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Lisa Cholodenko

29 Oct 2010

The family in [Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right*](#) might be unconventional but they will resonate with audiences of all sexual persuasions. [Julianne Moore](#) and [Annette Bening](#), as the parents of two children conceived with [Mark Ruffalo's](#) sperm in his donor phase, all show that the old adage of 'gay people deserve to be as miserable as straight people' to be accurate. This contemporary family is as flawed as any straight family you're likely to find.

Ruffalo's character Paul upsets the domestic apple cart when his two children Joni and Laser decide to seek him out. Suddenly included in a family he didn't know he was part of, the carefully constructed liberal dynamic Jules and Nic (Moore and Bening) strive to maintain is turned upside down.

Cholodenko's fourth feature took ten years to write so it has no excuse not to be good. It doesn't disappoint. The director has nailed every nuance of a modern day family and characters are as fully realised as you can get in 100 minutes.

As a fan of Cholodenko's work Moore was onboard right from the start and hung around waiting for the script to come together. The surprise casting of Bening was suggested by Moore for the more motherly role of Nic. (Robin Wright Penn was initially attached to the role.)

Mia Wasikowska and Josh Hutcherson play the kids. Wasikowska jumped out of nowhere to snag the lead in Tim Burton's [Alice in Wonderland](#) and will appear next year in [Gus Van Sant's Restless](#). And Hutcherson is the up and coming star best known for [Journey to the Center of the Earth](#) opposite Brendan Fraser.

The Kids Are All Right is more a personal film than a political one. 46-year old Cholodenko has a four-year old son, Calder, with her partner of eight years, composer Wendy Melvoin. They took it in turns to get pregnant using a sperm donor. And the film is co-written by Stuart Blumberg who donored his sperm as a young man. Together they took four years to get the first proper draft in shape and when Cholodenko conceived she took a couple of years out to re-orientate her life with a new baby before coming back to the script. It went down a storm with critics at the Sundance Film Festival, and won the Teddy Award for Best Feature Film at Berlin.

Born in Los Angeles Cholodenko caused a stir in gay cinematic terms when she released [High Art](#) in 1998. It tells the story of a straight book editor, played by [Radha Mitchell](#), who is drawn away from her boyfriend into a world of drugs and sex by [Ally Sheedy's](#) reclusive lesbian photographer. She followed [High Art](#) with [Laurel Canyon](#) (2002), channelling similar themes when Kate Beckinsale is seduced from a safe relationship into sexual exploration with her husband's decadent mother Frances McDormand.

As accomplished and ground-breaking as they were, there was something slightly stilted and pretentious about Cholodenko's first two films that *The Kids Are All Right* magnificently avoids. She's still exploring polymorphous sexuality and saying relationships can get sticky sometimes, but these familiar themes are loosened up with humour and a more naturalistic approach to storytelling.

Rachael Scott met with Cholodenko to discuss her new film and the current state of gay cinema.

You started writing *The Kids Are All Right* in 2004, then had a baby and went back to the script. How did becoming a parent influence your writing?

I saw a different perspective for the mums. I was a little shell shocked that first year I had Calder. You think, 'Oh, I can handle it. I'm a competent person', but it's 24/7. I was freaking out. I think it helped me focus the film and really engage in the relationship between the moms and the fulcrum of the unit. The main character is this five-person unit but at the core of it are these mums. And I think having our son Calder made that clear for me.

What did you think about the article in Time Magazine recently that said children raised by lesbian parents are better psychologically adjusted?

I did see that. I thought it was great. I've read a lot of those kinds of studies where, as far as they're reaching, they said kids raised by gay and lesbian parents are mature and stuff like that.

"I'm so tired of seeing gay characters in films where the trope is always some kind of suicide or tragic ending and I made a film like that!...I think there's a new era of having to reconsider the trajectory of the gay character in a movie."

When I was watching the film I thought the mums were very open about their sexuality, sex and how the children were conceived and that those types of conversations would never happen in most homes. But then I figured in a family with lesbian parents those discussions would be extremely important so that the children understand why their family is different, but also understand that there's nothing wrong with a different type of family.

Yes. It's a real respect for intelligence and the culture of openness and I think that's a good thing. I think there are lots of puritanical ideas about what is appropriate to talk about and it continues through the generations and I think these kinds of families demand a different dynamic and dialogue with the kids.



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What do you think about the accusations from some sections of the lesbian community that you've sold out to Hollywood by having Julianne Moore's character sleep with a man?

On the one hand I'm sympathetic because I know there's always a kind of right wing faction of the lesbian community that sees it as a cause and that's a sell out and blah, blah, blah. I feel sympathetic I guess to that kind of disappointment.

It doesn't really affect me because I don't see sexuality that way and I never saw this character that way. I see sexuality as more fluid and more inclusive than that. I'm sure there's a part of us that felt it was great that it was built into the plot anyway, you know, that she has this tryst with a man.

Is it going to make it easier to sell because there's this heterosexual component? It wasn't something that was contrived later on or constructed as an afterthought so we'd have a better chance of selling it. That was how the idea spilled out of my brain in the first place.

"Is it going to make it easier to sell because there's this heterosexual component? It wasn't something that was contrived later on or constructed as an afterthought so we'd have a better chance of selling it."

How do you think the portrayal of lesbians has changed on screen since you made *High Art*?

I'm so tired of seeing gay characters in films where the trope is always some kind of suicide or tragic ending and I made a film like that! I mean, it wasn't because she was a lesbian, it was because she was a drug addict. So I think there's a new era of having to reconsider the trajectory of the gay character in a movie and they can't just be in there because they're a gay character.

The whole gay martyr trope has been done to death and I don't think it's a very good example of where gay people are at. If it's always associated with trauma and tragedy it's a bit lopsided. I mean, there are millions of gay people living full lives who aren't traumatised.

I mean that isn't to say that it's not a hard experience or that there isn't still bigotry on every level, but you know - I don't need to tell you. You'd like cinema to move things forward.



There still aren't that many films with lesbian characters, though. What do you think 'gay' cinema still has to achieve?

It's really just about a great story, isn't it? I don't know. I really don't know how to comment on this. I tell you it's something I need to think more about.

There's this guy in the States called Tyler Perry. I've never seen his films, but this guy makes bazillions of fucking dollars and he's doing something that is really just about Black lifestyle and culture and it's totally working. I don't think it's political, it's just good fun.

So maybe there is a correlation in the gay community to that kind of thing where there's a different approach to it and it's about catering to the gay community in a different way where it's not tragic and it's not melodramatic and more taking it for granted. Assuming there's a population who is going to go and see it and appreciate it, but I don't really know what that looks like.

Even gay movies aimed at the mainstream like *Brokeback Mountain* are still tragic. Shows like *The L Word* and what's that other one that came from a British television show?

***Queer as Folk*?**

Yeah. Those kinds of shows have tried to do that, but I think they're really distorted.

What about *A Single Man*? Again that was tragic.

I mean even like *Milk*. I mean every film that's been about a great...ohh 'gay hero' gay whatever, it's like 'gay martyr'!

They're sold as universal love stories aren't they...?

Yes. But they're all tragic.

You're right. *A Single Man* wasn't exactly a rom-com was it?

Talk about the downer of post gay cinema.

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***The Kids Are All Right* opens in UK cinemas on 29 October 2010.**



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