

## Interview: Writer/Director Jennifer Westfeldt Has ‘Friends with Kids’

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CHICAGO – Jennifer Westfeldt created a distinct movie character with her first film in 2001, writing and starring in “Kissing Jessica Stein.” She now makes her directorial debut, guiding an ensemble cast that includes Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, Jon Hamm, Adam Scott and herself in “Friends with Kids.”

Westfeldt came out of nowhere, when she and her writing partner Heather Juergensen adapted a bunch of comedy sketches into the screenplay for “Kissing Jessica Stein” (2001). The quirky, indecisive and very funny title character brought Westfeldt some instant notoriety, which she parlayed into some prominent television roles (“24”), a Tony nominated turn on the Broadway musical stage (“Wonderful Town”) and another self-penned film (“Ira & Abby” in 2006).



Adam Scott (Jason) and Jennifer Westfeldt (Julie) in “Friends with Kids”  
*Photo credit: Jojo Whilden for Roadside Attractions*

She called in some favors in shooting her new film “Friends with Kids.” Four of the stars of last year’s smash “Bridemaids” – Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, Chris O’Dowd and Westfeldt’s longtime partner Jon Hamm – joined Megan Fox (“Transformers”), Adam Scott (TV’s “Parks and Recreation”) and Edward Burns (“She’s the One”) in a killer ensemble cast. The contemporary comedy about a couple of friends – played by Westfeldt and Scott – having a baby together without partnership is Westfeldt’s director debut.

With the themes of post-millennial child nurturing and relationships associated with having kids, Westfeldt reflects on the many implications of parenthood. She talked to a roundtable of reporters last week in Chicago regarding her new film, including HollywoodChicago.com.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In the film there are some pretty harsh assessments that come out of the evolutionary nature of marriage relationships, especially when kids are thrown in. How has our generation changed the nature of marriage with children, in your observation?

**Jennifer Westfeldt:** I hope it’s not just harsh, I want the film to be relatable, and I think life is filled with highs and lows, and everything in between. The goal was to show through these characters different perspectives and different versions of how people deal with this profound life change, because having children is a game changer, and a lifelong one.

From what I observed, people handle it in different ways, and I think every relationship is a little bit different. I was interested in exploring the ways in which the child transition changes the the friendships and the romantic relationships, and that was the jumping off point for the story.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In regards to your relationship with Adam Scott in the film, do you really think it’s possible for platonic friends to have a child together, the ‘Harry Met Sally’ ideal of ‘just friends’? Can you expound a bit on that idea, which is the basis for the film?

**Westfeldt:** Well, it’s not autobiographical, none of the characters are based on anybody in my life in particular. I think we’re in a time where there are many alternative family structures out there, and I think the important foundation of having a child is love and commitment. That can take a lot of forms, and the definition of family is different for everybody.

In this film, I wanted to explore that the group of friends in the film are family to each other. Both Julie and Jason don’t have the strongest relationship to their parents, so their main family is their friend group. I’ve seen a lot of that in my life, because everyone is so scattered now.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was it like to direct for the first time, especially since you both wrote the script and was the lead actress?

**Westfeldt:** I did not intend to direct the film. It wasn’t in the plans. For a long time we were sold on Jake Kasdan to direct, and I was thrilled that he wanted it. He was in post-production with “Bad Teacher,” and didn’t know when he would be finished. With an independent film, there is only a short window when the stars align and you get the cast you want.

When that happened, it was the dead of winter last year, the worst winter in New York City in 40 years, and Jake wasn’t finished with “Bad Teacher.” The executive producer and Jon [Hamm] encouraged me to direct it myself, and it was the only way to get the film done and not lose the cast. Given that, I decided to do it, but with tremendous support from our production partners.



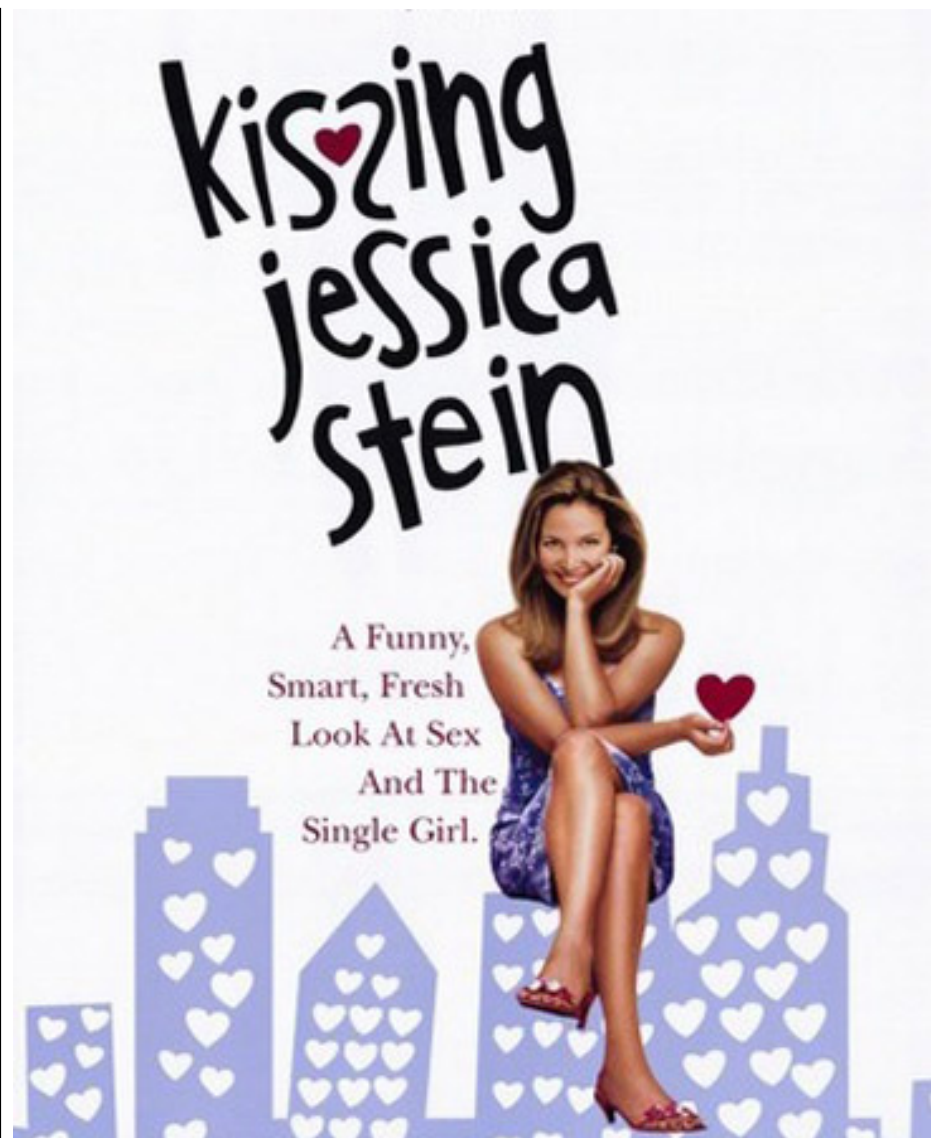
**HollywoodChicago.com:** Do you think this film is a rebuttal to the famous ‘it takes a village’ to have children, or just an alternative?

**Westfeldt:** It’s a particular story about a particular group at various points in their lives, and I really wanted to show the different things I observed in terms of how people transition to parenthood through the lens of these different couples. Plus the ripple effect through this friend group, when this alternative arrangement is chosen by these two singles, when they think they can beat the system and still have it all.

Also with Megan Fox’s character, she represents freedom, because she knows what she wants and knows what she doesn’t want. She doesn’t want kids and she’s great with that. Her character represents that side of it, and threatens the others in the film who are feeling a lack of freedom. The Edward Burns character is the only one who is 100% non-conflicted about being a parent, he is really happy with that identity. It’s just about these particular people, and I hope the audience can find one of those characters in which to identify.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you initially outline these character types or did they develop organically?





Westfeldt in 'Kissing Jessica Stein'  
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

**Westfeldt:** Both, honestly. I only write a movie once every five years or so, I don't know if I have specific process. [laughs] I do know in the three films they are somewhat subversive rom-coms, and all ask the question 'why can't we just change the rules?' In this film it has to do with having children. I think because I'm an actor first, I think about for each character, what arc would make sense to me and what doesn't, in a variety of experiences.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In wearing the directing hat for the first time, what was different about this film in comparison to the other two?

**Westfeldt:** I was heavily involved creatively in the production of the other films, I was to watching dailies and that sort of thing. But on this one, I wasn't used to also taking seven conference calls, doing the shot list, watching the weather and not getting any moments to prepare as an actor. It was more that I could have ever imagined. It's an endless job, but at the same time I was excited about the challenge. You should try everything once, right?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you wrote the script and was also on set directing, did you allow much improvisation, given the high comedic status of many of the actors in your cast?

**Westfeldt:** I was so insanely grateful for the cast wanting to do this, because on an independent film set it wasn't very glamorous. They were there because they wanted to be there, so that was great. Ad libbing was hard on the schedule, especially in the group scenes. It was easier to allow people to ad lib in two person scenes, only because there was a little more flexibility. I wish we could have filmed in twice as many days and allowed endless ad libbing. I would have loved to do that. We just didn't have the time. Maybe ten percent of the film was ad libbed.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you and Jon Hamm were together before the Mad Man phenomenon hit, what was the oddest thing that you observed about his sudden fame and do you think the world views him differently than you do?

**Westfeldt:** Sure, definitely. [laughs] Part of the amazing success of Mad Men is the element of fantasy about it, his character in particular. What goes along with that character is the sex symbol status. If we compare the successes we had in our careers, I remember when people were responding to 'Kissing Jessica Stein,' the type of recognition I would get is people coming up and saying, 'I was at the wedding and we sat at table nine together.' It would take them ten minutes to realize that they had seen me in a movie and we weren't friends. When people see Jon, they faint or scream or cry. [laughs] We couldn't be more opposite on the way people perceive us based on the work we do.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you took on this subject, and you personally don't have kids, do you feel any pressure to make a decision about having children in your own life?

**Westfeldt:** I feel we like kids, and we have a lot of kids in our life. We might choose to do it, there are a lot of ways to have a family in this world, but we may not, we've been pretty happy as we are and if we decide to take that on I'm sure we'll find a way to do it.

*"Friends with Kids" opens everywhere March 9th. Featuring Jennifer Westfeldt, Jon Hamm, Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, Megan Fox, Chris O'Dowd, Adam Scott and Edward Burns. Written and directed by Jennifer Westfeldt. Rated "R"*

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