

Interview: Film Icon Warren Beatty Knows ‘Rules Don’t Apply’

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CHICAGO – When encountering film producer, director, writer and “movie star” Warren Beatty, I entered into an interview that would be truly one of a kind. The spontaneous Mr. Beatty works a talk in a give-and-take Socratic method, searching for the truth underneath the rhetoric, as he did with his new film “Rules Don’t Apply.”

The film is a quasi-biographical profile of the legendary American billionaire Howard Hughes, but don’t mention that to writer/director Beatty (who also portrays Hughes). What he wanted to explore was the truth around Hughes, in the personification of a fictional couple (Alden Ehrenreich and Lily Collins) working for the billionaire. Set in 1958 Hollywood – the same year a young Warren Beatty arrived there – the film highlights the clash between the sexual looseness that existed in the movie business, and the potential seekers that “got off the bus” in tinsel town, still mired in their 1950s puritanism.



Warren Beatty as Howard Hughes in ‘Rules Don’t Apply’

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

It is an interesting topic for Warren Beatty to pursue, given his reputation as someone who enjoyed the fruits of the overall sexual revolution

that was to come later, as he became a major movie star. Born in Richmond, Virginia (as Warren Beaty) he grew up in an academic family with his older sister Shirley MacLaine, and decided to follow her into the movie business after one year of college at Northwestern University. He began his career on television in New York City, where he studied acting under Stella Adler. He was a semi-regular on TV’s “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis” (1959) in his first job in Los Angeles, and made his major film debut in “Splendor in the Grass” (1961), co-starring Natalie Wood and directed by Elia Kazan.

Beatty immediately became a sensation, working in high profile films like “The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone” (1961) with Vivien Leigh, the John Frankenheimer directed “All Fall Down” (1962) and “Promise Her Anything” (1964) with Leslie Caron. It was his work with director Arthur Penn in “Mickey One” – set in Chicago – that led to the next phase of his career, as they partnered again in the classic film “Bonnie and Clyde” (1967). This “New Hollywood” film, with its rule breaking authenticity, helped to usher in the 1970s-era evolution of cinema grit that introduced the new American director – eventually including Beatty himself.

In the 1970s Warren Beatty continued on a path of ground-breaking films, including the Robert Altman directed “McCabe and Mrs. Miller” (1971), the conspiracy-oriented “The Parallax View” (1974) and the 1970s excess-defining “Shampoo” (1975). He made his directorial debut (with Buck Henry) on a remake of a studio-era film called “Heaven Can Wait” (1978). The success of that film set him up for his greatest triumph, as he produced, wrote, directed and starred in “Reds” (1981), portraying American reporter John Reed during the height of the Russian Revolution in 1917. It received 12 Academy Award nominations, and four for Beatty himself (Best Picture, Director, Actor and Original Screenplay). He won the Oscar for Best Director.



Welcome to Hollywood: Warren Beatty in 1961’s ‘Splendor in the Grass’

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

His post “Reds” work was distinctive for many reasons. He appeared next for director Elaine May in the infamous bomb “Ishtar” (1987), but came back strong by directing and starring in “Dick Tracy,” the highest grossing film of 1990. One year later, he met his soon-to-be wife Annette Bening on the set of “Bugsy” (1991), and topped off the decade by producing, writing, directing and starring in the blazing political satire “Bulworth” (1998). Beatty has been politically progressive his whole adult life, working on behalf of the Democrats in the 1960s and on the campaign of George McGovern in 1972.

It was the box office disappointment of “Town and Country” (2001) that began a hiatus for Beatty which lasted until “Rules Don’t Apply.” During that break, he concentrated on raising his four children with Bening, becoming a family man after a previous string of relationships, having been linked at times to Joan Collins, Julie Christie, singer Carly Simon (which earned him a nod as the inspiration for the song “You’re So Vain”), Diane Keaton and Madonna (he makes a brief appearance in her documentary “Madonna: Truth or Dare.”).

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with the freewheelin’ Warren Beatty, for an unforgettable back-and-forth conversation, trying in vain to corral his spectacular career.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was fascinating to you about creating the larger-than-life character of Howard Hughes?

Warren Beatty: My primary interest in this experience was to convey some feeling about when I went to Hollywood in 1958. I keep saying to people that this isn’t a biopic of Howard Hughes, it’s more of a story about two people who are both very religious, and who both happened to come to Hollywood at the same time. The girl was a Baptist from southern Virginia, and the boy was a Methodist from Fresno. They come in at the same time, and work for Howard Hughes.

What interested me about the year of 1958, when I first came to Hollywood, is to take a look at the consequences of American sexual

puritanism. The effects of it, the comical and sometimes sad circumstances of it, that began to change with the first burst of feminism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This led to the liberation of the female, and the subsequent sexual revolution of the 1960s.

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, since you were part of that, did we come out it better as a society, or did the pendulum swing too far? I mean, you certainly did your part to understand the era.

Beatty: I was a Southern Baptist.

HollywoodChicago.com: Were you from a church going family?

Beatty: Not particularly. I went to church on my own, and for me it was an interesting and formative few years of my life. So in the film, I wanted to get at the significance of this unique American sexual puritanism that so often has made us the laughing stock of France and other countries. It’s an important issue, and the advent and promise of feminism is the reward, and I don’t think the pendulum swung too far. We’re facing massive problems in other parts of the world, in dealing with the liberation of the female. With anyone who has daughters, as I do, it changes everything regarding my thoughts on that subject.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you have direct contact with Howard Hughes?

Beatty: I was amused by him at the time, but never met him. But I like to say I met everyone who ever met him, because I heard so many stories, and they were hilarious. When I first went to Hollywood, and my first film was successful, and I became whatever-you-call-it...

HollywoodChicago.com: A movie star, but okay.

Beatty: What came with that was an appropriate amount of paranoia, regarding being followed by tabloids. I was at the Beverly Hills Hotel one day, and I felt I was being followed by someone at the tabloids. I complained at the front desk, and they checked it out. They came to me and said, ‘Mr. Beatty, those guys are not from the tabloids, they are with Mr. Howard Hughes.’

I said, ‘Howard Hughes? You mean the person in the suite next door to me is Howard Hughes?’ They told me that Mr. Hughes has seven suites, and five bungalows. Even then I thought that was grounds for a farce. I always held onto the comedic element of that, and put that into the film. In fact, everything that happens to Howard Hughes comes from stories that I have been told about him. They didn’t happen in sequence in the film.



Lily Collins and Warren Beatty in ‘Rules Don’t Apply’

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, like your other “real person” films, it wasn’t a conventional biography picture?

Beatty: Yes, I’d done ‘Bonnie and Clyde,’ and ‘Bugsy,’ and ‘Reds,’ you change places, times and chronologies. You make composites of people they’ve known, so you wind up creating a fiction no matter what. I’m of the opinion that all history is fiction.

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, it is written by winners, after all.

Beatty: Yes, there were several quotes about history I remember, such as ‘History is Bunk,’ said by Henry Ford. ‘History will be very kind to me, because I intend to write it,’ said by Winston Churchill. And I’ve always liked Napoleon’s quote, ‘History is a set of lies agreed upon.’

HollywoodChicago.com: You were born in Richmond, Virginia, and your mother was Canadian, right?

Beatty: Yes, she was from Nova Scotia.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did your mother and father imbue in you and Shirley that helped both of you get through the rigors of show business and Hollywood?

Beatty: Interesting question. It becomes more interesting as times goes by. [laughs] I don't know how to answer that. They've been gone over 20 years. On big questions, I chicken out, because I don't want to be reductive. What I've found, particularly as I get older, that I get quoted more and more.

HollywoodChicago.com: People are looking for your wisdom.

Beatty: What's interesting about that is how often I am quoted incorrectly. And the most important point can be left out of the quote, because this is the technology that we're living in. It's hard now for anyone to be missing. Privacy, as we used to mislead ourselves that we once had, just doesn't exist now.

To get back to the question, I can't think of anything that wouldn't be reductive, and I don't want to do a disservice to our parents. The nice thing is I can't think of anything negative to say about them. They were positive people.

HollywoodChicago.com: They had to be happy when both of you became movie stars, right?

Beatty: They were happy when we were happy. They were both academics, and their parents were academics. I think they were as pleasantly surprised about our development as Shirley and I were.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were famously political, even working on the George McGovern presidential campaign of 1972. Since you were a Democrat, how did the assassinations of Jack and Bobby Kennedy affect you as a Democrat and a citizen? And how did you collect yourself to start again in politics after those events?

Beatty: As a child, I was always interested in politics in Virginia, and it became something that was always a part of my life. I had the great honor to know Jack Kennedy because he wanted me to portray him in a movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was that 'PT-109'?

Beatty: Yes. I'm not being indiscreet, because Cliff Robertson did a great job, but I didn't want to do it. But in the process, I became friendly with Jack Kennedy, Pierre Salinger [Kennedy's Press Secretary] and Bobby Kennedy. I never got over those assassinations.



Warren Beatty at the 1976 Democratic National Convention

Photo credit: File Photo

HollywoodChicago.com: You were at the 1968 Democratic National Convention here in Chicago, correct [the convention was interrupted by protests against the Vietnam War]?

Beatty: Ooooh yes. [laughs] Were you?

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, I was eight years old at the time, but only 60 miles away in Michigan City. I do a film tour of Chicago, and I always talk about how ‘the whole world was watching’ when we go past the Hilton Chicago on Michigan Avenue.

Beatty: That was the night everyone was getting tear gassed. That included me. I was in Grant Park, across the street from the Hilton, where Hubert Humphrey [1968 Democratic presidential candidate] was staying. I was appropriately and dutifully being tear gassed, and I looked at my watch and it was 10:30pm, and I thought ‘this is awkward, I’m supposed to have a meeting with Hubert Humphrey.’

I went across the street, and went up to the 31st floor, where I was greeted by John Bailey, who was the chairman of the Democratic Party. By the way, I always liked Hubert Humphrey, who I felt was put in at terrible position that year, and he asked me to do a campaign film. I said to him I would, but on the condition that you have to announce that you want to get out of Vietnam. He said, ‘my boy, I’m going to do that within the week.’ Well, he didn’t do it in a week or two weeks or two months.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you react to that?

Beatty: I went to do a movie in France, where they were having there own political upheaval in 1968, and what happened, happened [the election of Richard Nixon].

HollywoodChicago.com: If you had a celestial phone to call anyone who has passed away in your lifetime, who would you call and what would you say to them?

Beatty: Oh, you don’t ask difficult questions. [laughs] Well, of course I would talk to my mother and father. I would ask them how they are, and I would tell them how I am. It sounds like a cliché.

HollywoodChicago.com: Actually, it’s very beautiful. Is there anyone in your career you’d like to call?

Beatty: There would be a lot of people I’d like to call and thank. I’m not going to run with that ball, on that question you’ve just asked. It’s a very good question, and if we were to spend a couple of days talking, I might be able to give you a specific answer.

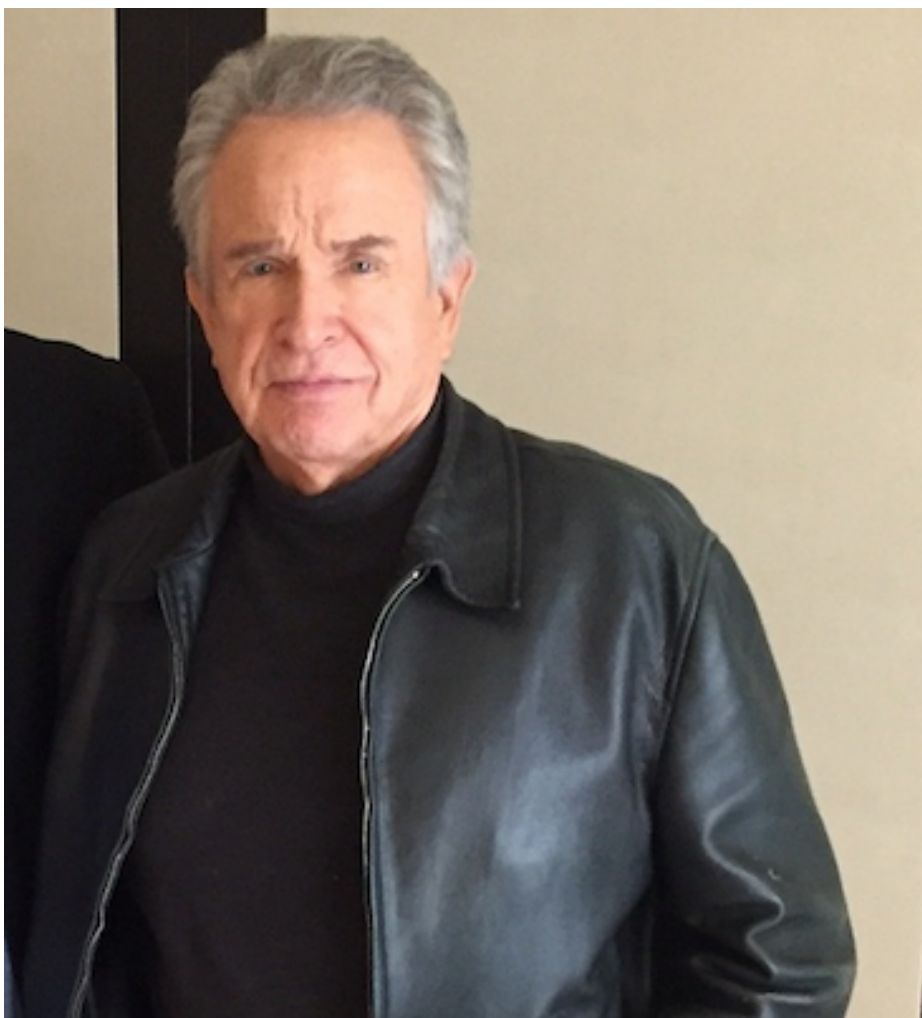
HollywoodChicago.com: Would you like to do a one sentence summation, if I mention certain people?

Beatty: I may walk away from it, but try me.

HollywoodChicago.com: Vivien Leigh.

Beatty: One of the most beautiful and unpretentious friends that a person could have.

HollywoodChicago.com: Woody Allen.



Warren Beatty in Chicago
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Beatty: Smart as hell. You know, I was instrumental in getting him to do his first movie [‘What’s New, Pussycat?’]. Since his quote about coming back in another life as my fingertips, maybe I should correspond with him now, and tell I’d like to come back as his...[never answers]

HollywoodChicago.com: So you’d like to reply to it?

Beatty: I have never replied to it. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Jerzy Kosinski [author, acted in ‘Reds’].

Beatty: Are you familiar with Kosinski? When you get Kosinski in a room, there is never anyone funnier. The only competitors offhand would be Robin Williams and Jonathan Winters.

HollywoodChicago.com: Elaine May.

Beatty: Brilliant, truthful, hilarious, deep and trustworthy.

HollywoodChicago.com: Hal Ashby.

Beatty: Lovable, brilliant, not so outspoken, but when he spoke he was never wrong.

HollywoodChicago.com: Madonna.

Beatty: [Sighs] Admirable, highly disciplined and lovingly unpredictable.

HollywoodChicago.com: Fatherhood.

Beatty: The best thing that ever happened to me...[quickly adding] but don’t forget to mention my marriage first. [laughs]

For an interview of actors Alden Ehrenreich and Lily Collins for “Rules Don’t Apply,” by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, [CLICK HERE](#). [23]

“Rules Don’t Apply” opens everywhere on November 23rd. Featuring Warren Beatty, Lily Collins, Alden Ehrenreich, Matthew Broderick, Candice Bergen, Martin Sheen, Ed Harris, Alec Baldwin, Oliver Platt and Annette Bening. Written and directed by Warren Beatty. Rated “PG-13”



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