

FILMMAKER

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THE ROMANTICS' GALT NIEDERHOFFER |

By Alicia Van Covering

Galt Niederhoffer is no stranger to Sundance, having produced films that won awards there beginning in 1997, when Morgan J. Freeman's *Hurricane Streets* won the Audience Award. As a founding member of Plum Pictures, one of New York's most active independent film production companies, she has produced over a dozen films, including *Grace is Gone*, *Dedication*, *Prozac Nation*, *Lonesome Jim*, *The Winning*



Season, *The Baxter* and *After.Life*. Niederhoffer grew up in New York, one of six daughters of a squash champion-turned-hedge fund maverick, in a rambling, eccentrically decorated house. In her first novel, *A Taxonomy of Barnacles*, Niederhoffer may have used her vivid and unique family dynamic for raw material; in her second, *The Romantics* (on which the film is based), she explores the family you make after you leave home: your friends.

Lila (Anna Paquin) is marrying Tom (Josh Duhamel), and Tom used to date Laura (Katie Holmes), and Laura and Tom may or may not still be in love with each other – dramas that the remaining five of their best friends from college arrive to witness. The group gathers for the rehearsal dinner and spends one long night reliving their college memories and testing the boundaries of their new adult lives. Comparisons to *The Big Chill* are inevitable, but this is a film that's less about reliving the past than it is about reckoning with the future. As the seven friends come together, fall apart and come together again, all in the course of one night, they repeat their favorite toast — “to our glittering future!” — and each time its meaning is different.

Filmmaker: What were some of the pitfalls of the Romance Movie genre that you had to work through or fight against?

Niederhoffer: I don't think anyone with any sense of movies and books could write a romantic story without an awareness of its tradition. It's hard not to allude to various hallmarks of the genre, so I find those references unavoidable but sometimes really interesting. But you always want to avoid cliché — so, [I was] fighting cliché, and when appropriate embracing it. There are moments [in literature and cinema] that can never be done better than they have been. All you can do is embrace it and acknowledge the debt. I really wanted to make a sweet, emotional, romantic movie — something that moves you and swells your heart, that makes you weepy at times [and makes you] walk out of the theatre feeling happy and like you want to go make out with your honey.

Filmmaker: Just like a wedding.

Niederhoffer: (laughs) Yeah, exactly. I mean these things have a purpose — they make us feel good, and they remind us of the universal fact that we all are pitting this enormity of emotion against the question of that emotion's validity in real life. I'm still most interested in stories with a love story at the center. [A wedding] seemed like the best setting in which to explore a love story of heightened proportions, the

proportions of love when it seems to be the only thing that matters – which is a quality of love that it loses once you grow up.

Filmmaker: What was happening in your life when you wrote the book?

Niederhoffer: I was just turning thirty, and I was pregnant with my second child — actually, I finished the manuscript the week before he was born. I was really settling into this new phase of my life, being a mom and an adult, I suppose, and maybe looking back on the period before that phase with some nostalgia and some romance. Things change so completely when you become a parent; all that stuff like Love and Heartache kind of leave the picture for a little while. I was in that new phase of being a responsible human being who had lost the luxury of all of that drama and, in a sense, frivolity. So I guess I was interested in reliving them, through this idea of retelling the old story of a rich girl and a poor boy and someone else caught in between. I also wanted to do something that just had more sincerity and more heart [than my first book]. Sincerity goes very easily to the point of sentimentality, and I wanted to ride that line, which is a hard thing to do. Emotions are as tricky in stories as they are in the real world. They're big and unruly and often the very unattractive sign of absurd and compulsive narcissism, you know? That quality is so true of young people and their emotions that you really have to navigate it with some care. The question kind of becomes: are young people fools, or are young people honest?

Filmmaker: Jane Austen territory.

Niederhoffer: It's interesting that you would mention her because my first book was a real homage to Pride & Prejudice — but that's why I think the Romantic period was so interesting to me, and why I had an epiphany moment when I figured out the title, and the central metaphor of it; two of the characters keep going back to this poem from the Romantic period. The Romantic poets were so interested in emotion — the importance of emotion, the placement of emotion, and the objects of it. They were reclaiming emotional intensity back from the Church, back from organized, institutional notions of love, and putting it into all sort of different things: nature, death, inspiration, the act of writing, and romantic love.

Filmmaker: Do you agree that the story is one of six people all trying to decide how to deal with their emotions, or whether they want to deal with them at all?

Niederhoffer: Yeah, that's an interesting way of thinking of it... The movie, at its best, is looking at the various ways in which we handle emotions in our lives, and how that serves us and serves an individual. Another weird thing that happened in the mid-19th century is that emotion became defined in such a way that you could almost say it was invented. You have the Victorian era, and Freud, and suddenly there's this totally new definition of the human heart and the human head and a narrative put in place about the fight going on between them. That's a dramatic construction; that's a story we tell ourselves about how people work and how our bodies work. If you accept that definition, which is pretty absurd, it becomes a way of understanding people and dramatizing the choices they have to make. Each of these characters is fighting their way through the choice they have to make.

Filmmaker: How did being a producer prepare you for directing?

Niederhoffer: Being a producer made me incredibly grateful for the opportunity, because I know how hard producers work — and all of our producers just worked their asses off, especially because it's such a hard time to get a movie made. Like all movies, it was a little rocky getting it going, and I was so scared it wasn't going to happen. So when it finally did, when everyone pulled through and worked so hard, I just was crazy with gratitude and understood that I had to carefully assess the battles that could not be won versus the battles that needed to be fought. It made me a little more humble and a lot more practical.

Filmmaker: The thing I least envy about directors is the pressure on them to think creatively in the midst of this overpowering, relentless production machine.

Niederhoffer: I think that's the hardest thing. People are right to say that the best director is the decisive director, but I realized something about that. Sometimes being decisive means saying, "Hold on one second, I need to think about that." Sometimes it's not best to just shout out an answer; your gut sometimes does need a good 30 seconds to hear itself out. Everything is so accelerated and rushed, and that's also part of the thrill of filmmaking — you add to this incredible mixture of people and limits and

opportunities this crazy time thing, where every second costs thousands of dollars. That adds this “game” quality to the whole thing, like you’re playing this game of Tetris, trying to solve a new problem every minute.

Filmmaker: How did you come up for the aesthetic plan of the film?

Niederhoffer: That was the result of an incredible, really joyful collaboration between me and the core creative members of the movie – Sam Levy [the DP], Tim Grimes [the Production Designer], Danielle Kays [Costumes], and now Jacob Craycroft the Editor. We had one of those awesome experiences that you dream about, that I had seen other filmmakers have. It was a weird kind of echo of the story, the way we came together as strangers and were thrust together as a group of friends, and suddenly we had to listen and share and argue and disagree and concede, and it was all the things that the movie was about; being inspired, being moved, and becoming emotional because of a person or idea that takes you out of the mundane existence of daily life.

Filmmaker: What was it like working with this ensemble cast?

Niederhoffer: The magical, transporting, very intense thing that happened with the key creative crew happened again when the actors arrived. It was so intense, the exchange that happened between myself and all of these people, so much so that I would sometimes forget... I would think, “OK, I have to do the democratic thing and find out what everyone agrees on here,” and then I would remember that it was my right and responsibility to the movie that a clear vision be upheld and described. You hear about directors who are totally open and kind of defer to the actor, and others who are completely rigid and ignore the actor in favor of their original vision. I found early on that while it is essential to maintain a clear sense of your gut — I think that’s what vision means; what is your gut, after you take that second to ask yourself, “What is the best idea here?” — that right before that, you absolutely must listen to the best idea. Because if not, you might miss it. And often actors do have the best idea about blocking or a line or a scene, and it’s absolutely critical to pay attention. I found that whole interchange, first with my creative collaborators and then with the actors, really thrilling, quite emotional and utterly taxing, but ultimately very awesome.