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Lisa Cholodenko Talks About Marriage, Casting, and Oscars

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Lisa Cholodenko
Jason LaVeris/Filmmagic.com

Lisa Cholodenko, who made a name for herself with such indie faves as "High Art" and "Laurel Canyon," took a few years off from her career to bear a child with her partner, using an anonymous sperm donor. When she returned to screenwriting, she ended up writing a script with obvious echoes of her own life.

"The Kids Are All Right", which comes out on DVD this week, is about a lesbian couple raising their two teenagers in Los Angeles. When the children's biological father, an anonymous sperm donor, comes into their lives, it shakes the foundations of their relationship.

The movie was a break-out hit at Sundance. When it opened in a handful of theaters in Los Angeles and New York, it earned more money per screen than any other movie released this year. That's right, "The Kids Are All Right" beat out heavy-weights like "Toy Story 3" and

"Inception." And the movie is already getting some Oscar buzz for its two lead actresses, Annette Bening and Julianne Moore.

Yahoo Movies: This is a very intimate portrait of married life. How did this story start out? What was the genesis of this movie?

Lisa Cholodenko: Let's see...I was considering how I was going to have a baby with my partner and we decided that we were going to use a sperm donor. And that was a pretty big decision. We talked about it a lot. It was something that was heavily on my mind because that was really the focus of my life at that point. And not long after making that decision, I sat down to write a new script. Somehow, I forced myself to not censor myself. I just wrote something down. And this family came into my brain and down on paper and all the sudden I had Nic and Jules and Joni and Laser. And Paul too.

YM: Did you consciously model your characters on people you knew in real life?

LC: You know, I didn't, I have to say. I don't think any one of those characters were a stand-in for myself or for Stuart [Blumberg, the movie's co-writer] or for people that we knew. There wasn't really any of that going on. And I'm glad about that. I can see myself in all of those characters.

YM: Can you tell me how you cast the film?

LC: Casting is really kind of a messy, tedious process. Julianne was someone I was interested in working with for a long time. We had met several times over the years. I think that she admired the films that I've made and wanted to work with me. So we sent it to her originally and she attached herself pretty early on. And then, y'know, we just kept writing and writing and making the characters clearer. And when the characters were finally at a place where we felt like this is ready to shoot, casting became much easier. I could see that this Nic character has this part of her that's really salty and sarcastic and that offsets the part of her that's really tight and harsh. Who does that really great? Who meets all these other criteria? Who would be a great pair with Julianne? Who

would I believe? You break down all those questions and you come up with only a few choices. In my case, when I considered Annette, there was just wasn't anyone else who was going to be a better choice. So I was tenacious. I camped out in front of her house for a week...

YM: [Laughs]

LC: Y'know. I had met her. She read the script. We had a conversation and then everyone gets involved. I think Julianne wrote her an email. We worked hard to make it come together and finally we did.

YM: How do you work with actors? What's your method?

LC: These actors, especially Julianne and Annette, are sensitive. That's what makes them great actors. I could tell that they didn't want to be micromanaged and didn't need to be micromanaged. I felt pretty confident that I had done my hard work by making sure that script was where I wanted it to be and saying what I wanted it to say so I wasn't going to have to cover my tracks on set. I could just guide them and help nuance things and maybe change things if I saw something wasn't working or someone didn't understand where to go with something. But mostly I was there just as a presence and a guide. I tried to keep my mouth shut as much as I could.

YM: How about working with the younger stars like Mia Wasikowska and Josh Hutcherson? Was that a different set of challenges?

LC: You know what? It wasn't. They were equally pro. It was astonishing to see young actors that on their game. It was relieving and kind of amazing and great. It made the cast very coherent. The only time I really talked was when there were a few scenes that Mia and I felt for different reasons weren't working right. We had to come to a middle ground and figure out whether to rewrite them or approach them differently. And we figured it out.

YM: So what did you do with those scenes?

LC: Y'know, fortunately Stuart Blumberg was there on the set and he could go off during the day or overnight and come back. I could continue making the film. He could do a little revision work. That was one of the great advantages of having a co-writer. I could get him to help revise whatever wasn't working quite right on the set.

YM: I'm assuming you didn't have a whole lot of rehearsal time...

LC: No, not at all. It was painfully, impossibly short.

YM: This movie is probably going to get some Oscar attention. What do you think?

LC: God, I hope it does. I think it's Oscar-worthy. I'm always happy when little films that have a big bite get their due. This film isn't flashy. It's not an effects film. It's not an extravaganza. It's a really human story. I really feel like we made a great film. So, I hope it does get some Oscar something something.