

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lawrence Kasdan on Companions, Darling and Otherwise

Sophia Stein · Thursday, May 3rd, 2012

*Last week, Lawrence Kasdan talked with Sophia Stein about his eleventh film and first independent feature, **Darling Companion**. The comedy explores companionship and connection in a variety of forms – a marriage that has become a little frayed around the edges, young people falling in love, a brand-new marriage, the surprise of mid-life romance, and even love between species. Inspired by the search for their real life “darling companion” mutt, screenwriters Meg and Lawrence Kasdan use the search for a missing dog, **Freeway**, as the catalyst for the story.*

***Darling Companion** (Sony Pictures Classics) which recently screened at the San Francisco International Film Festival and is playing in theatres currently, features Kevin Kline, Diane Keaton, Dianne Wiest, Richard Jenkins, Sam Shepherd, and Elizabeth Moss. The film opened April 20, 2012 and grossed a disappointing \$110,000 in its first week of release.*

SS: This is your first film in nine years – why such a long hiatus?

LK: Well, it was certainly not intended. I made a big Hollywood movie, and it didn't do well, but that didn't really matter that much. I immediately went into adapting a wonderful Richard Russo novel called, *The Risk Pool*, and Tom Hanks was going to be in it. I spent almost a year writing it, and the movie did not happen. The way most movies don't happen. The rare thing is when a movie does happen.

After that, I wrote an original screenplay, I did a few other jobs for people, I worked on a couple of other movies that I thought were going to happen, that didn't happen ... and pretty soon you turn around, and years have passed. No one was more shocked than me that it took so long between movies, and I hope it doesn't happen again. But it is the nature of the movie business that you don't have control over that. The kind of movies I make, which tend to be about people and relationships, are the ones that are the most difficult to get made nowadays.

SS: The story of *Darling Companion* feels like a midsummer night's dream — for 50-somethings. It has such a whimsical quality about it. Were you consciously referencing Shakespeare's comedy?

LK: I think I've been drawn to country house stories, ever since I saw *Rules of the Game* when I was very young. It's a very accepting kind-of structure, open to all kinds of stories. It's sort of like Westerns, in that you can put any kind of story in a country house setting. Obviously “The Big Chill” goes that way. *Rules of the Game* is one of the greatest films ever made.

SS: How much money was it made for?

LK: \$5,000,000. So, it doesn't have to make a lot of money; the backers are pretty much out already. It's just that you want people to see it. You want it to have a long life. After everybody has worked for nothing, you want them to feel that it was for some purpose. So you go out, and you

work your butt off.

SS: What are the stakes for you and Meg on this film? Did you invest your own money in the making?

LK: No, it wasn't our own money. I've done that in the past. As everybody told me beforehand, it's the dumbest thing you can do. But we were lucky to find a company in Minneapolis — Werc Werk Works who put up the money. And they've done all right, because we pre-sold Europe, and Sony bought the movie for a certain amount of money. So the investors are in pretty good shape right now. Whether anyone else makes money after that, will depend on how the movie does.

For Meg and I the stakes are that we gave a lot of time and love to this, and you want people to see it. And you want them to see it clearly, you don't want them to see it through some distorted lens.

SS: How do you and your wife work together as a writing team? What is your process?

LK: We just sit together. We've been talking for 40-some years, and it's an extension of that process. We sit in the same room — I sit at the computer, she sits in comfortable chair, and we talk through every line, and every idea, and every joke, and every thought, and try to come to some sort of meeting of the minds. And if one of us feels more strongly than the other, that one usually prevails. I've always been a believer in outlining. There have been times when I have drifted away from it ... but I think, writing original screenplays is difficult enough without having a plan.

SS: One of the most affecting scenes in *Darling Companion*, is when Carmen predicts her potential future with Bryan: She confesses that if she were to leave her Rockies mountain home to move to the city and marry him, it would be disastrous! — she would “fall out of alignment.” The implication being that chemistry and connection is not enough to sustain a marriage. To what do you attribute the longevity of your own marriage?

LK: It's all chemistry, I think. (Laughs.)

I think it's a long process. The first step is you have to be completely lucky. You just ran into someone, someone who can be your companion. Someone who over time is the right person for you. The right listener. The right generous mate. The right partner through adversity. It's just luck! — luck and a lot of good fortune. And then, it becomes a lot of hard work and commitment. There was a wonderful moment in Marty Scorsese's movie about George Harrison when he asks Olivia Harrison, how did she keep that marriage going when it was obviously a challenge at times, and she said, “Don't get divorced.”



SS: In the film, there is this pitting of a skeptic scientist (Dr. Joseph Winter/Kevin Kline) against a psychic (Carmen/Ayelet Zurer) and the doctor's willfully gullible wife (Beth/Diane Keaton). Where do you and Meg each fall on this spectrum in regards to your personal beliefs?

LK: It's the opposite. Although I would not characterize it as gullible. I think I am very much more open to the idea that there are forces at work that we don't understand. Meg is open to it, but much more skeptical than I am. It seems to me that we just don't understand a lot of what's going on around us. Therefore the idea that some people would have extrasensory perceptions, that they would be more sensitive to some aspects — like animals are more sensitive to certain things than human beings are — it's all part of the same thing for me. Which is how heightened are your sensitivities. Some of us seem [to have this]. And it varies enormously from day to day.

SS: This is a time in history where many, many people are unemployed or under-employed. People are having difficulty finding work that is economically rewarding, or even sustaining. Is that a theme that you are going to explore in your work?

LK: That search for satisfying work is [a theme] throughout many of the movies that I've made, I think, and it takes a lot of different forms. Sometimes in genre movies. It's certainly in "The Big Chill." It's certainly in "Grand Canyon." That it's not easy to find satisfying work in our lives and to live an honorable life while we're making a living. It's part of the constant struggle that everybody has.

SS: *Darling Companion* is a movie with lead characters in their 60's. I'm in my 40's and this movie spoke to me – as a married woman and as a person living in an age of technological fatigue. Who do you see as the audience for *Darling Companion*?

LW: I think there are a lot of people who aren't getting what they want from the movies. And that is not so much age related, as interest related. I think that the studios have stopped supplying movies that satisfy certain of our interests. So independent film has tried to pick it up. But independent film in tough economic times is also a difficult arena. [Indies have] become much, much more dependent on movie stars and European pre-sales, and that has changed the nature of independent film. So, I think there are a lot of people out there that aren't getting enough movies that they want to see. They open up the paper on Friday, and it doesn't matter if they are thirty years old or if they are sixty years old, they are not getting the choices that they want.

So this movie is for people who might have an interest in this kind of subject matter, which is about how varied the relationships are in our lives, that it's difficult to find the right companion, that it might even be across species — that an animal can mean so much to you, that you would do anything to save it. How difficult it is to maintain a marriage over a long period of time, and keep the interest there, and not take each other for granted. How hard it is to find a brand new relationship, either when you are very young or in mid-life. *Darling Companion* is a film for people who are interested in [relationships].

SS: What are you doing to promote the film and help the film find its audience?

LK: We have been working so hard. We are really lucky in that we have Sony Pictures Classics who are very good at this. But part of the way they have stayed in business for twenty years and released over three-hundred terrific movies, is that they don't spend a lot of money. So, my wife and I have been like Willy Lowman [in *Death of a Salesman*] with this movie. We've been to three film festivals, in about six cities, and we just got back from two solid weeks of publicity and traveling. You just go out and you do everything you can to try to make people aware of the movie. And then if you can get them to sample it, you hope that some of them like it, and the ones that like it, tell their friends. The movie was made for very little money.

SS: What do you make of ageism in Hollywood, and our culture at large?

LK: It's certainly a much bigger issue in our culture than [in Hollywood]. It hardly matters in Hollywood. Hollywood has always been a rough place to get work, whether you are twenty years old or sixty years old.

Clearly, one of the things that the movie did want to do was have sixty year old protagonists — who are not doddering, who are not demented, who are not figures of fun, who are not over-controlling parents, all the caricatures that Hollywood tends to use actors over sixty for. This is about the truth of the matter, which is that when you're sixty, you feel exactly as you did when you were thirty, except you may have a few more pains and crick's, but essentially you have the same urges and desires, and hopes, and ambitions, as you did when you were thirty years old. That doesn't change, and that isn't really represented well by Hollywood.

SS: You are quoted as saying: "It's an instinct, to look around and see what's happening; what aches and pains you're feeling — physically, spiritually, emotionally." What aches and pains, and matters physical-spiritual-emotional — will you focus on next?

LK: What I'm working on right now is a collaboration with Harlan Coben, who is a wonderful writer of thrillers. We are in the middle of a screenplay of his new book, which is on the best seller list now. It's called, *Stay Close*. It's a very dark thriller, sort-of a Hitchcockian thriller. Like "Body Heat" and some other things I've done, all these movies are really about the kind of things that people are willing to do in order to balance their desire with their conscience. And our desires are very powerful. And sometimes lead us into quite extreme behavior.

SS: You have had the privilege of directing so many greats over the years, among them Whitney Houston (*The Bodyguard*), who just passed —

LK: A terrible tragedy. Unfortunately, she had so many people around her and no one seemed able to help her. It was not a surprise. This was a long term problem. When we did *The Bodyguard*, she was young and fresh and monumentally talented. The kind of thing that comes along once in a generation. You can't believe what you are hearing. She was very humble and sweet about the acting. And Kevin Costner was very good with her, very nurturing of her during the making of that film. Of course, she is great in the movie. Amazing. It was shocking and terrible to watch her go through what she did.

SS: In your career as a screenwriter and director, do you have a favorite project?

LK: It sounds like a cliché, but the truth is that you give so much of your life to everyone of these projects. And generally when you write and direct them, it could be a year-and-a half, two years of your life. You feel as you do about your children — I have two sons; I don't have a favorite son. You really like them, and you're just devoted to them.

SS: Your sons (Jake and Jon Kasdan) are also filmmakers and quite successful at that. What advice did you give them when they first got started?

LK: They grew up on our set, and they liked it. We never really encouraged them to go into this business. We did not discourage them. They were endlessly patient with being on the set; they wanted to be on the set. And if you've ever visited a set, you know that after about five minutes, it's a really boring place to be if you're not working — but they were never bored. They always talked to everyone — all the cast, to all the crew, since the time they were really toddlers. And they saw, I think, that I was very happy doing this work, and that probably influenced them enormously in terms of choosing it themselves.

SS: What advice would you give to aspiring filmmakers today?

LK: It's actually not so different than the advice Carmen gives to these people looking for the dog, which is that "You must not give up."

I heard a wonderful piece of advice when I was trying to do it, from Frank Pierson, who is a great director and writer, with his screenplays *Cool Hand Luke* and *Dog Day Afternoon*. I struggled for many years before I sold my first screenplay and I read a quote from him; he said, "The only people doing it are the ones that didn't quit."

Images: Top, Lawrence Kasdan (courtesy San Francisco Film Society); below, Diane Keaton in Darling Companion.

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