

A Personal Challenge Turns Into A Global 'Directed By Women' Film Bash

August 28, 2015

By [Erin Trahan](#) 



"Don't Tell Anyone" by director Mikaela Shwer. (Courtesy American Documentary)

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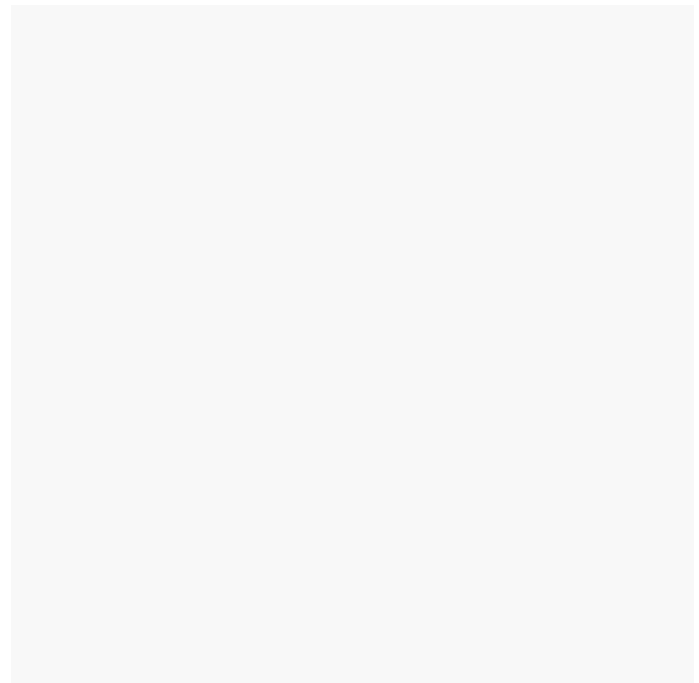
For movie lover Barbara Ann O’Leary, a self-prescribed exercise to watch more films directed by women has turned into a global *fête du film*. “My project is a party. It’s celebratory in nature, it’s appreciative and it’s about noticing,” she says.

Though not obvious from the [website](#) she built for the occasion, O’Leary is the force behind Directed By Women, a “worldwide film viewing party” happening Sept. 1-15. In all aspects, it’s an open invite with an open format. “People can do whatever they want,” she says, and festivities can include

watching a movie at home, with friends or at one of the public events that have sprung up around the world and in New England since the site went live.

The idea solidified a few years ago when O’Leary created a guideline to balance her recreational viewing of films directed by women with those directed by men in a given year. To reach her target of one film per day, she started making lists, researching directors known to her, and culling from others’ recommendations. “Soon the list was in the thousands,” she says. To date she’s tagged more than 7,000 titles in an [open source database](#), which is accepting additions.

O’Leary works as the social media specialist for [Indiana University Cinema](#) in Bloomington and jokes that because of Directed By Women’s online traction, “Facebook is certain I’m either in New York or LA. Why should we all have to live in Brooklyn?” She also says she pegged a 15-day window for the celebration because “I really hate things that happened last week.”



Barbara Ann O'Leary (Courtesy Eric Rudd)

Directed By Women comes at a time when European film funders have taken an [unprecedented stand](#) on behalf of gender parity, the ACLU is investigating [Hollywood’s gender gap](#), a recent BBC [poll](#) of film critics only resulted in three female-directed titles in the list of 100 top American films and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences still doesn't [invite many women](#) to join.

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Anna Feder, [Bright Lights Film Series](#) curator and director of programming for Emerson's Visual and Media Arts Department, has been paying attention to gender issues and film for at least two decades, since earning degrees in film production when "everyone wanted to be Tarantino and assumed [as a woman] you were going to be a producer." She also helps curate Boston's long-standing [LGBT Film Festival](#).

"I feel like this conversation is finally happening," she says. "It's the perfect time to break out into the mainstream. Everyone is talking about how women are underrepresented in front of and behind the camera."

Bright Lights was one of the first hosts listed on the global Directed By Women [map](#), where dozens of other events can be found or added. It will screen "[No Le Digas a Nadie](#) (Don't Tell Anyone)" on Sept. 15 at 7 p.m. in collaboration with the [Arlington International Film Festival](#) and seven other co-presenters.

In addition to being directed by a woman (Mikaela Shwer), Feder says that "Don't Tell Anyone" is a great fit for Directed By Women because it tells the story of Angy Rivera, an activist around the age of a lot of Emerson students, who is "just on the cusp and experiences a lot of false starts."

In the documentary, which also [airs](#) on PBS's "POV" starting Sept. 21, Rivera disrupts the fear and silence that comes with living undocumented in the United States as well as being a victim of childhood sexual assault. Rivera has been recognized for her [advice column](#) and videos for undocumented youth and will be present for the screening.

While Feder is always on the lookout for films directed by women, she says it's more difficult to find ones with feminist content. "The Swedish cinemas use the [A rating](#)," she explains, referring to films that pass the Bechdel test of having two or more named female characters who talk about something other than a man. That's a good conversation starter, says Feder, "but the bar is just so low." She found the Bath Film Festival's [F-rating](#) for "feminist" and says it "gives you a better sense."

The festival's blog explains that it gives F's to films "with a significant female crew (especially directors and screenwriters); films which feature women who are not just on screen to boost the male lead and films which address women's issues."

Bright Lights kicks off on [Sept. 8](#) with “[Mad Max Fury Road](#).” It’s directed by a man, George Miller, but is also rated F — a descriptor that Feder lists next to the title on the series’ website. (Bright Lights runs September through April every Tuesday and Thursday. All events are free, open to students and the public and include post-film discussion.)

In O’Leary’s view, the project’s focus is on abundance. “The conversation around lack is not the conversation I’m having,” she says. “There’s an explosion of women filmmakers but it’s not so evident because they’re not in the upper echelons in Hollywood or they do really well on the festival circuit but don’t get wide distribution.”

She gets particularly charged up, she says, when she hears from people around the world who are creating their own Directed By Women events. A man who runs a film society in Delaware told her he was approaching his local multiplex with the idea to run [Ida Lupino’s](#) “The Hitchhiker.” A group in Barcelona has planned panels and films spanning multiple days. A woman in India wrote to say she is organizing a seven-country, six-city celebration as part of [Women Making Films - India](#). Unfamiliar with the group, O’Leary inquired back and the woman replied, “I just formed it two days ago.”

Feder is optimistic about the potential for Directed By Women and sees it as a catalyst for getting groups around Boston such as [WAM!Boston](#) and [Women in Film & Video New England](#) in the same room. “There are so many pieces to this puzzle. Part of it is female filmmakers pushing through and part of it is all the other people around them,” she says.

Erin Trahan writes regularly about movies for [The ARtery](#) and is the editor of [The Independent](#). She’ll be reporting from the 40th [Toronto International Film Festival](#) in September.

Editor’s Note: *Erin Trahan has been affiliated with both [WAM!Boston](#) and [Women in Film & Video New England](#).*



Erin Trahan  Film Writer

Erin Trahan writes about film for The ARtery.

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