

## Interview: Director Lorene Scafaria Presents ‘The Meddler’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 27, 2016 - 12:37pm

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CHICAGO – The combining of icon Susan Sarandon and a “smother mother” from New Jersey is unbeatable, especially under the sure hand of writer/director Lorene Scafaria. The distinctive voice that brought us “Seeking a Friend for the End of the World,” now is taking on mother/daughter relationships in “The Meddler.”

Lorene Scafaria is originally from New Jersey, and the film is somewhat autobiographical. Like Sarandon in the film, Scafaria’s mother moved to Los Angeles after her husband passed away, to be “closer” to her daughter. Prior to all that, Scafaria had graduated from Montclair State in New Jersey, and afterward moved to New York City to write plays.

After acting and writing in NYC, she made the West Coast move in the mid-2000s and landed the screen adaptation of “Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist.” In 2012, her original screenplay “Seeking a Friend for the End of the World” was released, and marked her directorial debut. She continued to write, act and direct for film and television as her second film, “The Meddler,” was produced.



Susan Sarandon and J.K. Simmons in ‘The Meddler’

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics*

HollywoodChicago.com caught up to Lorene Scafaria while she was promoting the film this week. She spoke of the autobiography of “The Meddler,” her path to the director’s chair and the meaning of the word “Fempire.”

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Given Susan Sarandon’s status as a film and acting icon, what do we see from her, in your opinion, that we haven’t seen in any of her other performances?

**Lorene Scafaria:** She’s so human in this film. She’s obviously so human in real life, which is why I thought she’d be right for the role. She is

generous, warm and maternal – kind of a ‘Super Marnie’ [Sarandon’s Mom name in the film], what my Mom and the character of Marnie wishes they could be.

I don’t think we’ve seen her in anything like this before. We haven’t seen her in a lead role in a long time, and carrying a film, so that was a big treat for me. She portrays a true character, and disappears into it, in a way that the audience hadn’t seen before. Susan in real life is very cool and very sexy, so to have her play ‘everybody’s Mom’ was really fun.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Obviously everyone is going to ask if this was your mother, but how did you want to make sure it was a balancing act to make Marnie a sympathetic character?

**Scafaria:** It was an exercise in empathy for me. [laughs] I really wanted to tell my mother’s side of the story, I didn’t want to break it up into the daughter’s side or my side. I wanted to stay with Marnie and really see what she was doing when her daughter wasn’t calling her back. How much of her life is in loneliness and based on the situation she is in, and how she and her daughter are both grieving in really different ways.

And yes, it’s based on my own mother, who moved from New Jersey to Los Angeles when my Dad passed away, who got an iPhone and started calling me a lot. [laughs] I started writing the script right away, but I didn’t know how personal it was going to get.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Beyond the inspiration for the character, how else did your Mom help in regard to getting the film completed?

**Scafaria:** When I pitched the film, I actually filmed the first five minutes with my actual mother – who is not an actress – to show potential financiers, to show them that we could do it for less money than what seemed like was on paper, because of the Beyoncé song and the Apple store and all of that.

Then I showed the script to Susan, she thought it was everything, and she said she had to play the character. When we started filming, Susan wore my mother’s blouses carried her purse, and nailed the Jersey accent.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What I found most compelling about Marnie’s new life was the men that came around here. Given that Susan Sarandon is a very beautiful woman, what does Marnie not know about her looks that makes her uncomfortable within them?

**Scafaria:** She’s not one of those people who dresses flashy, and it’s not about body-conscious clothes or jewelry. She certainly doesn’t realize how beautiful she is, and she hasn’t been trying to entice anybody for a long time – she was married to someone for a long time, she wasn’t exactly dressing up every day. She’s also not used to the attention, and it was suddenly on her, and that was very intimidating. When my mother was first asked to ‘lunch,’ it actually sounded threatening to her. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are giving Rose Byrne another step in her acting evolution. What do you think Byrne understood about the role that made her the obvious choice for Lori, because she is playing a version of you?

**Scafaria:** We talked a lot about it, because she doesn’t have a mother like Marnie, and she had never suffered a profound loss like her character. Those were the two things I needed to tell her about...I would email her horrible things, to give her post traumatic stress. [laughs]

She and Susan had great chemistry together, but beyond that I feel that Rose is a gifted actor, one of those rare unicorns who can move from comedy to drama in one scene. There is just so much she can do behind her eyes, with just a look. That became my favorite stuff. She’s playing off of Susan, but she did it in a real and grounded way.



Susan Sarandon and Rose Byrne in ‘The Meddler’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

**HollywoodChicago.com:** She was very funny as well in the film, ‘Spy’...

**Scafaria:** Oh my gawd, that’s my mother’s other favorite movie. [laughs] Let’s say second favorite, now.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In your screenplay, Marnie’s ‘meddling’ is through the filter of her inability to face her own losses. What type of emotions did you think about in building the elements of the meddler inside Marnie?

**Scafaria:** When I think about grief, and what my mother and I went through, it felt like [echoing the stages of mourning] that I was in anger and depression, and she was somehow in denial and acceptance, all at the same time. She was happily walking around in a fog, but clearly grateful about the life that she had and the person she was with – so optimistic and happy, but with that air of sadness underneath.

Susan has said about the character, which I love, that Marnie has a very ‘deep surface.’ That’s how she keeps her guard up, and keeps her moving forward. I love my mother’s child-like nature, that she was funny and fun. That’s why my childhood was so much fun, and why I was able to tell this story.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** And of course, she moved from Jersey to be near you...

**Scafaria:** I do think moving 3000 miles away was really brave, and to navigate through a new city like Los Angeles was very impressive. It was a whole new culture – she can’t order coffee here without someone calling her out. [laughs] The role required someone like Susan, someone who could play all those emotions all at once, and be layered. The sadness was there all the time, but with that smile on her face. It was about survival instincts, maternal instincts and all that ‘Mom stuff.’

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you sit down with your real Mom when she moved to Los Angeles, to establish barriers?

**Scafaria:** No, we learned nothing. [laughs] The fictional characters in the movie are further along than we are. Honestly, in writing the script and sharing it with her, we did get something out of it. She appreciated that I was authentic about how mean I can be, like the moment in the movie where Lori asked Marnie to stay over, but to also give her a ride to the airport the next morning. That cracked my Mom up.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your use of pop music to sweeten your images is expressly creative. When writing a script, do you get inspired by a song so much, that eventually ends up in the film?

**Scafaria:** Some of the songs were in the script, like the Beyoncé song that Marnie plays on a loop. Diane Warren [the composer] and Beyoncé were really generous, we didn’t think we could afford it. Of course Frank Sinatra and Dolly Parton were in the script, and even Blues Traveler – I still can’t believe they participated.

During the ‘egg scene’ in the film, I had another song in my head for it, but it wasn’t right. After putting it together, I eventually placed Herb Alpert’s ‘Zorba the Greek.’ We had to change our tune, once I saw how Susan ate the egg. I sent the footage to Herb Alpert, and he said ‘absolutely.’

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your original screenplays both feature the longing of lost love. Do you think human beings desire that one connection in their lives, or are we conditioned through societal structure to accept that coupling as a goal?



Director Lorene Scafaria in Chicago  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Scafaria:** I think men look back, and women look forward. We look at things differently, men are more nostalgic in a way, and probably still think about the girl they first kissed. Men are just more inclined to live in the past, and women are more inclined toward thinking about what is ahead – who’s going to hook up, get married, have kids – all these giant questions. I don’t think we’re living in the present together. [laughs] That would be the goal.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You started a writing group called ‘The Fempire.’ What deeper meaning, do you believe, can a woman give a story that a man can’t?

**Scafaria:** I don’t know. I’d like to think I have a high emotional intelligence, but I’ve always been interested in behavior and psychology. That’s where I go as an individual. But the difference between men and women storytellers? I don’t know.

Maybe for something like this story, perhaps it benefits from the ‘female gaze,’ and perhaps it helped to see J.K. Simmons character in a certain light, and realizing it was just as important to linger on him looking at her, as she was looking at him. Women, at those moments, like to be watched. Susan actually said that every woman will want to be looked at in that way. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Orson Welles said that a film set was the best train set a person could have. What is your favorite part of the director’s ‘train set’?

**Scafaria:** I love all of it. That is the reason writing is no longer enough for me, I love directing and I love being on set. I love overseeing a group of people who are all experts in their field, because I’m not. [laughs] But I love the big picture stuff.

My father was in the garment business, and he had a sort of factory that he oversaw. He had people who sewed, cutters and pressers, and it wasn’t until I got on the set of ‘Seeking a Friend...’ that I understood that I sort of do what he did, overseeing a group of people who are taking pieces of cloth and making it into a whole. So it’s really fun for me to work on all aspects of filmmaking.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** That’s a really nice tribute to your father, to compare what you do to what he did, and create something that will be lasting.

**Scafaria:** Yes, I like that. My mother is one of those people who are so generous and selfless, she doesn’t think this movie is about her. She thinks it’s my father’s ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In ‘Seeking a Friend for the End of the World,’ what scene in the film best illustrates your own reaction if the end of the world would occur?

**Scafaria:** The absolute end. [laughs] I would probably would be optimistic that something would save us, and be so shocked when it didn’t. I would try to hang on to a positive feeling to the bitter end. I’m the flakey weirdo who would miss the flight, but it wouldn’t be a trope, it would happen to someone like me. I’m a romantic to a fault. I would be the person to get off the plane, and stay with the guy. Sorry, Mom.

*“The Meddler” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on April 29th. Featuring Susan Sarandon, J.K. Simmons, Rose Byrne, Cecily Strong, Michael McKean, Jason Ritter and Lucy Punch. Written and directed by Lorene Scafaria. Rated “PG-13”*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 2:29pm):**

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/26491/interview-director-lorene-scafaria-presents-the-meddler>

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