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COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 22

STARTING
FROM
SCRATCH

→ here's how

data
VS.
instinct

what are you
relying on?

The
NOMAD
economy

AMM
POEMER

From yes please to

NO
thanks





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GIRLS ON FILM

Hollywood's infamous GLASS CEILING is starting to show some serious CRACKS. We take a look at one Aussie charging UPWARDS and taking other women with her.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

With Best Actress Oscar statuette in hand, Cate Blanchett last year addressed Hollywood's gender imbalance with terse finality.

"Those of us in the industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the centre are niche experiences – they are not," she declared to an Academy comprising more than 6000 voting members, 76 per cent of whom are male. "Audiences want to see them and, in fact, they earn money. The world is round, people."

Statistics, unfortunately, also speak loudly. In a report that's been widely cited in disgruntled tones over the past year, Stacy L Smith and a team of researchers at the University of Southern California investigated 120 popular global films from 11 countries. Of the 5799 characters evaluated, only 30.9 per cent were female. Worse still, just 23.3 per cent of the films had a girl or woman as a lead or co-lead.

"I think the most important thing for us is breaking down this idea that movies with women in the middle of them are just for women," says producer Bruna Papandrea, who is working hard in Hollywood to create more roles for women on both sides of the camera.

"That's the thing that we really have to shift. It's such a big problem. *Cast Away* is a great example – a man lost on an island – no one calls that a men's movie."

At 43 and an Australian, Bruna is one half of Pacific Standard, a production company she helms alongside Reese Witherspoon, which last

year launched its first two movies, *Gone Girl* and *Wild*. She fears the latter film, despite pulling in more than US\$50 million at the box office, was written off by many as "women's only".

"It's not gender specific," says Bruna of their adaptation of the best-selling memoir of the same name, which recounts American novelist Cheryl Strayed's three-month, 1100-mile (1770km) hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. (The movie is released on DVD in Australia on June 17 in case you missed it.)

"Women, like men, are complex. There's a great line at the end – 'I feel like everything I did led me here, to the place I am now'. I think that's true of so many people, men and women. Although it's a harder sell to men, as a film, because that's the perception that's created."

In order to quash this perception, Bruna says more meaningful female roles should grace our screens, with the solution lying behind the camera. As was also discovered by Stacy and her researching team, films with a female director had 6.8 per cent more women in the cast than those without.

"It makes sense," says Bruna. "Reese always says this – 'I'm a woman, I want to tell stories about women. That's what I know and that's what I'm interested in'. The paradigm needs to shift, and really with writers most of all, because that's where it starts – be it novels or screenplays."

Celluloid Ceiling's 2014 study of women behind-the-scenes found that females comprised only 17 per cent of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers working on the year's top 250 grossing films in the US. The same as back in 1998.

"I think at a certain point the numbers are the numbers, you know?" says Bruna. "And I think there's definitely a little bit of an old-school system of male producers in Hollywood... Men

will be [told], 'come and produce this movie', whereas a woman might have to find that movie themselves – create that opportunity for herself." Which is precisely what she and Reese did, having met at a dinner party thrown by mutual friend, actor Isla Fisher.

With Nicole Kidman and Naomi Watts also in her circles, household names are synonymous with Bruna's own, both on and off the credit role.

The Adelaide native produced one of her first films in Australia, *Better Than Sex*, which screened at the Toronto Film Festival, where she met directors Anthony Minghella and Sydney Pollack (in a "change-my-life moment") who appointed her as a production executive at Mirage Enterprises in London. A stint in New York City

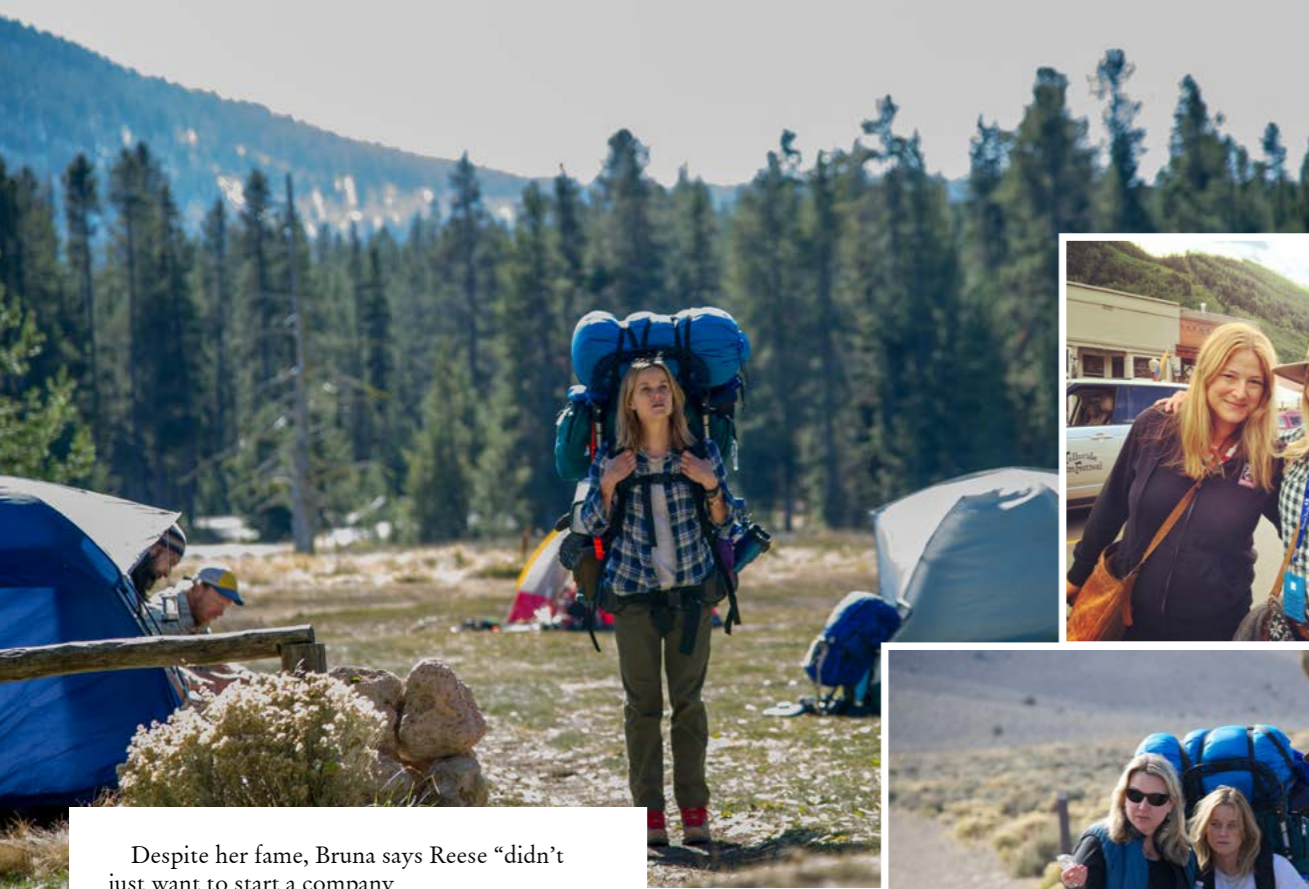
with GreeneStreet Films was to follow, before a move to Los Angeles, where she's since lived for eight years, initially signing with Groundswell Productions and executive producing *Milk*, the drama that won Sean Penn an Oscar.

Bruna stepped out with Make Movies, her own outfit, in 2009, releasing zombie comedy *Warm Bodies* in 2012 – delighting the box office and critics alike. That same year saw Bruna merging with the

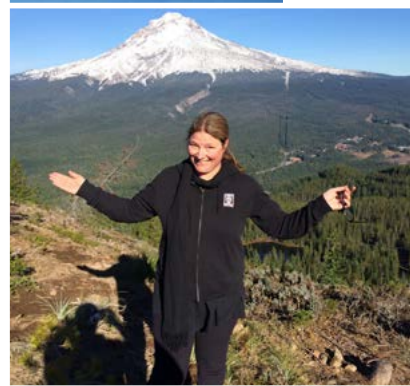
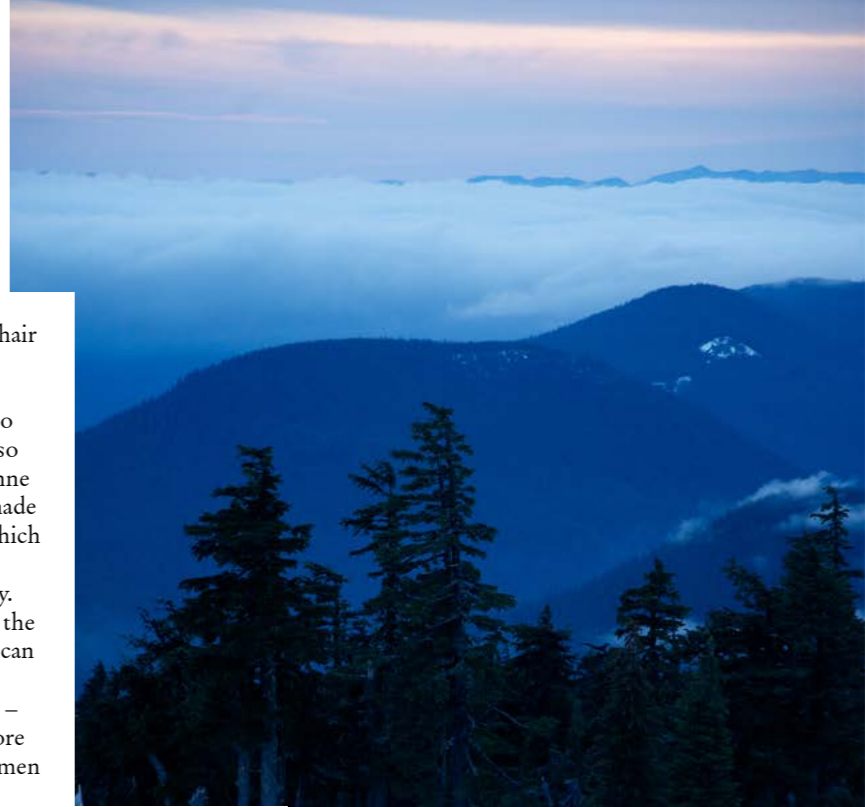
likes of Reese and her production company, Type A Films (which we have to thank for *Legally Blonde*), and Pacific Standard began, born of the duo's shared appreciation for copious amounts of reading.

"It was really through sending each other a few books," recalls Bruna. "Our partnership has been very organic, and I think that's probably why it's been successful. We just became about, 'are we like-minded?' And I really wanted to make sure she would do the work, too. Did we have the same taste? Would she like reading as much as I did and was she interested in making things – obviously for herself, but with other actors? And all those things turned out to be, yes. The answer was yes." >

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Bruna Papandrea with Reese Witherspoon on set



Despite her fame, Bruna says Reese “didn’t just want to start a company that was about her” – giving director David Fincher (*Fight Club*, *The Social Network*) free rein to cast Rosamund Pike as the female lead in *Gone Girl*, their adaptation of Gillian Flynn’s crazily successful novel.

“I was always open to doing it,” revealed Reese to the *Hollywood Reporter*. “But whenever David Fincher says he wants to do a project, you just sit back and say, ‘Whatever you want to do.’” Reese did, however, take the lead of Cheryl in *Wild* – a film Bruna says needed “a different type of nurturing”.

“We didn’t want to have a lot of voices in that process. We didn’t want people to say, ‘we don’t want to see Reese Witherspoon do heroin’. So we developed it with private money, then once we had a script, we basically went to the studios and said, ‘here it is... here’s our star... do you want to make it? And if you don’t want to make it, we’re going to move on’. Particularly where darker subject matter is concerned, we just don’t want it softened by the system.”

Staying small (but mighty – “with a big output... we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to just move things quickly”) and working “outside the system” allows Pacific Standard autonomy – the ability to pick and choose appropriate players for each project.

“We’ve been offered many deals by studios... [but] we’ve always been very reluctant to do that. We have such eclectic taste and we’ve

Our PARTNERSHIP has been very ORGANIC, and I think that’s probably why it’s been SUCCESSFUL.

found homes for our movies at different studios, different companies... We’re finding that the studios want to be bolder, too. They want to make more female-driven stuff. There’s an appetite, and it’s great.”

Their third film, *Hot Pursuit*, a comedy starring Reese and *Modern Family*’s Sofia Vergara, hits screens this month. But funnily enough, Bruna’s not afraid to call this one a chick flick.

“I think [it’s] a term of endearment,” she says, “so I don’t hate it. I hope women go in droves to see it, in the same way they did to *Sex and the City*. I want to see all stories told” – even the ones that don’t take her fancy, like the polarising *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

“The success of that is a little bit astounding to me, but I don’t begrudge it. Women drove the market for that book, and for the movie – and a really great female director directed it, by the way.” Sam Taylor-Johnson, that is (her film collecting a cool US\$85 million in its opening weekend – the largest debut ever for a female

director), while Anne Fletcher took to the chair for *Hot Pursuit*.

“We really need to breed more female directors,” says Bruna. “Not only are there so few, the amount of years between movies is so much greater than male directors. I think Anne is one of the only female directors to have made three movies in a row in a six-year period, which is pretty crazy.”

And don’t even get her started on diversity. “If you break that down again and look at the amount of Latino women, or African-American women behind the camera, or roles that are created for them, the numbers are like death – it’s horror. So we also need to start being more colour blind, not just with women but with men as well, in the way we cast movies.”

Bruna is quick to credit her own leading man, husband and fellow producer Steve Hutensky, for his constant support, especially in the wake of her lupus diagnosis – the excruciating autoimmune disease she hasn’t let hinder her creative pursuits, or role of mother to their two-year-old twins. Just last year, in recognition of her strength, Bruna received the Lupus LA Woman of Achievement Award, with Reese and Cheryl by her side.

“I was kind of outing myself publically,” says Bruna, “and that was a little bit disconcerting... [but] I realised that was the next step. It’s important for busy, successful women to bring awareness to [the disease].”

Busy indeed. Pacific Standard currently has no less than 17 projects in development, including a TV adaptation of Liane Moriarty’s novel *Big Little Lies* set to shoot in California, boasting six roles for women.

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And more warriors are joining the frontier.

Rose Byrne, Gracie Otto and three friends have banded together The Dollhouse Collective – an all-female production company supporting women in the industry, while across independent film festivals, a rising female presence is being felt. This year, 36 per cent of the movies at Sundance were directed by women, and Tribeca featured work from 30 women.

At this year’s Tribeca, even Meryl Streep got in on the act, announcing the establishment of an exclusively female-focused writers’ workshop. Co-founded with New York Women in Film and Television, The Writers Lab brings together eight female screenwriters over the age of 40 to help increase their opportunities with mentoring from some of the industry’s most established female talents.

“We just have a way to go, you know?” says Bruna. “It takes a while to change a culture.” But she’s doing her darnedest to break down those clubhouse walls. ■