

Interview: Lisa Cholodenko Explains Why ‘The Kids Are All Right’

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CHICAGO – Lisa Cholodenko’s “The Kids Are All Right” is a daring, masterful dramedy about the new modern American family. Annette Bening and Julianne Moore play Nic and Jules, a pair of lesbian mothers who have raised two beautiful children in Joni (Mia Wasikowska) and Laser (Josh Hutcherson).

The action of the piece kicks off when the young man of the family pressures his older sister into tracking down their birth father (Mark Ruffalo), the sperm donor that she can now contact due to turning eighteen. What happens to this unusual family from there is never predictable, always genuine, and completely engrossing. Writer/director Lisa Cholodenko recently sat down with HollywoodChicago.com to discuss the process behind the film. And how it was conceived.

When confronted with the pull-quote that advertises the film as being about the “new modern American family,” Cholodenko says, “I think that it’s a template for a new modern American family, which is to say that it looks different than a heterosexual “two kids, two cars, white suburbia.” I think we’ve been in this mash-up of new faces of the American family for a while. But I do think that the intention behind the film was: “All right, let’s take the old template; let’s do the Leave It To Beaver vibe and throw these lesbians in it and see what THAT looks like.” That’s MY mash-up. It’s going to be hard to argue with that. I’m proud that we did that in a way that feels organic and didn’t feel like an experiemental film, super-contrived, or arch. We figured out these characters in a way that’s organic to who they are.”



Lisa Cholodenko, The Kids Are All Right

Photo credit: Focus Features

There are elements of the life of Nic and Jules and the plot of “The Kids Are All Right” that are certainly germane to the fact that they’re a homosexual couple but the film also speaks to heterosexual marriage as well. As Cholodenko says, “...it was very important to us to kind of reach beyond the things that are particular to them as lesbians and go into the things that make them moms, partners, lovers, and all the things that go into complications of a long-term relationship. We were really dilligent about keeping it focused on that and digging deeper for

those things and keeping identity politics out of it.”



Lisa Cholodenko, The Kids Are All Right

Photo credit: Focus Features

“The Kids Are All Right” could have easily become a “message movie,” or an overtly political one but Cholodenko focused on character from the very beginning. “It starts at the level of the script,” says Cholodenko. “Does this feel fresh or does this feel canned? Are these things that they’re expressing interesting enough to warrant an audience’s attention? Is there enough change in these characters?” There’s a whole host of things that, over a period of time, I continually ask myself. Then there’s the thing of casting, which I think is huge. With Mia Wasikowska, she’s such a gem and a singular spirit that she brings something to it that’s singular. With another actor, it could have been played in a way that felt cliched. Then there’s the ensemble. And then there’s the direction. If I see it going one way and it feels flat...”What’s underneath that? OK, you’re shy. What’s underneath that?” Digging and digging and digging. Things end up feeling cliched because they’re on a layer that’s surface.”

Digging beneath the cliché is a tough assignment for a cast but Cholodenko assembled a very talented one, even writing the role of Jules with Moore in mind. “We didn’t write initially for Annette,” says Cholodenko. “But once I realized that she was the only one I wanted to do it, we did do a pass which was explicitly for Annette. That ended up getting revised a bit by virtue of meetings I had with her and comparisons to other drafts. It was fun. It was fun to imagine things coming out of her mouth. Who is Annette Bening? What does she do great? How would this sound coming out of her mouth?” It’s one of those sort of ephemeral things but once you can picture somebody, you can tweak things to tailor it for them.”



Lisa Cholodenko, The Kids Are All Right

Photo credit: Focus Features

Josh Hutcherson was the most unknown member of this all-star team of acting and Cholodenko admits to having a different idea for the character when she wrote the film — “More of a Michael Cera type, maybe not as gawky. Then I thought THAT’S the type of guy you would expect to find in an indie film. When [Josh] came in and you could tell he had just been to the gym and he had this stocky little body and he seemed really boyish — like a little dude. You know what, that’s exactly who this family needs. A dude. Not a boy who’s super-sensitive and has been kind of feminized. That’s not the right tip. He felt like a counterpoint that was really good. And he read the scenes and they were really funny.”

Just before Sundance, when her producers and manager realized the potential hit they had on their hands, Cholodenko was asked to quicken the languid pace she had used in “High Art,” “Laurel Canyon,” and, apparently, the first cut of “The Kids Are All Right.”

“I was kind of going at a leisurely pace because I didn’t know what was going on with distribution,” says Cholodenko. “I wasn’t of the head that we would rush and get to Sundance. It didn’t seem like what this film was about. I had my own producers and manager/sales rep come in and everybody looked at it and thought it was going to be great and that we needed to make it pop. I thought I could take the band-aid off slowly or go in there and hack, hack, hack. I’ve never done that before, so I’m just going to be ruthless.”

As for what’s gone — “It’s really just pieces of scenes and where we get in and out. It had less to do with content and more with pacing. It’s a character film and there’s still some long stuff but I think it has a better pace.”

In closing, Lisa Cholodenko expresses the difficulty of making a film like “The Kids Are All Right” when asked if she has any advice for upcoming writers. She says, “If you’re attracted to ensemble films, don’t try that as your first outing. Stick with a hero character. It’s much easier to write one very defined protagonist. These kinds of films are complicated to find the structure that makes them feel balanced.”

Check out the balance in “The Kids Are All Right” when it opens tomorrow, July 9th, 2010.

‘The Kids Are All Right’ stars Julianne Moore, Annette Bening, Mark Ruffalo, Mia Wasikowska, and Josh Hutcherson. It was written and directed by Lisa Cholodenko. It opens on July 9th, 2010. It is rated R.



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