of an alcoholic and I suffered some childhood trauma from my own upbringing, so when I read the script, it really hit me very hard and I felt like I had to tell that story."



Annabelle Attanasio © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Annabelle Attanasio](#), born in Los Angeles, daughter of screenwriter Paul Attanasio, directed *Mickey and the Bear*, with Camila Morone as the teenage daughter of an abusive father. She said: "I grew up in a situation where I took on a lot of the emotional weight of my family, and I thought it would be interesting to tell that story from the perspective of a daughter's relationship with her father. I wanted to see more women that were complex like me, like my mother and like my sister. As female auteurs, we want to provide the next generation with these stories where we can recognize ourselves, where you actually are the emotional center of your own story."

[Nahnatchka Khan](#) directed her first feature, the romantic comedy *Always Be My Maybe* starring Randall Park and [Ali Wong](#). In this role-reversal, it is the woman who's more accomplished, a successful Chef, while the man is a struggling musician still living at home with his parents. Born to parents who emigrated from Iran, a graduate of USC's School of Cinematic Arts, Khan is the creator of the TV comedy series *Fresh Off the Boat*.



Zara Hayes (c) Armando Gallo-HFPA

Zara Hayes directed the comedy *Poms*, starring Diane Keaton and Jacki Weaver, about elderly women in a retirement home who start a cheerleading group, and learn how to be friends and support each other. The British filmmaker had directed the documentary *Dian Fossey: Secrets in the Mist* (2017). She said: "I grew up in England, where we didn't have cheerleading, and for that reason it seemed sexy and exotic to me, I've always been amazed by the athleticism of it, it's dance combined with gymnastics, it's physically really demanding. And the image of it, from a feminist perspective, is a bit problematic, but these older women look empowered by it and they've reclaimed this archetype for themselves."



Chinonye Chukwu © HFPA

[Chinonye Chukwu](#), raised in Fairbanks, Alaska by Nigerian immigrant parents, directed her second feature after *Alaskaland* (2012), *Clemency*, with Alfre Woodard as a Death Row prison warden unhinged by the executions that are part of her duties. She said that black and brown people are disproportionately incarcerated, put on death row and executed, so it was very intentional on her

part to represent that in the film. She does not believe that the death penalty is a form of justice and that society has the right to kill.



Amy Poehler © Armando Gallo-HFPA

Comedian [Amy Poehler](#) made her feature directorial debut with *Wine Country*, where she co-stars with Maya Rudolph and Tina Fey. It's a female bonding story about a group of women friends who go on a wine tasting tour in California, and they all end up resolving some issues in their lives.

[Nisha Granata](#), born in Vancouver, Canada, of Indian descent, a graduate of NYU Film School, directed *Late Night* with Emma Thompson from a script by Mindy Kaling. The film explores how a successful talk show host learns how to change her ways from a younger woman (Kaling) who is a diversity hire.



Lorene Scafaria © HFPA

[Lorene Scafaria](#), at her third film, *after Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist* (2008) and *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (2012), directed *Hustlers*, starring Jennifer Lopez, Constance Wu and Julia Stiles, based on the New York magazine's 2015 article "The Hustlers at Scores: The Ex-Strippers Who Stole From (Mostly) Rich Men and Gave to, Well, Themselves."



Jennifer Lee © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Jennifer Lee](#) co-directed and wrote the screenplay for *Frozen II*, as she had done for *Frozen* (2013). In the first film she introduced the feminist notion that the magical "True Love's Kiss" of Disney's *Enchanted* (2017) does not have to come from Prince Charming, but it can be your sister's loving embrace that breaks the spell. In the sequel great emphasis is given to the traditions of the [Sámi people](#), the Laplanders of Northern Finland, Sweden and Norway, their connection with the spirits of nature.



Kasi Lemmons © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Kasi Lemmons](#), who made her directorial debut with *Eve's Bayou* (1997), directed *Harriet*, starring Cynthia Erivo as abolitionist [Harriet Tubman](#). She said: "I really had to do a lot of research on Harriet Tubman and it was incredibly eye opening to me. I knew she was this iconic hero, but in reading everything about her work in the Underground Railroad, about her family and the intricacies of her life, I have become more and more convinced that she deserves to be on the \$20 bill. But in her time, she didn't do it for recognition, she was motivated by love of family and a deep sense of justice, she did this out of pure courage, force of will and determination. She is a genuine hero."



Elizabeth Banks © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Elizabeth Banks](#) wrote and directed *Charlie's Angels* starring Kristen Stewart, Naomi Scott and Ella Balinska. She said: "I take the responsibility that Hollywood has of creating culture very seriously. So I wanted to make a movie about women working together, to build on the theme or

sorority and sisterhood that I felt worked so well in the Pitch Perfect movies. Kristen is also the first Queer angel...”

[Greta Gerwig](#), whom we had featured in our [article about Women directors](#) two years ago, directed her second feature film after *Lady Bird* (2017), *Little Women* from the 1868 classic novel by Louisa May Alcott. She said that the list of women who loved and were influenced by this book includes Simone de Beauvoir, Elena Ferrante, J.K. Rowling, Anna Quindlen, and Patti Smith.

[Marielle Heller](#), whom we had mentioned in our [article about Women Directors](#) last year, directed her third feature after *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015) and *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* with Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers. Joanne Rogers, 91, said that, if her husband were alive today, he would have a really hard time with how divided we are politically, and he would be trying to find ways to bridge people together.

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