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## At Athena Festival, Women Are the Stars

By STUART MILLER

The snubbing of "Selma" director Ava DuVernay in this year's Academy Award nominations has stirred debate about the way Hollywood treats women, both on screen and behind the camera.

It is a topic the Athena Film Festival has been trying to spotlight since it launched in 2011.

If the festival, set for Feb. 5-8 at Barnard College, doesn't ring a bell, you're not alone.

Even Gillian Robespierre, a native New Yorker and up-and-coming director, said she didn't know about the festival before her film "Obvious Child" was selected for screening this year.

Now, she plans on coming every year.

"It's important to foster female talent," Ms. Robespierre said. "They have a great group of filmmakers, and it doesn't feel industry driven."

The festival, which gave Ms. DuVernay an Athena Award in 2013, offers an array of feature films, documentaries and shorts.

Not all are directed by women, but each features female protagonists demonstrating leadership—or at least a

command over their fate.

Offerings this year range from a premiere of the HBO documentary "Rosie O'Donnell: A Heartfelt Stand Up," which showcases the comedian's evolving comedic work since her recent heart attack, to the feature "Dukhtar," a drama by filmmaker Afia Nathaniel chronicling the story of a Pakistani mother who kidnaps her 10-year-old daughter to save her from becoming a child bride.

The festival also will honor Jodie Foster with a lifetime-achievement award.

"My goal from day one was to change the conversation and change how people perceive leadership," said festival founder Kathryn Kolbert, director of Barnard's Athena Center for Leadership Studies.

Most people, she said, tend to automatically picture a leader as "a white guy with gray hair at the temples."

In particular, Ms. Kolbert said she hopes the festival can push Hollywood insiders "to think differently about who is leading the industry and about diversifying the stories that are told."

Programming to fulfill that

goal falls to the festival's co-founder and artistic director Melissa Silverstein, who also serves as editor of the website Women and Hollywood.

The job, said Ms. Silverstein, has had built-in challenges: There are numerous choices for the short-film and documentary categories, but fewer feature-length films.

"I want to be able to share more stories with women on screen, but they are not there," she said. "I look all day long."

Women's stories are the last to get greenlighted, said Ms. Silverstein, because there is a misconception they are bad for business.

The percentage of female directors involved in the 250 top-grossing films has been stuck below 10% since the 1990s, according to data from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.

In this year's Oscar race, none of the eight Best Picture nominees has a woman in the lead—a sign of the festival's continuing significance, said director Gina Prince-Bythewood, who will be honored this year.

"It's important to be cele-

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Actress Jenny Slate, left, and director Gillian Robespierre worked together on the film 'Obvious Child,' which was released last year.

## Film Festival Encourages Women to 'Wear the Pants'

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brating filmmakers, but also to be encouraging and inspiring others coming up to tell those stories," she said.

To do that, the festival also places emphasis on its master classes and panels, said Ms. Kolbert. Among the offerings this year is a guide to successful crowdfunding.

Another 2015 honoree is Sheila Nevins, president of HBO Documentary Films, who said she attended Barnard back when "we couldn't wear pants unless the school declared an actual snow emergency. I also had to maintain a B+ average to be allowed to take classes at Columbia with the men."

While Ms. Nevins adds a dose of realism—Hollywood studio honchos aren't necessarily lis-

tening to a small women's festival a continent away—she said she was impressed with how the festival has grown "from almost nothing to a place for women creators that is making a mark for itself."

Attendance at the festival has more than doubled since its inception, to nearly 5,000, and the number of films under consideration has grown to 350 films from 84 the first year.

Ms. Nevins said she hopes the festival will eventually be unnecessary.

Meanwhile, she said, she may dress like Athena, the Greek mythological goddess of both arts and war, to accept her award.

"Right now [women] still need armor—and to be armed—to get a film made."