

SEXUAL ENSEMBLES



AN INTERVIEW WITH:

Lawrence Kasdan

by Laura Schiff

Born in 1949 in Miami Beach and raised in West Virginia, Lawrence Kasdan grew up in a family in which writing was encouraged. He studied English literature at the University of Michigan and later earned a master's degree in education. For the next five years, Kasdan worked as an advertising copywriter in Detroit and Los Angeles while trying to sell his screenplays. He sold the sixth screenplay he submitted, *The Bodyguard*, which was finally produced seventeen years later. Kasdan went on to co-write three of the most successful films in motion picture history: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*. In 1981, he made his critically acclaimed directorial debut with *Body Heat*. Two of his films, *The Big Chill* and *The Accidental Tourist*, earned multiple Oscar nominations, including Best Picture. His script for *Grand Canyon* was honored with Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for Best Original Screenplay. Lawrence Kasdan's other writing and directing credits include *Continental Divide*, *French Kiss*, *I Love You To Death*, *Silverado*, and *Wyatt Earp*.

I noticed that several of your scripts involve love triangles, for example *Body Heat*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *The Big Chill*, and to some degree Kevin Kline's character in *Grand Canyon*. What is it about this triangle dynamic that interests you as a writer?

We have a lot of drives in us. We have certain ideals, models for how we're going to behave, and then we have our desires. Those things are in conflict a lot of the time. Love triangles are just a result of this conflict between how we think we should behave and how we want to behave. A love triangle is, to me, not a device or anything. I'm not attracted to it as a particular mechanism. It's what goes on every day if you're trying to maintain a relationship. You try to be steadfast and faithful. Maintaining the affection and the connections between two people is tough. Not having it be interfered with by some outside party or by some other force—life is full of that all the time. You've got conflicting emotions you've got to deal with. For me it's just part of human behavior.

When talking about love triangles, the theme of infidelity comes up. In *Body Heat*, *The Big Chill*, and *Grand Canyon*, some of your protagonists have extramarital affairs. It seems to me that in writing these characters, you must walk a fine line because you want to show them violating the trust of their marriages, and yet you still want the audience to like these characters and care about them. Can you talk a bit about how you achieve this balance?

With all characters you're trying to get to a place where they seem true to life. What seems true to life to me is that people are flawed. Even though many people want to do what's right, sometimes they're driven to do other things. We have a lot of things working on us all the time. No matter what resolution we may make about our behavior, it's tested every day. I see all the characters in these movies as being very sympathetic because they're struggling to lead their lives. I don't worry too much about the audience's affection. What I worry about is, do I care about them? If I care about them, then I think everything else takes care of itself. I don't think the artist wants to pander to the audience's affection. Let the characters be human beings. If people can be sympathetic to a human being who is struggling with a moral dilemma, that's what you want. You don't want them to be painted in a positive way all the time, because who's like that?

I see a relationship between sex and death in these films. They seem to be opposing forces—sex being a creative force and death being the destructive force. What can you say about this theme in your work?

I think we go to the movies for intense feelings. What you're trying to do is evoke strong feeling. Sex and death are two intensely important things that happen to us. This is how we know we're alive. Death because it puts a limit on our lives. It puts things in perspective, knowing everything will end, but not knowing what's on the other side. Sex because we have a strong desire to satisfy that urge. It's right behind hunger. Clearly, death is a destructive force. In my movies, sex represents an intense reach for life. Sex is about living your life more keenly for that period. Your life can be transformed by desire. Your judgment can be suspended in exchange for your feelings.

In *Body Heat*, William Hurt's judgment was impaired by his desire. The film noir was basically about a rich woman, Kathleen Turner, who seduces her lover into murdering her husband. The plot for this is so intricate, it reminded me of *Double Indemnity*. Do you remember how you came to conceive of the story?

Body Heat came out of two separate things. One was wanting to write about what I felt were a lot of my contemporaries. Everything seemed to go our way in college. I graduated in 1970. The [Vietnam] war seemed to end because of us. We changed the direction of the nation. And then we went out into the real world and it was hard to even find a job. I saw among a lot of my contemporaries a tendency to be impatient to make some big score. They didn't want to do any hard work and buckle down. They were petulant about having to do mundane work. A lot of them struggled to find *any* kind of work. [Hurt's character] Ned Racine is a guy like that. Things used to come easy to him, but now he struggles to make ends meet. He gets an opportunity to make a big score, and it's all mixed up in sex. It was a kind of metaphor for this impatience, this attitude that anything was okay, which I found shocking among my contemporaries who had been very morally superior in college. Clearly, we were subject to the same temptations as everyone else.

The other element working on *Body Heat* was film noir. There were incredible films from this genre: *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Maltese Falcon*. I wanted to make my first movie very stylish, and film noir gave me enormous freedom to do that with both the visuals and the language, which I thought was one of my strengths. It was a very hyped-up, stylish way of talking. They don't talk like normal people. I thought the genre of film noir fit perfectly with my own interest in what was happening with my contemporaries.

The power of *Body Heat* lies in Kathleen Turner's sexual aggressiveness as the femme fatale, her total control and manipulation of William Hurt. He's so under her spell, in fact, that he thinks he thought up the plan to murder her husband. You can watch the movie from his point of view, and then you can watch it from her point of view, and it's totally different. What were the challenges of creating this set up between the two characters?

The thing that interests me, and the reason I always wanted to make movies, is that the job of the writer is to create a story that has a kind of inevitability to it without being predictable. That's what you're trying to do. In the case of Hurt's character, he is hypnotized, distracted, by someone whose mind encompasses his, is bigger than his. He doesn't go *in* thinking that way. He's very

arrogant in his stupidity. He thinks *he's* the smarter guy, and she understands that he thinks that. She plays him like an instrument.

I've heard from a lot of Hollywood people that today's movie climate is much more timid and repressed when it comes to showing sex in movies. If you were writing and directing *Body Heat* today, would you keep the sex scenes the same or would you tone them down any?

After the '60s, they started showing sex much more openly, and I think the problem with sex scenes now, thirty years later, is it gets tired. The visual language is practically dead in sex scenes now. It's always handled the same way. It's the same twelve shots of lovemaking, you know? The same dissolves. It's boring. It's very unusual nowadays to see a sex scene that seems real. What's happening is you get to the point where there's a sex scene and you may as well just turn off your head, because you've seen the whole thing already. It's very difficult to do in a new way. When I directed *Body Heat* seventeen years ago, it hadn't been quite as used up and I worked pretty hard to make the scenes startling. It's very hard to come up with a fresh visual language that gives us what it feels like to have this experience.

***The Big Chill* is being re-released in November for the fifteenth anniversary. Essentially, it's the story of a group of college buddies who are reunited many years later at the funeral of their friend Alex, who has committed suicide. I'm always struck by that line the minister says at the eulogy: "Where did Alex's hope go?" Later on in the film, the friends question where their own hopes and ambitions have gone. It's an interesting theme, how being with old friends helps us to remember how we used to be.**

When we get together with the people we knew when we were fresh and had a lot of hopes and idealism about the world, it throws into relief where we've gotten in our lives. It brings back a lot of those feelings we had when we were a little fresher. And you're *always* measuring your journey against what you *thought* your journey would be. When an idealistic young man like Alex commits suicide while there's so much work to be done, it means something has gone wrong with his machine. Here was a guy who wanted to do good, but obviously had reached a point of such despair that he lost all his hope that he could have an impact. He was so confused and dis-

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traught by the journey he had taken that he gave up. When the minister starts speaking, he's just another minister who didn't know the deceased. But what happens is he actually goes to the very heart of the thing by the end, and even the friends who are a little skeptical are struck by it.

Alex was played by Kevin Costner, whose part ended up on the cutting room floor. What's the story behind that?

There was a whole flashback sequence that showed the friends all preparing Thanksgiving dinner thirteen years before. You saw Alex and you saw what everyone else was like. It was always intended to be at the very end of the movie. After watching these people for an hour and hearing them talk about the past, you would actually get to see what they were *really* like. What their drives were. Everything they've said in the present day part would be put to the test when you saw it. We shot that flashback sequence and I put it on the end of the movie and I showed the movie to a group of my friends. It was immediately obvious that the flashback was unnecessary. In fact, it confused the movie terribly. Kevin's part was entirely in that expanded flashback sequence, and he was very good. The scene itself was good, but it just didn't work on the end of that movie.

The way the film ends now, the sexual tension between these people has been building up throughout the long weekend during which the film takes place, and it culminates in multiple couplings on the last night they're all together.

These are people who had intense relationships for a long time. In flashback, you actually saw that they were all practically living together in college. That was my college experience during the '60s. We had a house, and even the women may as well have been living there, they were there so much. So when these characters get together, there's a lot of old synapses firing off. There's old relationship feelings.

Grand Canyon is another ensemble film with a very talented cast and a strong story. In this film, a series of random violent events sets off a chain reaction in the lives of two families. In dealing with these difficulties their lives are ultimately changed for the better. The movie's theme of chaos vs. control is really intriguing. From watching this film, I would guess that you're someone who believes that everything happens for a reason.

I believe there are forces at work that we can't always identify. There's a lot of stuff going on all the time. I don't know if everything has a reason, but everything has a place in the big design. I don't think everything is predetermined, but I think there are certain patterns that reassert themselves constantly. I believe that there's a great deal of good in man which can come out given the opportunity, and there are destructive forces in man that can also take control. The issue of control vs. chaos is primary for me in everything I've ever written. The world is chaotic and frightening. We figure out various strategies for trying to control that fear.

Would you say that chaos serves a purpose in our lives?

I think we experience the sense that the world is chaotic and frightening, and it doesn't matter whether it serves a purpose or not. It's like the air we breathe.

What has an effect on us is our reaction to the chaos. For some people, it's like being in a boat—no matter how stormy the ocean, they float on the surface of the waves. Other people are pulled down by the undertow. I think that when we experience the world and watch the news, we're constantly reminded of what a scary place it is. People control their fears in various ways. They may become workaholics, they may become *alcoholics*. They may become exercise freaks. Some people *have* to go out and run five miles a day, not just to stay in shape, but to do something to control their anxiety. Some people become obsessed with maintaining relationships, other people become obsessed with having *multiple* relationships. It's all to find a cure for chaos.

The ideas of chaos and destiny are also major themes in the Star Wars trilogy. You completed The Empire Strikes Back after the original writer, Leigh Brackett, died. It's considered by many to be the best of the three films. How much of the script had been already written by the time you took over the project?

Not much, George had the story. *The Empire Strikes Back* is the second act of a three-act structure. The first act is *Star Wars* and the third act is *Return of the Jedi*. The second act, if you know classic dramatic structure, is always the

most interesting. That's the act when all of the forces that have been established in the first act come into conflict. The maximum drama is in the second act. By the end of the second act, you don't know how it's going to work out. In effect, that's how *Empire* ends. Nothing has been resolved, nothing has been saved. In fact, Luke, the hero, has started to become machine-like, like his father, Darth Vader. His one arm has now become mechanized. At the end of the second act of the trilogy, everything is still in flux and the characters go off in their different directions. That's always the best part of the story, and I think it's the most interesting. In the last act [*Return of the Jedi*] there's all this resolution. Resolution is not interesting. *Conflict* is interesting.



THE BIG CHILL

Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker are these larger-than-life figures, symbolizing good and evil, life and death, spirituality and faithlessness. In a lot of ways, the Star Wars trilogy is like a Greek tragedy, with a lot of Oedipal themes. Empire's pivotal scene occurs when Luke learns that Vader is his father. Rather than accept this news, Luke jumps to his supposed death. What can you tell me about this scene in terms of the structure of the film? It felt like this is one of those scenes that must be played. It was inevitable, given all the build-up to it.

Yeah. Like I said before, in a good story, you want a hint of inevitability, without being predictable. I think that's what's good about *Empire* and that's why some people like it the best. When it's revealed that Darth Vader is his father, and he's tempting him to come over and join him on the Dark Side, Luke has to make a decision. It's very tempting to be reunited with his father, and also to be powerful. Luke makes the toughest choice, which is to leap into the void rather than to succumb to the forces that Ben Kenobi had warned him about.

In effect, he's taking control of the situation by leaping into the chaos. In the third film, Return of the Jedi, the big shocker was that Luke and Leia

are twins. Given all the sexual tension between these two characters in the previous two films, I think it's safe to say that you and Lucas were flirting just a little bit with incest.

That's really George. I don't know when he knew that, if he knew that before he started *Star Wars* or if he knew it in the middle of *Empire* or if he knew it when we did *Jedi*. I don't know how much that was a part of the scheme. It's all about family, this saga. It makes sense—this is how the triangle is going to be solved. Luke has family issues.

Are you working on the new *Star Wars* trilogy?

No.

I heard a rumor that you're writing a new Indiana Jones script.

Nope. They've been working on another episode for years, but I haven't worked on it.

You recently directed and produced a script you wrote called *Mumford* that will be released spring 1999. What's that about?

Mumford is a comedy about a psychologist who comes to a small town and gets involved with a bunch of new patients, people who live in the town. It's an ensemble comedy with a bunch of great actors and *no* movie stars.

I'm curious, have you ever had a chance meeting with a stranger who altered your life forever?

What I believe is that everybody in your life was a stranger to begin with, except for your family. People you live with, people you work with, your best friends

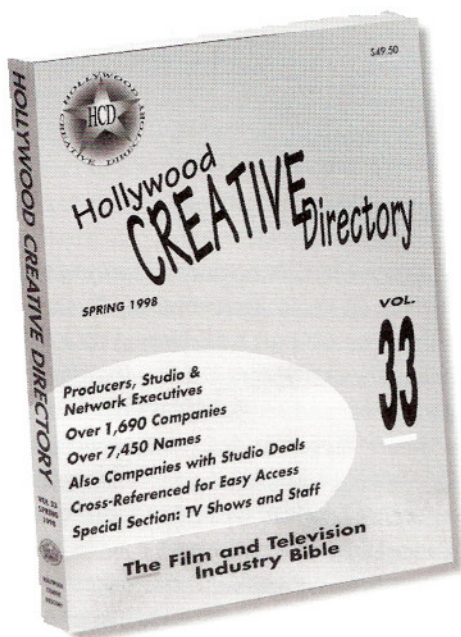
from college. There was a moment when you met and you were strangers. I've had nothing *but* strangers coming into my life. My wife was a stranger. She came in and had an enormous impact on my life. It was chance that we met.

And you actually co-wrote *Grand Canyon* with your wife, Meg Kasdan.

I did.

There was a line from *The Accidental Tourist* that could have just as easily been in *Grand Canyon*. Bill Pullman's character says, "Isn't it amazing how two different lives can link up together?"

The Accidental Tourist was a great novel by Anne Tyler. The reason I responded to it was it's about a guy who tries to control his universe so much that even if he's in Paris, he wants to eat at Burger King because he knows what the food's going to be like. His whole life is writing these travel books that tell you how to not notice that you're in some wonderful, exotic place. That's someone who's trying to control their universe. But what has happened to him before the movie starts is that Chaos has reached into his life and plucked his child away. [In the film, William Hurt's twelve-year-old son was struck down by a stray bullet during the hold up of a fast food restaurant.] His worst fear has been realized. The chaotic world that he so despises has come in and destroyed the thing he cared about most. It's about a guy who's trying to maintain his control on the world, and he meets a woman who's all about chaos [played by Geena Davis]. She's disorganized and sloppy and full of life. He resists her as best he can, but she turns out to be his salvation. She couldn't be more different from him, but he finds out that she is what he needs. We're often surprised by the thing that completes us. It's often not someone like us.



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