

PDF Feature:

RON SILVERMAN: Lawrence Kasdan has been associated as a writer, producer and director of some terrific movies, including the ones we saw today. How do you feel about Los Angeles now? What brought you to this film, to write the [*Grand Canyon*] screenplay with your wife, Meg?

LAWRENCE KASDAN: We just wanted to do a movie about some of the things that we were feeling about what was going on in America and what was going on in Los Angeles and about having children and sort of the anxiety that we were feeling. This is a very personal movie, and it's a great luxury to be able to sort of explore things you're feeling. I always had an emotional reaction to movies, and it didn't have to be a movie like *Grand Canyon* to do that. It could be an adventure film or a western but I always had a personal kind of emotional response to those things, and I treat movies as though they really matter and that they should be used to express yourself.

RS: What was your personal connection to *Accidental Tourist*? Was that the only book that you made a film of?

LK: It is. It was a wonderful Anne Tyler novel, and I thought it would make a good movie. It was about something that interested me very much, which was a man who tries to control his universe because he is terrified by the chaos and the randomness. So he writes these books about how to travel to Paris and feel that you've never left Baltimore or Cleveland or whatever—that is, to take all the foreignness out of foreign travel. He comes from a family that is very hermetically sealed. But he marries and has a child, and the child is struck down by the kind of random violence that we read about every day in the paper. And his world starts to explode and he can't get over the loss of his child and it eventually destroys his marriage. And he sinks into a kind of spiraling to the bottom in which he can barely function, he can barely leave his bedroom. But he still has this dog that the child liked, and the dog eventually leads him to this strange woman, and they glance off each other a couple of times but essentially she latches on to him.

She sees something in him that she wants. And through her he makes his way back to the world, because she is all the messy, chaotic things that he is trying to eliminate from his life, and yet she becomes his salvation. This idea of not being able to control your universe and making some kind of peace with the frightening chaos that's out here is very much in *Grand Canyon*, too.

RS: The film you're working on now is *Wyatt Earp*. What personal statement are you making with that film?

LK: This is the seventh film that I've directed, and if you look at *Body Heat* and *Big Chill* and *Accidental Tourist* and so forth, there's one thing that sort of links them. And it's about this conflict that people feel between an ideal behavior and desire. Between being responsible on one hand and freedom on the other. And that tension fascinates me. It's really about control versus letting go. So it comes into every aspect of your life—the way you talk to people, the way you act with people, the way you indulge in things.

Wyatt Earp was a very complicated, problematical kind of guy. He was good at only one thing—which he fell into—which was being a lawman. And he spent his whole life being a lawman even though he didn't really want to do that. And he was wracked by that tension between the things he wanted and the things he thought he should do. So Wyatt is the perfect kind of protagonist for me because he was under the weight of his responsibility and yet is surrounded by an alluring kind of chaos.

Q: You've made a couple of sort of traditional genre films. Is that a constraint or does that allow you to have fun with what are supposedly the rules?

LK: The appeal of the genre is the kind of sensual pleasures we get from certain images, certain rhythms at the top, certain kinds of environments, sets, and those things have enormous appeal. At the same time, most genres are very flexible in terms of what kind of story they can hold. In *Body Heat*, which was the first movie I directed, it's a traditional film noir on a superficial level, but what it was really about for me was something that I then went back to try to deal with in *The*

Big Chill. Which was a certain kind of person of my generation who was sort of stumbling along in life, and impatient to get all the sort of material pleasures that the society holds out to you constantly every time you look at advertisements or turn on the TV. And he had, like a lot of people of my generation, stumbled through school without much trouble, everything had been easy, and now he's working as a mediocre lawyer in a small Florida town. And sort of unsatisfied, in a kind of unfocused way, knowing he wants more, knowing that he wants a bigger taste of the pleasures. And then a woman comes into his life, who offers him that opportunity to make that big score which, in this case, involves murder.

So, *Body Heat* became, for me, about people, my friends, people of my generation and yet the story was injected into a standard film noir kind of genre film. And that's pretty much how I've had to use the genres. The only one that is pretty much what it is is *Silverado*, which is really a Western. And it is a kind of a metaphor for the filmmaking process—it was my third film—in that it's about strangers with particular skills who come together on a journey, and who use their skills to help each other get through a difficult passage, which is what true filmmaking is about.

Q: A lot of filmmakers in Hollywood don't exercise a certain amount of power to make the films they really want to make, and obviously there's some of that statement wrapped up in the Steve Martin character. I wonder if you might have any interesting anecdotes about watching that with the studio executives.

LK: Some people think they are that Steve Martin character. And he represents to me not any specific person in town, but everybody in a way, because he's torn. He really does love movies, but he also loves material pleasures. He has very much been co-opted by a system that rewards certain kinds of work, and he has been reluctant to be brave about other kinds of work. And it's very seductive. But, if you entered [filmmaking] because you loved film, because you loved storytelling, because you saw great films when you were young and you said, 'I want to do that, I want to touch people, stir people with this very powerful medium,' then you have to come here and sort of fight a battle every day to keep your eye on the

ball and remember that that's why you're here. And not that you will get a good table at a restaurant, that you will have a nicer car, or your agent's name will be in the paper—much less you—and people will treat you well and they'll return your calls right away. Now, everybody wants the most people to see the work that you have worked so hard to create. I wanted everybody in America to see *Grand Canyon* and the fact that I didn't think they would didn't make it any less painful to me that they didn't. I want as many people as possible to see *Wyatt Earp*, not because of the money that that would mean to me, but because we worked really hard to make it as good as we can.

RS: We've had a number of seminars here in the last few weeks in which there has been a lot of rapping of Hollywood studio executives. Clearly, if having gotten to the point that you've proved to them that you can make good, solid films and they will let you do the films that you want to do, that seems to me to speak well for the executives that you deal with. [Pause] I guess not.

[Laughter]

LK: I never really go over budget and the movies are always sort of releasable and, in fact, most of them have made their money back. So, since they have a terrible hunger to fill these slots they've got, they'd just as soon be in business with me as with somebody who traditionally goes over budget or makes four bad films for every one good one he makes or is very difficult to deal with. I know that a lot of people don't have that kind of freedom, and there are projects that don't get made because the director doesn't have that kind of clout. There are very few people that just sort of get it easy. It's always a struggle, and it's even a struggle for me, in the sense that the work is a struggle. It's hard to try to do good work all the time. So it's always a struggle. Nothing changes.

Q: I think you said that you used different cinematographers on all your films. Why Owen Roizman on *Grand Canyon*? And your transitions—were those written in the script, or were those in collaboration with the DP?

LK: The transitions in *Grand Canyon* were the most intricate of anything that I have done and are all in the script. The movie is really designed and when you do that, that means that you're planning to have most of what's in the script in the movie, which is not always the case. But *Grand Canyon* is pretty much as written. We didn't take out very much of that movie. And when that happens, then the transitions you've designed can stay in place. The cinematographer, even though he's a hugely important collaborator in all other ways, has very little to do with that. That is much more a case of me explaining to him what's the plan, and therefore we want to end up over here or on this kind of shot. My lighting was always about transitions. It's one of the things I was always strongest at. And I'm very proud of the way most of my movies move—how they get from one place to another. Sometimes you're backed into a corner, you cut out a scene that didn't work or you need it for time and the transitions are cruder than you want them to be. That happens.

RS: Since you've done six movies with editor Carol Littleton, what is your working relationship with her? Where do you count on her in the process?

LK: Carol Littleton is an extraordinary woman. She was a musician, which is a key to her editing. She edits in a very musical way. She's been very helpful to me over the years with the scores of my movies. But, most of all, she's about the substance of the material, the thematic material. She's able to cut film as expertly as anyone cutting, but she is able to edit material in a way that not all editors can. She has a very sensitive, wide-ranging view of what your work is about. She can execute what I want, even if she doesn't agree. She is constantly a fanatic for your original intentions and yet knowing that a movie is plastic and that your intentions change and the ways to achieve those intentions may be different that you thought. So, she's everything you want in an editor.

Q: Can I ask you about your road as a director from *Silverado*, which you went to New Mexico and shot and then in the seven years that have passed, you went to the same exact set to do another Western. How was that experience different than, say, all those years back and all those films back?

LK: It was a struggle to get *Silverado* made. No one was making Westerns back then. It only cost \$20 million, but in 1985 that looked like a lot of money for a Western. The studio tried to back out right before we started, and I gave up my salary so we had this sort of siege mentality. It was great, great fun because everyone was in the struggle together. And I was out to prove that a Western could work. I was going against the tide. Seven years later, I went back with a larger budget, a very different kind of story, a much more ambitious undertaking, no more certain in its outcome, I think, than *Silverado*, but much more ambitious in its inception. The only thing that was the same was that it was great fun. I really liked making this movie.

Q: I'm wondering when you were writing the screenplays for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Body Heat*, at what point do you think you can get an emotional truth without giving kind of a plausible truth?

LK: A movie is something quite apart from the screenplay. The screenplay is terribly important—vitaly important. It should make sense, it should have some sort of integrity to it and it should be involving. But the fact is that once there is a camera and there are actors and a score and lighting, everything changes and movies are an emotional experience. They are not an intellectual one. It's taken me years to finally accept it.

If you're going to be a writer or director, you want to be a sponge to the world that's going on around you because, at least in my case, I'm trying to make something that resembles truth, something that people can look at and say, 'Yeah, that seems true. Even if I haven't lived it, that seems true and if I have lived it, then I have lived that scene.'

Q: When you've got the thing on paper the way you want it, how do you prepare yourself to direct? Do you spend a lot of time with your actors rehearsing? Do you talk about what makes it work?

LK: I think one of the advantages of writing movies is that you get this incredible saturation education in the movie while you're writing it. And, one of the

challenges of directing someone else's material is that you haven't had that, and you have to figure out what they meant. I then come to a movie, very much like an actor comes to it, trying to understand what the script was about and what was intended and what are the nuances and what isn't there and should be there and so on. When you've written a movie, in my experience, I've made the movie in my head, so I do very little storyboarding. It's just sort of running in my head. And now I try to get that on film.

Q: How important are the production designers on your projects?

LK: Very important. It's just like an editor or cinematographer. You want someone whose taste you really trust, who's going to bring you ideas, who's going to understand what you want and yet challenge you all the time. And the costume designer is another member of that team. Those are the important people and everything is built on what they do.

Q: There's a scene in *Accidental Tourist* when William Hurt comes home and Kathleen Turner, she ends the marriage there at the kitchen table and William Hurt is so.... So much is happening to him with such little, tiny nuances, throughout the whole movie. With him as an actor, do you look at that scene when it's happening and know, wow.

LK: Well, I'm a huge fan of his, and I thought this was one of the most amazing performances that I'd ever seen, what he did in this movie. And it's not in the traditional Hollywood amazing. Hollywood amazing tends to be autistic, paraplegic. Sometimes good work is honored, but this kind of work is rarely honored. But this is an amazing performance in that Bill did not get credit for it. It's a very difficult character. It's a very uptight guy with a very large problem, and he plays him brilliantly.

You will bring enormous amounts of work and discipline and experience to filmmaking just to achieve a bad scene. To achieve a good scene will be a miracle. When it happens, you will be revived. That'll keep you going through the long hours and the years of disappointment and frustration and people saying no.

It's so hard to do one scene. And all the people out there, all the civilians and all the critics who are civilians don't get it. In fact, anyone who doesn't make art—no matter how sympathetic they are—they just don't get it. They don't get what we do. That's what makes making art different from a lot of other jobs, which are perfectly honorable jobs, but where it's clear that you do it because you make a living and you can shelter your family and feed them. And a lot of honorable jobs are like that. This is not like that. This requires much more and has to be treated with enormous respect.