

Female Artisans Find Mentors in Other Women in Showbiz Crafts Fields Dominated by Men

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COURTESY OF DEBORAH NADOOLMAN LANDIS

At 23, costume designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis (above, with legendary costume designer Walter Plunkett in 1979) was fresh out of UCLA graduate school, unemployed, and a self-described “twerp.”

When she landed in the office of Ange Jones, chief of the NBC costume department in Burbank, for an interview, a job offer of \$350 per week “blindsided” her. But what came after that is something that’s becoming rarer in the business: Jones took the greenhorn under wing and made sure she had “a real Hollywood apprenticeship,” says Landis, who has accumulated multiple credits as a costume designer, including an Oscar nomination for 1989’s “Coming to

America,” and served twice as president of the Costume Designers Guild.

Sure, making it in a below-the-line profession in Hollywood requires talent. But there’s one thing that, in many ways, is even more crucial: a mentor. And, many women believe, that’s especially true for them.

“The greatest gift one can have in their career is having someone looking out for them who they can trust,” says composer Sasha Gordon. “It works on so many levels, and has been really instrumental in everything I’ve done.”

Yet finding that right mentor — who is often a first boss or an associate of a first employer — is not guaranteed. Many below-the-line fields have few slots for women. And while male mentors are not infrequent, in general, women who have been mentored by other women suggest that there’s a sympathy that makes the experience more fruitful.

“It’s a cliché, but women were definitely more nurturing to me,” says theatrical lighting designer Natasha Katz, who got invaluable help from lighting designer Marsha Madeira early in her career. Madeira gave the future six-time Tony winner her drafting table and advice on how to take the union exam, which in those days was a 48-hour ordeal.

While men have aided her career, Katz says, it’s a very different dynamic when women mentor fellow women.

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COMPOSER SASHA GORDON

Sometimes it involves tough love. Art director Toni Barton received a boost from fellow designer Patricia Woodbridge, a woman she says became her “set mom” during the five films they worked on together. “She beat me up and beat me into shape, and I’m extremely grateful to her,” says Barton, adding that it was Woodbridge’s practice to always have “one green person” on every team to give them a shot.

“That has always stuck with me,” says Barton, who speaks regularly with middle-school students about her profession in the hopes of opening the field to more African-Americans and women. “If I can bring someone in on a project, I do it, because someone did it for me.”

Yet while mentorships are often about opportunities and hands-on learning and teamwork, there’s an element of tutoring that includes explaining what to expect.

“The task of the costume department is challenging, daunting, and full of pressure,” says costume designer Renee Ehrlich Kalfus. Part of mentoring is about offering this kind of “reality check,” she says.

Unfortunately, there’s no standard process for finding a mentor. Apprenticeship programs are few, leaving guilds and unions with the production-assistant category, in which work is far from standardized.

“We would much prefer a formalized apprenticeship situation,” says Landis about the Costume Guild. “What we have now is irregular and messy.”

But below-the-line jobs do tend to reward initiative and moxie: Those who persevere are often richly rewarded if their talent matches their interest. Kalfus says she often gets “smart, talented, overqualified young people starting out,” and has gone to bat for some of her young crew to get them new titles once a project wraps, based on their contributions.

“There’s something melancholy about mentoring,” says Landis, who now teaches at UCLA. “It’s an acknowledgement that your career is bookended, and you want to prepare the next generation with your love of the art and craft. It’s an acceptance that the here and now is temporal; you’re passing on knowledge because you can’t own all of it.”

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