

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

## LAURA DERN HAS THE SPIRIT OF SEVENTIES CINEMA

*The actor, who plays George Clooney's publicist in "Jay Kelly" and Will Arnett's estranged wife in "Is This Thing On?," has spent her life surrounded by Hollywood luminaries.*

By Michael Schulman

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Laura Dern is such a child of Hollywood that she can trace her conception to a movie set: “The Wild Angels,” the Roger Corman biker flick that starred her parents, the actors Bruce Dern and Diane Ladd, in 1966. The couple split up when Dern was two, and she grew up amid the chaotic, creative ferment of seventies cinema, when Hollywood was embracing off-kilter actresses such as Shelley Duvall, Sissy Spacek, and Dern’s mother, who died on Monday, at the age of eighty-nine. In Martin Scorsese’s “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,” in which Ladd plays a diner waitress, the seven-year-old Dern wound up as an extra at the counter, for which she had to eat nineteen ice-cream cones. As her own career took off, in the eighties, Dern (with her mother’s help) attained legal emancipation so that she could work more hours. At seventeen, she moved into her own apartment

(her roommate, somehow, was Marianne Williamson) and dropped out of U.C.L.A. after two days to star in David Lynch's "Blue Velvet," as a sunny suburban teen sitting atop a world of horrors.

What Lynch saw in her was an innate incandescence that has propelled her through the decades, whether she's outwitting dinosaurs ("Jurassic Park") or bringing down a corporation ("Enlightened"). Perhaps because she's a daughter of the New Hollywood, an era when art had a tenuous edge over commerce, Dern has always made unorthodox choices. In the nineties, instead of following up "Jurassic Park" with the blockbusters on offer, she starred in Alexander Payne's abortion satire, "Citizen Ruth," and helped Ellen DeGeneres come out as gay on her sitcom. (Dern was so besieged by death threats that she had to hire security.) That independence of spirit fed her longevity. The year she turned fifty, she was everywhere: reuniting with Lynch on "Twin Peaks: The Return," playing a California power mom on "Big Little Lies," and commanding a rebel spaceship in "Star Wars: The Last Jedi." Not long after, she won an Oscar for her movie-stealing role as a divorce lawyer in Noah Baumbach's "Marriage Story." At the 2020 Spirit Awards, the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles sang a paean to her.

Some have called it the Dernaissance. Whatever it is, it shows no sign of abating. In Baumbach's newest film, "Jay Kelly," which comes out this week, Dern is a publicist who works for the title character, an aging matinee idol played, with self-referential suavity, by George Clooney. Next month, in Bradley Cooper's "Is This Thing On?," she and Will Arnett star as a married couple whose breakup is complicated when the husband takes up confessional standup comedy. In both films, Dern combines big-hearted openness with something more self-protective and disillusioned; there may be no actress better at conveying a woman's yearning for freedom despite the maddening obstacles the world throws in her path. I met Dern over lunch, as the two movies were playing at the New York Film Festival. This was several weeks before her mother's death, and our conversation

(which has been edited and condensed) touched on her frequently, as well as on Dern's long collaboration with Lynch, who died in January.

**Let's start with "Jay Kelly." Now, "Jay Kelly" is how you might pronounce "George Clooney" if you were drunk to the point of slurring your words. There's also another character, an actor played by Patrick Wilson, who's named Ben Alcock, which is reminiscent of someone. What is Noah Baumbach up to here?**

The thing about Noah is that it always feels effortless. People are, like, "Well, it's an homage to—" And then you see the film and you're, like, "To the exact scene I saw in that Fellini film." He hints with great effortlessness, but his goal, from my perspective, is exploring the iconography of the movie star. Inviting George in to shape this character was about everything we place on the movie star: all your dreams, all your insecurities, all your resentments, all your wishes that didn't happen—your longing of being seen by a person in your love stories, whatever it is. And, as you plant that on the movie star, you also project your idea of who *they* are, or who *they're* supposed to be. He is all of us, and we're all terrified. I think it's a brilliant use of the movie star as the playbook to allow us to reminisce: What did we miss? Did I really show up for myself, for my loved ones, for my children?

**One thing that interested me, as someone who writes about Hollywood, is how it shows that, when you peel away that iconography of the movie star, there are all these other people who are a part of the machinery: you as the publicist, Adam Sandler as the manager, Emily Mortimer as the stylist. That group forms this work family that is in service of whatever the movie star represents. I talked to your publicist Annett Wolf to set up this interview. Did you draw on the Hollywood publicists you know to create this character?**

A million per cent—and specific aspects of a few I admire or find charming or funny or ruthless. Annett signed me right after “Blue Velvet,” when I was nineteen, and she’s been my publicist my entire career. I had a publicist at the beginning of my career who died of AIDS. That really broke my heart and woke me up to the delicacy of these relationships. And I knew how important it was to have someone who understood your goals and didn’t just want to make you a movie star. Annett was my perfect partner at an age when you’re separating from your parents and becoming your own adult—especially if your parents are in the same career.

The publicist often has the boundaries that the movie star either doesn’t know how to have or doesn’t want to come off as having. I started at eleven, so I didn’t know how to say to an adult interviewing me, “I’d rather not talk about that.” I needed a grownup in the room. But sometimes you never develop your boundaries, because there’s always someone doing that for you. [Jay Kelly] is not an obvious narcissist, but he is a child who’s had other people be on the front lines for him.

**Not to get even more inside baseball, but your character’s name is Liz. Noah and Greta Gerwig and Emily Mortimer, who also co-wrote the screenplay, all share a publicist named Liz Mahoney. Did you have a sense that you were playing her? Did you talk to her about this character?**

I spent so much time with Liz and Annett and Lisa Taback [at Netflix]. There’s no way I’m not drawing on the way they protect their clients. They all have very different ways of doing it. The thing I love about Liz is that she’s just so dry.

**The real Liz?**

The real Liz. And the character Liz has that in her nature, that very direct quality that a lot of publicists have. You'd think a publicist is a "yes" person to their client, but the publicists I've known tell you the truth. Like, "No, this is a disaster. You've got to go this way." It's not like I needed to do research. I've spent my whole life with them, and my friends' publicists, and boyfriends' publicists, and best friends' publicists, including Liz, because I've spent so much time with Noah and Greta.

**You've seen the machinery of stardom from the inside your entire life. Is there something that this movie is revealing that people generally don't understand about what's underneath the hood?**

Vulnerability is a trait that is not talked about in the iconography of a famous person. Some people can almost have a childlike, almost innocent vulnerability, because they've had people protecting them their whole lives. That is not George. George is astute and very honest, radically loyal, totally there for the people he loves, a very different kind of person. Jay misses it all. Liz never says, "The reviews are a disaster. They hate the film. One person said you're handsome but not very good." He's *almost* seeing what's going on, but we have protected him to a fault. It wasn't what he wished for, but it's what we thought our job was. I even reference it when I'm, like, "It was so great when we were young. He was our baby." Until he grew up needing so much that we couldn't have our own lives.

**Right. They're kind of like parents, best friends, and servants all at the same time.**

And I've seen it plenty. I've been at a festival where Annett and I are having dinner, and another client has just arrived, and the mistreatment [of her] is very loud. The demands, or the way someone communicates to their team. There are a million ways to live your life, but one choice is to do it with gratitude.

**Let's move on to "Is This Thing On?" Unlike "Marriage Story," which is really a divorce movie, I would call this a separation movie. These two characters are not at the point of lawyers yet, and there's an ambivalence about whether their marriage is really over. How did you and Bradley Cooper and Will Arnett talk about that?**

Will knew the story that inspired this film. A comedian in England, John Bishop, and his wife went through a version of this. Through the process of their separation, they both found their way back to themselves. For him, it was through standup. And, in fact, she *did* get invited to a comedy club and was sitting in the audience, when her soon-to-be ex-husband stood up. He had never told her. She didn't know this was an interest of his. There he was, and he talks about the things he talks about in the movie and then says, "I miss my wife."

**The version I saw yesterday ended with the credit "Inspired by a true story," which made me wonder, Whose story is this?**

Yeah, and John has a credit on the film. He had a miserable job in pharmaceuticals and now is this huge comedian. That inspiration was what started the journey for Will, and then Will gave it to Bradley. And Bradley fell in love with the idea of a love story that's about how you have to find your way to yourself before you can ever find the core of a relationship. That's when the three of us started to dive in. It's not a very typical female role, someone who is always pragmatic, always clear: "Here are the rules, here are the boundaries." Usually, with characters I've played, I'm so deeply in the emotion of it. But pro athletes are trained in that win-lose [mentality], and volleyball is a game of strategy. It's so different from the way my brain works.

**Right, your character, Tess, is a former Olympic volleyball player. All this precedes the start of the movie, as does the marriage that we're watching crater, similar to "Marriage Story."**

**That seems challenging as an actor, to have to start your story at a place where so much has happened. Did you create an entire history of this relationship with Will and Bradley?**

Emotionally, we were very specific. We spent really deep, intimate, emotional time together on who we are as characters, as people. What we brought to the love story. What we fell in love with, or thought we were in love with. How we grew away from ourselves, becoming responsible adults. Giving up the job. Kids come. And, one day, a marriage is over. It's funny—when people talk about marriages, they're, like, "What happened?" Does anybody know, really? Even when it's, like, "There was an affair" or "They lost their job and got depressed"—that's *still* not what happened. When you're looking at twenty-plus year marriages, you don't even understand how you lose each other. How you lose your way. How you stop being honest with yourself about what you need. How you stop talking to each other.

And so we shared a lot privately, all three of us, about our lifetimes, about the history of these characters, so that, in a scene that says nothing about the history, you can hopefully feel the history. There are scenes when we hurt each other, where it may not even make sense. You feel the idea, but you don't totally get it. And that's intentional, because the characters don't. Why are these people fighting over the way she dropped the kids off at the thing?

**Did playing a former athlete make you think about how you were using your body? We see a photo of her throughout the movie doing this amazing volleyball move midair. Did you internalize that, physicalize that somehow?**

Yes. I've done only a couple movies where I had stunts. People are, like, "Oh, my God, 'Jurassic Park.' You trained so hard for that movie." I want to say I did, but in a way I trained harder for "Citizen Ruth." I'm jumping out of windows and throwing my body at things. Or even

“Enlightened,” with pratfalls. Comedy sometimes requires more physically than anything else. For this movie, the way I carried myself was what was important. My body is my skill. I had the most amazing coach, Kirk Myers. I saw him every day. We did some volleyball training, just to understand the game, but it was really about being strong. Also, Bradley really liked that I looked Will in the eye. We are tall people. Both of us aren’t used to staring right into the eyes of another person. Being formidable, especially with a very big guy, that was important to Bradley.

**You have a couple scenes with Peyton Manning, who plays a guy from your athletic past who you go on a semi-date with. What was it like to act with him?**

Totally effortless. And Bradley is such a brilliant guide. Peyton’s the master at his craft, but he’s also a great listener to a coach. He clearly has this superpower of being in a moment and taking in what’s being told. It made him such a natural actor.

**That’s something that athletes and actors have in common that I hadn’t thought about: they have to respond to the coach, or the director. How does Bradley’s directing style differ from Noah’s?**

All my favorite filmmakers share genius in the editing room and incredible instincts around sound and music and character and actors. But the one thing about Bradley is that what leads him—what leads the camera, what leads the lighting, what leads the edit—is the honesty of the moment, of the actor, probably because he started with acting, so he doesn’t care about anything else than that it’s truthful. He spoke to me like a coach, and I do think it was a strategy to remind me that I was playing an athlete: “You got this!” It was different from how he would speak to me at other moments. And Noah is the most extraordinary conductor of rhythm and truth through the language.

Noah can hear the honesty of a thing in a very specific way. They both have the honesty part, but one starts with the actor, and one starts with the writer.

**Looking back on the totality of your career, I'm struck by how many great directors you've worked with: David Lynch, Peter Bogdanovich, Steven Spielberg, Greta Gerwig, Kelly Reichardt, Mike White, Paul Thomas Anderson, Alexander Payne. I could go on.**

Robert Altman!

**Robert Altman, that's right! "Dr. T & the Women."**

Jonathan Demme. I'm just thinking of the people who have been such teachers.

**I'm curious what you look for in directors and how you figure out how to adjust yourself to fit into their worlds. I can only imagine how different it is to be in a Robert Altman movie versus a David Lynch movie versus a Greta Gerwig movie. Do you watch their other films first to figure it out? Is it about talking to them? Or is it about intuiting what they're going for?**

Hopefully all of it. Knowing their films, listening to them and understanding the story they want to tell, that's probably the biggest piece. I love knowing my directors. I love knowing their references. Friendships in that relationship are the most profoundly important. It is the reason I wanted to become an actor, watching my mom and Martin Scorsese together on "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore," which was a defining moment for me as a little girl. I was six or seven, looking at them in this friendship where you finish each other's sentences. My dad and Hal Ashby, [on "Coming Home"]. This melding of minds—that was so beautiful to me, and there was such trust on both sides. "I'll do whatever you say. Let's try it." That bold trust made me want to become an actor.

**Your father was also in Alfred Hitchcock's last film, "Family Plot."**

I was on that set.

**Did you see Hitchcock at work?**

Yeah. It's one of my favorite memories. The prop department got me a mini director's chair and put it next to him so that I could watch. I remember the way he was particularly amused by my dad, and that feeling of seeing a director understand your parent in a way you see them was interesting to me. He saw how funny my father is. When I was going to school, people were, like, "Oh, your dad's such a bad guy! He killed John Wayne [in 'The Cowboys']!" I thought, Well, that's interesting, because I see him as a funny person. And Scorsese, who saw my mom as so brave and so willing to go anywhere. I thought that was so cool. I hope that the directors I've worked with loved the experience as much as I loved the experience, because every one on that list I would want to work with again and again. David [Lynch] knew I could be anyone and held everything inside me. And I did not know that about myself.

**Your first two movies with Lynch were "Blue Velvet" and "Wild at Heart." In the first film, you play this naïve high-school girl. And then, four years later, you're this raw, sexual badass, rocking out on the side of the road to heavy metal. Did you know you had both of those things within you, and how did he help you access them?**

His belief in me is unparalleled. I doubt, in my fifties, that I'm going to have another filmmaker call me and say, "Did you read it?" "Yeah, it's insane. I love this." This was something we were going to venture into next, and I said, "I'm trying to understand the different characters, how they end up together. I don't know which part you're thinking of for me, but I'm ready to do whoever you want

me to be. I'll be there, David. You're my everything." He goes, "Idiot, you're playing all of them!" It's a whole different level of faith in an actor.



**He said at one point that you're ninety-nine per cent fearless, and the one per cent is that you didn't want to shave your head for a movie that he didn't end up making.**

Shave my head, lose my eyebrows, get a disfigured nose, something with my arm. I forget. And I would've done all of it, happily.

**What happened in that movie, besides you having no eyebrows?**

The closest I can describe to what I read, because I read only a section, is something like “Twin Peaks: The Return.” It’s just diving into mystery and a world that only David can create.

**I loved the letter you wrote after he passed away, earlier this year. One thing you talked about was his very specific interest in lipstick.**

For Diane, the character in “Twin Peaks,” he had a vision of the way she was going to look, and we weren’t getting it. So he had me go thrift-shopping and FaceTime him, and then we did a fitting at his house. And then—Fríða Aradóttir, who has done my hair on most movies—he was, like, “Call Fríða and have her take you to a wig store and show me stuff. She’ll know.” He loved to build from every detail. On “Wild at Heart,” if there was a lamp beside me in the motel room, he’d just built it on the side of the stage. He painted the hallways in “Inland Empire.” He is in the fabric of everything. And great filmmakers are.

**The way you described your relationship with David was very sweet, like the way you both called each other Tidbit. Was that just immediate, when you started working together?**

We did a scene on “Blue Velvet” in my childhood bedroom. I’m on the phone crying, I think, and at the end of the take he was, like, “Oh, Tidbit.” I was, like, “Why’d you call me Tidbit?” And he said, “ ’Cause you’re a little bit of tid.” So then I said, “Well, then I’m calling *you* Tidbit.” And it stuck since then. It was instantaneous. The casting directors had seen me in a couple of films, and they had

recommended me. He'd never seen me in anything. We talked for about a half an hour, and he said he just knew. I never auditioned for him. He never saw me act, which is crazy.

**You have a famous speech in “Blue Velvet” about robins. She dreams of robins coming, and they fill the world with love. And she says, “There is trouble till the robins come.”**

Boy, is there. That's maybe the most important line in all of cinema these days. We need some robins!

**There's such a specific tone for that speech. On one level, it's idealistic to the point of absurdity, but it's fully sincere on her part. And then also it's ironic, in the midst of this movie about the underworld of crime and perversity and violence. How did you know what tone to strike in that speech?**

That's all David as a guide. And I attribute to David my love of what I consider comedy. Without David, I don't get to Noah. I don't get to Alexander Payne. I don't get to Mike White. Comedy does not work unless it's about truth. “Big Little Lies,” working with Jean-Marc [Vallée]—David Lynch brought me to Jean-Marc, too, and my relationship to Jean-Marc was so important.

**He directed you in “Wild” as well as “Big Little Lies.”**

Yeah, and he had a very similar taste to David, in terms of trusting the truth in the absurd. He knew that it had to be so pure and so beautiful that, if it's funny, it comes out of how insane the world is.

**Certainly your character in “Big Little Lies” screaming “I will not *not* be rich” is an iconic line. It's so funny, and it comes out of extreme rage.**

Through that whole character, the more I trusted the rage, the more weirdly likable it would be. I think I have the most fun with things that are on the line between excruciating and comedic. Someone asked me recently if I was proud of the way I've handled the difficulty in my life. I said that the one thing that I'm so grateful for, which I really got from my mother and grandmother, is that I've never been cynical. I don't understand that emotion. I can be irreverent, but I'll always believe in love. I'll always believe in the goodness of people, despite hideousness.

### **The robins!**

The robins will come, and I think that's what David saw in me. He liked when I'm evil. He liked when I'm overtly sexual. He liked when I'm violent. He liked when I am kind, because he was that. Jay Roach was another great guide in that way. I played the Florida secretary of state Katherine Harris in the "Recount" movie, and that was a really challenging task. And, again, back to the relationship with your filmmaker: if your guide is a believer in the pain of a person, or the longing of a person, you find the humor in it. But, if it's just to hate the person or to write off the person, it's not funny. Even in "Big Little Lies," Renata's such a gorgeous character to play, because she would do anything to protect her child.

### **The famous Amabella.**

We love Amabella.

**What you're saying makes me think about how you're the child of two actors who blossomed in the seventies. The New Hollywood roughly coincided with the first thirteen years of your life, and so much of that filmmaking was director-driven, behavior-driven. Many of those**

**movies walk the line between comedy and drama, realism and absurdity. In a way, I think of you as a seventies actor.**

Oh, my God, that's the greatest compliment I've ever gotten. I love that so much. I'm the luckiest actor alive for having been raised in that way, on those movies, at the Actors Studio, around Lee Strasberg, around my parents' friends. Shelley Winters was my godmother. All I heard was the language of this kind of storytelling. My parents' friends were craftsmen and women. It was all fellow-actors, writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, camera operators, editors, script supervisors. Maureen Stapleton, Gena Rowlands. You can't make it up, you know? Being around Jason Robards and my mom when they worked together [on "Something Wicked This Way Comes"], having beautiful conversations. And my dad's friendships: Jack Nicholson, Bob Rafelson, Michael Cimino.

I remember Shelley took me to my first big Hollywood movie premiere, at Grauman's. She had no makeup on, false eyelashes, and she was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, sneakers, and a full-length fur coat. I'll never forget that image.

**What was the movie?**

It was the first "Superman." She was friends with Marlon Brando, and Marlon invited her.

**Did you know him?**

I did. My mom and him were very close. I remember one day coming home from school, and the answering machine picked up, and I heard him leaving my mom a message. I remember hearing his voice going, "Hey, it's Bud," and I was just frozen. My God, listening to that voice! It was so iconic,

but, again, these are the truest actors. Shelley and my mom were actors, like Charles Laughton was an actor or Marlon was an actor or Gena Rowlands was an actor. They were all playing complicated characters, flawed characters. There was no “too pretty for this,” “too ugly for that.”

**Just in 1974, your mother was in “Chinatown” and “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,” and your father was in “The Great Gatsby.” So you had Jack Nicholson, Ellen Burstyn, Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, all in this orbit.**

What was incredible was that my mother gave me my Alabama grandma to help raise me. So I listened to the stories of heartbreak and the craft of acting and the longing to get to the truth of the thing. And I had to go to gymnastics. And I had ballet class. And I was at school. And I went to Catholic church with my grandma and temple with Shelley, my godmother. I was immersed in *life* as well. Yes, I have three big memories of a red carpet. But, when my parents did press for a movie, we’d go to “Merv Griffin” or the “Tonight Show” or “The Mike Douglas Show,” and that was kind of it.

**It’s all ballooned now.**

Ballooned! Imagine: Could the seventies be the seventies with social media? Would we have had the same protective bubble of the art? I don’t know. I remember doing “Citizen Ruth,” when we were in the makeup trailer and had no money, having so much fun talking about where my hickeys should be placed. “Can we do a herpes sore?” “Yes! Herpes sore!” And I just think, Does that get lost if you’re an ambassador for a brand and you’re just starting your career? It gets to the point of protecting who you want to play and how far you want to go and if that’s likable and if that’s not likable, if that’s politically correct, if that’s too dangerous. David Lynch made art every single day of his life,

because he had to. It came from inside. It came from the unconscious. He never thought about what the audience would think of it.

**On the other hand, the New Hollywood of the seventies was also a bit notorious. The gender politics were hazardous. The drugs were plentiful. You've said that you saw "horribly inappropriate" stuff on movie sets when you were a teen-ager. How did you navigate the dicier part of the New Hollywood?**

The seventies felt radically safe. My dad was a marathoner, so he was really consistent and healthy, and my mom was very disciplined and professional. So I had pretty orderly hippies for parents. I was very lucky. The eighties were when stuff got crazier. Maybe it's because, in the seventies, I was the child of people there, and I was learning and evolving from those people. But they were rarely making movies about teen-agers. In the eighties, we started becoming the lead characters, and so suddenly we were on set. We were the grownups—but we were children. The world has proven that that's a very tragic terrain for many. I was fortunate to have some really loyal, kind people show up at fortuitous moments in my life. When I was twelve, I did a movie called "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains." I had my thirteenth birthday on that movie.

**Right, and it had members of the Sex Pistols and other punk rockers.**

If you want your kid to make smart choices and not go down an addictive path, send them on location with the Sex Pistols. They were the greatest. They'd seen hell, and they were, like, "You don't want to get into this shit." I was around people who let me see, at a very young age, that that would not be a happy path.

**That's not the case for many child actors.**

Yeah. In terms of predatory behavior, I'm sure it has always existed and I was too young to see it. But, once I was a professional, I saw how unbelievably dangerous any profession where minors are working can become. I think it's why, during the MeToo movement, there was a beautiful support alignment from the female farm workers' union to actresses and the Screen Actors Guild. And Mónica Ramírez, the extraordinary attorney and activist, was comparing the experience of any profession where twelve, thirteen, fourteen-year-olds are working. When wake-up calls happen culturally and you see something for the first time, you can never go back. And that is what gives me profound hope for future generations.

**The robins will come?**

They will. They will. ♦