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Jennifer Westfeldt and 'Friends with Kids'

Sophia Stein · Thursday, March 8th, 2012

When Julie and Jason witness the toll that having kids is taking on the relationships of their married friends, they set out to beat the system and have it all, romance and children, by parenting a child with their platonic best friend. Writer, producer, actress and first-time director Jennifer Westfeldt spoke with Sophia Stein about *Friends with Kids* and her "indie film habit."

Sophia Stein: Jennifer Westfeldt — you are a quadruple threat. Writer, producer, director, and star. Which is your favorite hat to wear?

Jennifer Westfeldt: Well, I only grew up being an actor, that's all I really knew about or wanted to do. And specifically, on stage, that was really where I thought my life would go. So everything else has been a real surprise to me, and a real, kind-of stumbling into this indie film habit. It's a strange piece of my life as an artist that's evolved, and kind-of in some ways, happened to me. And then I guess I couldn't get enough, so I kept doing it, sort of on the side of my acting projects. So it's been an interesting challenge, and it's been exciting as a woman, to at least have one aspect of my career be something that I can shape a little, in terms of working on stories and themes and ideas that interest me, and reflect the age I'm at right now, or the things that I am thinking about. So [filmmaking] has been a nice way to augment my acting career.

SS: So which of the hats is the most difficult for you or challenging?

JW: You know, I had never intended to direct this. It was not in our thinking whatsoever. We were talking to a number of directors. Jake Kasdan who ends up being a producer on this project was going to direct it for a time. There was this small, small window of time where this wonderful cast could do it, could all do it. And Jake still wasn't finished on *Bad Teacher;* the studio still needed him. So really, with his prodding and with the support of my other producing partners, it sort of fell to me — or else we wouldn't have been able to make the film. So I kinda took a deep breath and steeled myself, and I realized it was going to be a really sharp learning curve. Jake ended up being on set everyday, watching at the monitor every time I was on camera. My DP, Will Rexer, was sooo generous with his time. We spent so much time in pre-production talking through every shot, every moment, every visual reference. He filled in my gaps and helped me speak about things in a way the crew would respond to, rather than just in a way that I would speak about it as an artist. I felt like I got this incredible group of people to support what was a first-time [directing] effort, and one that I wasn't entirely sure at the outset I could pull off.

SS: So now that you've been bitten by the directing bug, would you direct yourself again?

JW: I don't know. Not for a while … You've gotta be a little crazy, you have to have a few screws loose to do this many jobs on something! But at a certain point you get so invested in

seeing something through, you're working so hard, and a number of people are working so hard, that to not see it to fruition, to not see it get made, feels like the worst possible fate. So you kind-of get to a point where you would do anything to make it! … to make it the way we want, with the actors that we want. So it felt like the right choice and the right challenge to take on, if we wanted to see this thing to come to life.

SS: Ever since *Ira & Abbey,* I have been waiting for your next film, but that was way back in 2007?

J**W:** Yes, *Jessica Stein* we shot in 2000, and it got released in 2002, and *Ira & Abbey* in 2005, released in 2007. This one, *Friends with Kids* in 2010, released in 2012. So they have all been basically five year increments. And it's funny, they all have sort-of the same thread, taking a life phase and putting a subversive spin on it. Why can't we choose the rules and do it this way?! — with dating, with marriage, with kids. You know they're all that same sort of idea of why can't we change the rules?, why can't we do it our way!

SS: So between 2007 and 2012, five years, how does that time map out?

JW: I wrote the first half of the movie four years ago, and then I put it in a drawer. I didn't quite know what to do with it, and then I got busy with other acting jobs. I wasn't sure what the thread was in terms of my progression as an artist or as a storyteller. I came back to it about two years ago. I had a renewed interest in the initial kernel of the story, which was this new, experimental, non-traditional family that two-best-friends enter into and the ripple effect among the friend group. I was really interested in the group of friends and that dynamic, how the friendships change. How the romantic relationships change, how the evolution and nature of love-of-family evolves as they get older? How one couple's choice impacts the other, and how people feel judged — "oh, you're doing it this way," "what's the matter with the way we're doing it?," and all of those responses in the group dynamic. So that was when I wrote the Vermont scene and that big climax for all eight characters. That's when I got re-invested in it. And ironically, we finished that first draft two years ago this month. And then we wrapped the film a year after that. So it's actually been a swift process from the finishing of the first draft, swifter than the other two, by far.

SS: I am curious. They say that a film is written three times, the screenplay —

JW: Yes, the shooting —

SS: and the editing.

JW: A hundred percent!

SS: Did the story change a lot?

JW: Not the story, but the telling of it changes, it has to. Every actor brings so much, and they change it. And then what happens in the shoot — the location isn't right or the kids melt down, or it's snowing and it's supposed to be outside in October — so many things shift and change and you have to roll with it. So there was an evolution. I don't think that the film we ended up with is wildly different from the script, but different things have an emphasis.

SS: We see these romances develop for both Julie and for Jason with these other partners, but we never really see the break up scenes with the new partners. It's intimated. Was that something that was in there?

JW: There was one extra scene with Adam and Megan, but it wasn't a break up scene. Mostly because I feel like that moment in the restaurant with them, sort of says it all. He's in such a different place from the top of the movie where he's like, "I can't believe these kids." And then he's on the other side of it, and he's like "your kids are adorable." And she doesn't get it, she's not there yet, that's not the place that she's at in life. And so I think that the look on her face and the

look on his face, realizing that there is a gulf between them, of just – experience, that she doesn't have, that she won't get until she goes through it.

SS: How do you finance a film like this? I noticed that Mike Nichols is one of your executive producers.

JW: Well, Mike was involved early. We did a workshop of the screenplay with some actors at New York Stage and Film, this wonderful company on the Vassar campus in the summer, and Mike was one of the screenwriting mentors. So we started with this cold reading, and he, along with others, gave me feedback. He really responded to [the screenplay], and put his name on it, and got involved as sort of a "godfather" of this project, which was lovely.

But raising the money is always challenging. My first two films were much more piecemeal, we had a great number of many investors on the first two. On this one, we actually had a single company take it on, and that was really fortunate. Red Granite Pictures financed the film. They had been reading scripts for two years, and they hadn't yet found something that they wanted to be their first film … and then they found this one and decided that this was what they wanted to launch their company with. So, it was really lucky in a way, that they found us, and we found them.

SS: You and your partner Jon Hamm have a new production company, Points West Pictures?

JW: Yes, it was our first project as well.

SS: What's next?

JW: I'm developing a series that Allan Ball is executive producing, and I am acting in and writing with someone else.

SS: Can you tell us what that's going to be about?

JW: I don't think I'm allowed. But they are going to announce it soon; so after that, it won't be so hush hush, I'm sorry. After that, we have a couple of other projects in development that we would like to get off the ground. So with any luck, if this one does well (she knocks on wood), we'll get the opportunity to make more. I certainly hope so.

SS: I hope that you embrace the prolific-ness of a Woody Allen, because you're our female Woody Allen.

JW: Oh, you're sweet. That's so nice, thank you.

SS: The topic of Friends with Kids is very timely, the NY Times just featured an article that the majority of births to women under thirty are happening outside of marriage.

JW: Yes, that doesn't surprise me

SS: Are you and Jon Hamm going to be "friends with kids"?

JW: (Laughs) I don't know. I'll have to keep you posted. It could go either way, we'll see. We love kids. We love the kids that are in our lives. It also hasn't happened yet … so we're open.

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