

## Interview: Harry Lennix on Digital Release of ‘Mr. Sophistication’

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CHICAGO – One of the more unique independent films that worked the festival circuit in 2012 and ’13 was the drama “Mr. Sophistication.” The main character was Ron Waters, a comedian described as “Richard Pryor’s protégé.” Actor Harry Lennix took on the character, breathing in both the drama of the show business story and the particular style of stand-up.

The film was recently released in downloadable and DVD formats. While on that festival circuit, Harry Lennix and the production crew – writer/director Danny Green and producers Jon E. Edwards and Albena Dodeva – stopped by Chicago, and HollywoodChicago.com spoke to them about the film.



**Actor Harry Lennix, Portrays Ron Waters in “Mr. Sophistication”**



Harry Lennix and Robert Patrick in ‘Mr. Sophistication’  
*Photo credit: Mr. Smoothie Company*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You were born in Chicago and have the Chicago influence in the story of Ron Waters. How important was it to give Ron a midwestern urban feel for his exile?

**Harry Lennix:** I hadn’t thought of it in terms of an exile, but I like that a lot. Many times when you want to reveal a character in exile, the common approach is to make him destitute, living in a box or something. Ron Waters comes back to a cocoon that is run by his wife, and they’re doing okay.

Typical of an artist, and on the cutting edge that Ron is, he doesn’t want to be comfortable. He doesn’t want to be tucked away in his little nest, but wants to get out there again. He must challenge himself, and the status quo in his field. He sees himself as an agitator that likes to mix it up a little.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are an actor, not a stand-up comedian. What preparation for the stand-up scenes, besides actually doing it, became the best way for you to prepare to take it on?

**Lennix:** There is an old story about the actor Gary Cooper. Somebody asked him what is his trick for acting. He said, ‘Learn your lines.’ It sounds simple and absurd, but it isn’t. If you have complete liberty with knowing what it is you’re suppose to be saying, you can create the illusion more easily that you’re just coming up with it.

This was reinforced with me when I worked with Anthony Hopkins in ‘Titus.’ He had a bunch of colored pencils, and would mark every time he ran a line. And his goal number is 250 times. That gives him complete liberty and mastery over what he is going to say, and then do.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You did that then, with those comedy routines?

**Lennix:** I would exhaustively run those routines, to anybody who would listen – my wife and my friends – ‘hey, let me try out this material!’ [laughs] Danny Green wrote all of the routines, having done some time as a stand-up comedian. He came up with it, and I thought a lot of it was really compelling. It was a different way of looking at things.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you try out the material on stage for an unsuspecting audience?

**Lennix:** Yes. When we were trying to raise funds, we tape the routines in front of a live audience we’d bring in, but they’d never heard the material before. I didn’t go to ‘The Laugh Factory’ or anything, but maybe that’s next.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** According to background on the film, this is a partial nod to another midwestern born comedian, Richard Pryor. In your research of Ron Waters, what do you think was most misunderstood about Richard Pryor?

**Lennix:** I don’t think anything about Richard Pryor was misunderstood, because he lived his life in real time. You knew what was going on in his life, because he talked about it on stage. He was fearless. I remember him in the film, ‘Jo-Jo Dancer, Your Life is Calling,’ and was stunned with his honesty in it. That is what drove his comic genius, the fact that he doesn’t have any barriers. That is where the Ron Waters parallel lies, he doesn’t have barriers. He is compelled to tell the truth on stage.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The act that Ron Waters does is in the Pryor style, the dissection of real life and making the truth an observation for comedy. Within your performance, what do you think the hardest thing was for Ron Waters to express about himself either on-stage as a performer or in his life?

**Lennix:** He has bad self-esteem, which is why he acts out against himself. Whatever the veneer he has on, in reality he’s quite vulnerable. He also stopped maturing at a certain point, especially when he found safe harbor with his wife. The moment he starts working again and is confronted with the lifestyle, he can’t handle it.

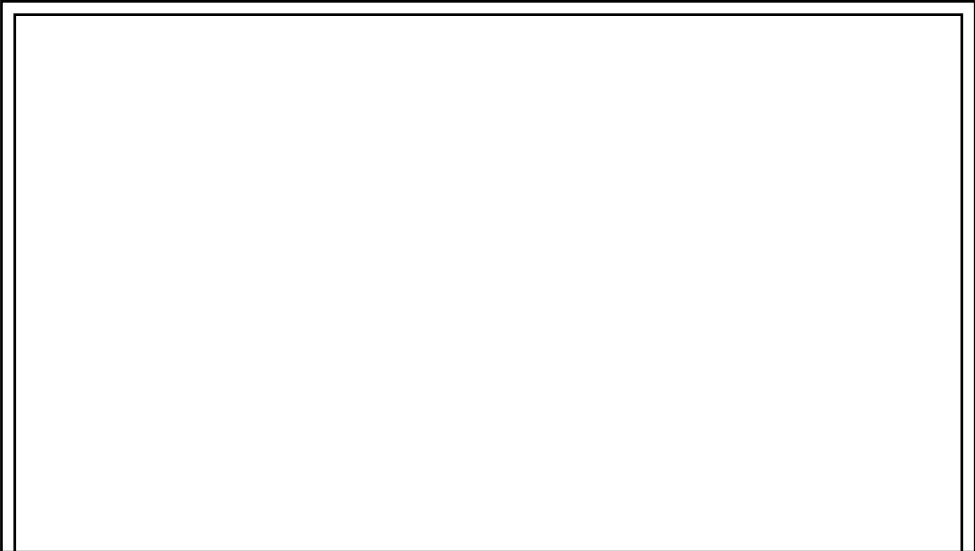
**HollywoodChicago.com:** Celebrity relationships are examined fairly closely in the Waters story. Given your experience and observation in the celebrity sphere beyond just the acting work, is there a case that marriage is virtually impossible at the level that Ron Waters or any major star is at?

**Lennix:** I don’t think so, I can point to several successful marriages among those people who have gone on to do great things. Marriage is difficult anyway in this age. Women have more affairs now because they’re in the workplace, with the same temptations as men. Celebrity doesn’t help a marriage, of course, it tends to intensify and magnify the same problems other people deal with, and then there is the lens of outside forces constantly in your business.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was this the first making love scene that you ever filmed? What kind of challenges are apparent when trying to do a carnal act in from of directors and technicians?

**Lennix:** It wasn’t the first love scene, but certainly the most intense. There is nothing even remotely erotic about it. I could easily tell my wife there was nothing sexy about it at all. It made me really respect the actors in pornography. [laughs] How do they do that?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There is the liberal use of the n-word in your stand-up act in the film. The word has proven the power to ruin careers, as well as create them in art. What is your opinion about the use of the word, both in the African American culture and its ability to start a fire if said by the wrong person?







Harry Lennix in Chicago for 'Mr. Sophistication'

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Lennix:** I think it should be a politically and culturally charged word. The very etymology of the word is designed to create distance and objectify. Ron Waters, and other comedians, use it too liberally. But in the case of Ron, he wants people on edge when they're watching him.

I was just at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles a few weeks ago, and a young guy came on stage, and every other word was the n-word. But I didn't feel he had context, or had been called that word negatively, because he's in a different generation. While I completely don't believe in a 'post-racial society' – it doesn't exist – I'm glad it's a delicate and uncomfortable word. I use it myself, sparingly, but only in a certain context.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are currently in a big hit TV show, 'The Blacklist.' What is the origin with your involvement with the series, was it an audition or did the producers ask you in?

**Lennix:** I went in to a meeting with the writer and creator, Jon Bokenkamp, about a year ago. I read a page of dialogue to give them a feeling as to what was happening in character, and then later my manager called and told me they wanted to use me in the pilot. I was very enthused because it was the best pilot I'd read that season, in my opinion, and it fit into my 'wheelhouse.'

The studio got behind it immediately, and they gave us the budget we'd need to make it a success that it has proven to be in the early stage. We hope to continue that trend. What impresses me is that we've done it in a quiet way, very capably and confidently, without drawing a lot of attention to us. I'm proud to be a part of it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you've played such a wide variety of roles, which felt closest to who you actually are, given your life and background, either on stage or screen?

**Lennix:** Probably Walter Lee Younger from 'Raisin in the Sun.' I did that role in 2000 at the Goodman Theater, with Irma P. Hall as my mother. It was an all-star Chicago cast, with playwright Lorraine Hansberry's family in presence. There is something about that play that is so specific to Chicago, yet not in its familiar version – Sidney Poitier is brilliant in the role but he's not from here. The family lives in the ghetto of the city, and there is all sort of indication in the language that Walter Lee is a street brother and hustler type of guy. I knew that guy, he was from my neighborhood, and I was very proud of my interpretation of his character.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In doing research for this interview, an interesting observation kept emerging – your similarities to Barack Obama in manner and style. What do you think is similar between he and you, and how did you feel about his historic election?

**Lennix:** I don't see the similarities that other people see. [laughs] I guess I can see it in the cadence of our speech, but he got a lot of that from me. We were close friends for years, when he lived in Chicago. Now he's from Hawaii, but I think he got that 'well spoken south side Chicago' style from me. I know it sounds like I'm boasting about it, but I'm not.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What kind of cadence did he have when you first met him?

**Lennix:** I would describe it, frankly, as a little more white. He didn't grow up around black people, and not even on the mainland of the United States.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So where did you first encounter him?

**Lennix:** I met him through some friends of mine, and he was walking out of a Walgreens and I was walking in. People had been telling him that we looked alike, and back then I was skinny like he was. I knew him before he was even in politics. I was satisfied that the people who voted for him were happy, and had some hope. I never believed that it was the panacea that it was given credit for, and I find little in his administration that distinguishes it from the previous administration.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I ask this question a lot. When was the first time in your career that you turned around and thought to yourself, ‘how the hell did I get here?’

**Lennix:** It was when I booked ‘The Five Heartbeats.’ I was living in L.A. in a studio apartment. I got a phone call that I’d be doing the film, and here are the people in it, and I was one of The Five Heartbeats musical group. I remember thinking, ‘Wow! Okay!’ I was 25 years old, and it was a good feeling.

I was always taken with the poem ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling. Because there is a line that says, ‘If you can dream, and not make dreams your master. If you can think, and not make thoughts your aim. If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two imposters just the same...’ I’ve always loved that, because I believe maintaining an equilibrium is very important in this business. I try not to swing wildly either way. So there are years I don’t work, other years when I can’t stop working.



**Director Danny Green, Producers Jon E. Edwards and Albena Dodeva of “Mr. Sophistication”**



Danny Green Directs Harry Lennix and Tatum O'Neal in ‘Mr. Sophistication’  
Photo credit: Mr. Smoothie Company

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Danny, there was some Chicago roots in the film, but all I saw were exteriors. What did you want to say about the character of Ron Waters by choosing his exile in Chicago?

**Danny Green:** We wanted to tie it into Harry Lennix, because he’s from here, and wanted to make some kind of connection between where Harry comes from and Ron Waters, which is Harry’s alter ego in the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So all around the backdrop of the film, is the sense that Ron Waters is a post modern Richard Pryor-type comedian. What does the film owe to Pryor?

**Green:** What it owes to Pryor is the classic type of social commentary that was his style, rather than one liners. Pryor was a storyteller, and we wanted to do that, have Ron tell stories that were hitting points along the way – stories that you laugh at, but part of one larger picture.

**Jon E. Edwards:** When we were putting together concepts for the film, the character of Ron Waters needed some kind of past and history. In our heads, Ron was a protégé of Pryor. We had to develop that so the character could have a story.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** For the producers, this is an independent film made what I presume was a tight budget. What tricks did you use to make the film feel as broad and expansive as it did, despite the budget?

**Albena Dodeva:** [Laughs] Every trick we could find.

**Edwards:** It’s mostly connections. We have a wide range of connections in most cities, we’ve been doing this since we were kids. It’s about



the relationships, and we got a lot of love. People believed in us and allow us a wide range.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This film also deals with the complexity of so-called celebrity relationships. Danny, how did you want Ron Waters to remain sympathetic despite his obvious problems with fidelity, and what were you trying to say about the nature of relationships with celebrities?

**Green:** I wanted Ron's brilliance, charisma and charm to carry him through – those are his positive qualities – but he also has these glitches in which he carries on with a couple women at the same time and is not honest about it. I wanted to explore his nature in relationships, as he was doing all these great things, moving the world with his passion. If an outside force tries to marginalize that, do they also destroy the positive man or woman?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The stand-up circuit is staging a revival, especially in Chicago. What fascinated you all about the lifestyle and work ethic of stand up comedians, and where do you think the best work is coming from recently?

**Green:** It trips me out to see people get up on stage and make other people laugh, that's rare. It's easy to be funny in more intimate settings, but to get up on stage and reveal a part of yourself is challenging on any level. An example of the best stuff was recently in Los Angeles, when we went to the Comedy Store. They had comedian after comedian, but there was an entire line-up that had us in constant laughter.



Producer Albena Dodeva On Set for 'Mr. Sophistication'  
Photo credit: Mr. Smoothie Company

**Dodeva:** I'd never laughed like that my entire life. They were great.

**Green:** I'm not saying it's even just L.A. I think the great comedy is coming from the clubs again, pockets of comedy happening all over the world. That's where the real comedy scene is happening.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There is a fluid use of the n-word in the film, again made prominent by a character patterned after Richard Pryor, who also threw the word back into the culture's face. Given the complex nature in the use of the word today, why did you want Ron Waters to make it part of his on-stage routines?

**Green:** Because it just is, it's a part of it. Personally, the taboo of it isn't taboo to me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It does go back to the fact, though, that not all could get away with it, like how it changed Michael Richard's career when he said it.

**Green:** Yep, he said it and ruined his career. It wasn't a joke though, he was going off on a rant, which is different. Whites guys, other races, yes, it's more difficult. But this is part of Ron's character.

**Edwardz:** This character is not thinking about what other people think of the word.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What are the biggest challenges of producers, when presented a script with so many roles, sets and costume changes? How do you work in tandem with the director to reel it all in?

**Dodeva:** First, we had an amazing crew, production designer and everything. We were surrounded by great people. But there are a lot of difficulties, for example on day four, one of our trucks which had our wardrobe and make-up stuff just disappeared. We got a call from our unit production manager, and she asked me if I was sitting down, which is never good news. We scrambled, and got everything back in place in 48 hours. This is how good the crew was.

**Edwards:** When it's out of the system that is supported by a studio, there is no office to call when something like that happens.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Danny, besides Richard Pryor, which comedians influenced the piece and gave Ron his voice, and why do you admire what they did in the comedic landscape?

**Green:** Lenny Bruce was the other big influence, we had to tap into that, that brand of social commentary. Dick Gregory is fantastic as well. We like that these guys are smart and topical, and topical immediately. Whatever happens with them, it's about now. I listened to Dick

Gregory’s tapes, and he makes even the most mundane subjects part of the story, and always funny.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When you formulated your own visual style, what directors influenced you, and what films did you watch to get a sense of how your film would flow in the way it looked?

**Green:** ‘Butterfield 8,’ lots of Federico Fellini films, and I did watch Bob Fosse’s ‘Lenny.’ I used some off-angle close-ups from there, and also when I was shooting in the clubs, some of the starkness. That was the visual, we wanted the film to look like a classic movie. We were careful not to put it in a time or place, to give it a sophistication that was timeless.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, I’d like each of you to pitch ‘Mr. Sophistication’ in one sentence...

**Green:** ‘Mr. Sophistication’ is a fairy tale about love in the modern world.

**Dodeva:** ‘Mr. Sophistication’ helps himself out by using the drama of life.

**Edwards:** Sometimes a baller has to ball – hopefully we captured that, and we shot it.

*“Mr Sophistication” is available for download or DVD formats by [clicking here](#). [18] Featuring Harry Lennix, Tatum O’Neal, Robert Patrick, Gina Torres and Bruce McGill. Written and directed by Danny Green. Not Rated. For more information regarding the film, click on [MrSophisticationMovie.com](#). [19]*



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