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From Ecstasy to the Promised Land: Conversations with Nina Davidovich, Shiri Appleby, and Lesley Ann Warren of the Film *When Do We Eat?*

By Carly Hope Finseth

When Do We Eat? is the story of the "world's fastest Passover Seder" gone horribly awry. It's about an old school dad (Michael Lerner) who's as tough on his sons as his father (Jack Klugman) is on him. On this night, however, one of the boys (Ben Feldman) slips Dad a dose of special, hallucinogenic ecstasy in order "to give him a new perspective." Meanwhile, Mom (Lesley Ann Warren) brings a handsome stranger to dinner and the kids take sides. By the end of the night, however, Dad's visions turn him into a modern day Moses intent on leading this hungry group to the promised land of family forgiveness. Of course they're all so stubborn, it would be easier to part the Red Sea.

The movie has won several awards, including Best Comedy at the San Francisco World Film Festival, Best Director at the Tahoe/Reno International Film Festival, and Best Screenplay at the San Diego Film Festival. And it's really no surprise, as the film speaks to all viewers about the importance—and often dysfunction—of family.

I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to interview three of the film's most prominent women: Nina Davidovich, who co-wrote the film with husband and Director Salvador Litvak; up-and-coming actress Shiri Appleby (*Roswell*, *Swimfan*) who plays the daughter Nikki in the film; and the luminous Lesley Ann Warren who plays the family matriarch, Peggy. The following details our conversations.

Nina Davidovich, Co-Writer, *When Do We Eat?*

Carly Hope Finseth: *Tell me about the film.*

Nina Davidovich: Well, it's about a family who, you know, they kind of get together every year to celebrate Passover because they feel like they should. Nobody gets along; they all have their own craziness. And the father of the family, who is played by Michael Werner, is a rageaholic, always yelling at other members of the family, you know negative and cynical and pretty obnoxious. And one of the kids is kind of a teenage pothead and he decides, you know, I think I'm going to mellow dad out and give him some *really* powerful ecstasy—which is not just ecstasy, but ecstasy mixed with LSD—so it's a hallucinogenic also. So that's kind of what gets the whole story going is that Dad is tripping. And so of course, the son thinks, you know, oh Dad will be so mellow and happy and everything will be easier. But, and, there definitely is an element of when the drugs kick in he suddenly becomes much happier and more mellow and more loving than he ever was before, but what's interesting is that because everyone in the family is so used to the pattern of, you know, Dad's a jerk, once he changes, it sets off a lot of other conflicts. And so, before things get better, they actually get a whole lot worse. They *know* how to deal with angry Dad; they don't really know how to deal with loving Dad. And so, by the end of the movie, everyone has kind of gone through the fire and come out whole and they're a lot happier and I think they've learned that love involves acceptance and your relatives aren't always going to be who you want them to be, but you need to accept them for who they are, and it's worth it because family is meaningful and is hugely important.

CHF: *So you would you say that the movie is about family more than, say, religion?*

ND: You know, it's about both. We originally were going to do it as a Thanksgiving dinner because we just thought that the idea was really funny of, you know, slipping drugs to Dad. And we were going to do it at Thanksgiving originally. And then we decided, you know what? We're both Jewish; we both celebrate Passover, go to Seders every year. There's been Thanksgiving movies, but there's never been a Passover movie, and it kind of might add a little more color to the story. And so, but it really actually added *a lot* and the movie did wind up being about religion and tradition and ritual and how, you know, a lot of people today feel that religion is kind of irrelevant to them. But what we've shown in watching this family go through the Jewish ritual of a Passover is that there is value in the tradition and in doing something that has been done for thousands of years. And the challenge is: How are we going to make this relevant for our



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—Nina Davidovich



Shiri Appleby as Nikki in *When Do We Eat?*

"I don't feel that I'm typecast only as the nice girl next door. I think that you can get into different rooms, and can prove that you're capable of other stuff. It's just up to you."

—Shiri Appleby



Lesley Ann Warren as Peggy in *When Do We Eat?*

"Everything that women in real life go through is multiplied many times as an actress, I think. You know, the sociological, cultural emphasis on youth and beauty is inescapable. So I think that you have to keep your eye and your heart on what is important to you."

—Lesley Ann Warren

The Movie



[When Do We Eat?](#)

families today? So, it's about family but it's about a family that's healed in the course of a ritual. So it's definitely about family, about religion. You don't have to be Jewish to understand it. We've had a lot of non-Jews say, "That's my family." And people who aren't Jewish and who have never been to a Passover Seder are very interested in, well what is it? What is it all about? Like I've seen *Monsoon Wedding*; I loved it. I'm very interested in other cultures and so for Jews, it's kind of like, it has an additional level of resonance because, you know, most Jews have celebrated Passover. But for non-Jews, it has an additional level of interest because it's like, Oh wow! This is someone else's culture and it's kind of interesting.

CHF: *I've read that you made a conscious decision to avoid stereotypes when writing it. What did you mean by that? I'm thinking, for example, the stereotypical Jewish mother...*

ND: Yes. That's something that just is a personal pet peeve of mine, that Jewish women in today's society in movies and TV are always portrayed as obnoxious, big mouthed, and above all unattractive. There are so many TV shows and movies where the Jewish guy is in love with a non-Jewish girl because Jewish girls are so unappealing and bossy. And, you know, stereotypes come from somewhere and there is a little truth to that but you know, I'm sick of it as a Jewish woman and as a mother of a baby daughter. I just think it's kind of a dangerous message. And so it was really important to me that the female characters, in addition to all their flaws and foibles, I just wanted them to be attractive and appealing. And Lesley Ann Warren is the Jewish mother. I mean, it's a different image than we've seen. Because first of all, she's thin and gorgeous. And second of all, she's not overbearing the way most Jewish mothers we've seen are. She doesn't play the guilt card as heavily. So, yeah, I mean we definitely wanted to avoid some of the same—plus, my husband will say that he's sick of Jewish men always being portrayed as nebbishy and nerdy and so, for whatever flaws the characters have, we didn't want to play into those same kind of Woody Allen—and I love Woody Allen, but it's gotten to be a little cultural cliché that Jewish women are big mouthed and bossy and Jewish men are nebbishy and dorky. And we wanted to put that to rest.

CHF: *There was something about a recent feminist aspect of having an orange on the Seder plate. What is that about?*

ND: Yeah, we had an orange in the movie because there's this kind of new tradition—and that's what's cool about this kind of thing is that it's all about the tradition that's been around for thousands of years, but also you can add your own new things. And so, what happened a few years ago, or maybe it was like 10 or 15 years ago, is that there are now women rabbis. And there's this very kind of well respected orthodox rabbi *man* (of course), and when he heard that there were women rabbis, he said—and let me just tell you first that the bimah in a synagogue is kind of like the stage at the front of the congregation—so this rabbi said, "A woman belongs on the bimah like an orange belongs on the Seder plate." So, ever since then, a lot of women have been like, you know what? A woman does belong up on the bimah; a woman *can* be a rabbi. And so we're going to put an orange on the Seder plate. So we have an orange on the Seder plate [in the film]. And it's actually not explained in the movie because it just, we had it explained and then that part got cut out. But for those who know, I think it will be just a cute kind of inside joke and we're hoping that other people are going to ask about it.

CHF: *How would you characterize the female characters in the film? I see that one seems to be a prostitute...*

ND: The female characters are all very strong. That one character ["Nikki," played by Shiri Appleby], what she is actually—her mother actually called her a prostitute and certain other characters consider her that she's no better than a prostitute—but what she really does is she's called a "sex surrogate." I don't know if you're familiar with this profession. They definitely exist and it's kind of getting bigger and bigger, and what it is is what it sounds like; it's a professional woman who helps men who have sexual problems. And sometimes that help involves actual sexual activity. So for instance, a typical example of when someone would use a sexual surrogate is like a disabled person, maybe a man who has cerebral palsy, maybe has been in a wheelchair his whole life, he doesn't know, you know, he's never been with a woman, he wouldn't know how to begin. And, you know, a relationship with a surrogate would be someone who would kind of teach him the ropes and get him to feel more comfortable and confident so that he could maybe then go out after that and kind of interact in the world of dating. So that's what this character does. And she considers herself a healer, a helper, somebody that helps, like I said, disabled people, or people with sexual problems—impotence, stuff like that—and of course her mom just sees her as a whore. Sort of, you have sex for money, that's all I need to know. That's what the mom says. But one thing we did also that we thought was kind of surprising is that the dad totally supports her. Because as far as he's concerned, she's successful. She has a job, she's making money, that's what he cares about. So we thought it was kind of unexpected that somebody who that's her job, her dad thinks it's okay.

CHF: *What do you hope that moviegoers get out of the movie after watching the film?*

When Do We Eat?

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Lesley Ann Warren as Peggy in
When Do We Eat?

"With all the ups and down that any career brings—but I think especially when you're in the public eye in a particular way—you really have to create strong inner life to survive."

—Lesley Ann Warren

ND: First of all, I want them to laugh. I want them to come away from it in maybe a better mood than they went into it with. I also want them to think about their own family and what healing needs to be done maybe within their own family. And I want them to have hope that people can change, families can heal, things can be mended. The way it happens in the movie, obviously, is a little exaggerated, but the message is, you know, it's worth it. Working on family relationships is worth it. There's hope. I mean, I have feuds in my family, my husband has feuds in his family, most people do—but it doesn't have to be that way. But if we'd made people laugh then we've really succeeded in our number one goal, but we also wanted to say a little something more about family and tradition.

About Nina Davidovich: *Nina Davidovich moved to LA from NY with dreams of becoming a screenwriter, but was sidetracked by a career in feature production working for the Donners' Company and producer Jennie Lew Tugend. Davidovich worked on films such as Lethal Weapon 3 and Free Willy, and is very proud of having found Keiko, the killer whale who played Willy, and who was later rescued from his tiny tank in Mexico City and released into the wild. Davidovich entered the corporate world as a Creative Executive at Disney's Touchstone Pictures, and spent several years in movie development before returning to her first love, writing. She makes her feature film writing debut alongside her husband, director Salvador Litvak.*

Shiri Appleby, "Nikki," *When Do We Eat?*



Shiri Appleby as Nikki in *When Do We Eat?*

Carly Hope Finseth: *Well, I spoke with Nina a few minutes ago and she started to tell me about your role... Can you tell me: What is a "sex surrogate"?*

Shiri Appleby: A sex surrogate is a woman who works as a therapist to help their clients overcome their sexual issues in the bedroom. Isn't that weird? I guess there really are sex surrogates.

CHF: *So what did you think when you first read the script?*

SA: I couldn't believe I got to audition for a role like that; it's so fun!

CHF: *It's so different from other stuff you've done, right?*

SA: Absolutely. And it was great. And once I got the role, you can look up on the Internet and find a lot of people's stories of people who have used sex surrogates and I spoke with sex surrogates and you realize how helpful it is.

CHF: *So you did research and prepared for the role that way?*

SA: Well I just wanted to know what this is really like. And you realize what a serious thing it is. So that's sort of where I found the character—you know, she's very serious about her job and she takes herself very seriously and that's sort of where I got her from.

CHF: *And your father in the movie supports you with this, but that your mother thinks you're some sort of prostitute?*

SA: My dad's behind it, because he sort of thinks I'm an entrepreneur and I'm going to make a zillion dollars. And he supports me. My mom is basically saying I'm a whore.

CHF: *Did you relate at all to the character in terms of her enterprising nature and strong character?*

SA: Yeah, you know, she had a very strong drive and she's very proud of herself and she has a combative behavior with her brothers. But you know at the end of the day she loves her family. And I think that's something I really identified with.

CHF: *What did you enjoy the most about the role?*

SA: It was just something so different for me and I loved doing a comedy. And working with all of these great actors was *really* fun; I got to learn a lot and be a part of a really good experience.

CHF: *Well, how has your life and career changed since your role on Roswell? Do you think that's contributed to all of these new opportunities?*

SA: Well, absolutely. I'm sure being a part of a successful television show doesn't hurt. And you know, going into rooms and doing well and liking your job is another factor. And so it's been really wonderful to be playing all of these different characters and shooting in all of these different locations. I really, *really* enjoyed it. Not to say that I wouldn't do another television show again—I would, I'd just want it to be the right thing.

CHF: *Do you read for a lot of roles? Do you have a lot going on in your schedule?*

SA: Yeah! You know, it comes in waves of crazy times and really busy times, but I've been really busy so far this year. I've already made two movies so I feel pretty lucky right now.

CHF: *What's it like being a young, up-and-coming female actress in Hollywood?*

SA: Pretty exciting. I wouldn't necessarily feel... I mean, I don't walk around saying that all day [laughs], but it's nice to be working and to just see that the parts keep getting better. And so I'm enjoying it and hopefully it will only continue.

CHF: *Do feel you're treated at all differently for being young or a woman?*

SA: I think you're always treated differently in life for being young... But, no.

CHF: *You don't feel typecast in a particular role, or...?*

SA: No. I mean I can only audition for certain roles. [Laughs] But no, I don't feel that I'm typecast only as the nice girl next door. I think that you can get into different rooms, and can prove that you're capable of other stuff. It's just up to you.

CHF: *How did you first get into acting?*

SA: It started when I was really young. My parents helped me out getting started and I've been doing it ever since. It's been a really wonderful life.

CHF: *Did you grow up in the L.A. area?*

SA: I did!

CHF: *So you grew up around the industry as a child.*

SA: I was a child actor. [Laugh] I did commercials, I did television shows, I did a lot of print work. It's been really nice.

CHF: *In closing, what do you hope that moviegoers will take from the movie and your performance?*

SA: Well the whole movie is really fun. And I think that not only is the movie about a Jewish family, but we can all sort of relate to it because there's craziness and mischief and all sorts of stuff happening. We're poking fun at the religion and making fun of a bunch of different stuff and at the end of the day it's really about a family that loves each other. And I think that everyone can kind of walk away from that and relate to some degree because we all have crazy families and we all do love them. So it's a *really* fun movie. If you love a *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* situation this is right up your alley.

About Shiri Appleby: *Shiri Appleby has been acting since the age of 4, landing jobs in several commercials for Cheerios, M&Ms and Taco Bell. Her first television job was on the soap opera Santa Barbara. Next came various roles on thirtysomething, Bronx Zoo and Doogie Howser, M.D. She made her film-debut in the low budget sequel, Curse II: The Bite. I Love You to Death came next and Shiri finally started to get secure work as an actress. For the next four years she worked steadily in television movies and made various television appearances.*

When she entered high school she took a small break and took part in Yearbook, Student Council and was a cheerleader. In 1997 she graduated from Calabasas High School, where she was voted 'Most Spirited' by her class. Roles on 7th Heaven and City Guys followed and then Shiri enrolled into the University of Southern California where she planned on taking a break from acting and studying English. However, her plans gave way when she landed the role as Liz Parker on the WB Hit Roswell. It was then that she gave her education a break and decided to try acting full-time. With the success of Roswell, Shiri rose to fan-magazine fame and was seen everywhere through the show's success. With small roles in past films such as The Thirteenth Floor and The Other Sister, in 2002, after Roswell ended, Shiri landed the lead role as Amy Miller, the trusting girlfriend of Jesse Bradford, in the suspenseful teen-film Swimfan.

Lesley Ann Warren, "Peggy," *When Do We Eat?*



Lesley Ann Warren as Peggy in *When Do We Eat?*

Carly Hope Finseth: *Tell me about your character. What is she like?*

Lesley Ann Warren: Well, she's a modern woman who has been a very protective and loving mom who has tried to make a marriage work. And I think she's the kind of personality that keeps all of the plates in the air—tries to keep the plates in the air at the same time, like jugglers, you know?—and they're all crashing. It's just not happening. So she's at a point in her marriage, I think, when her marriage isn't working any longer. Her husband possibly had an affair years ago that she hasn't been able to get over; her kids are kind of all over the place and didn't turn out maybe necessarily the way she'd hoped. And I think she's looking for meaning in her life and isn't finding it in her home anymore.

CHF: *Do you relate to her at all in your own life?*

LAW: You know, the part that I do relate to is that I am somebody who tries to make everything work. I want everybody to get along, I want everybody to be happy. [Laughs] But I think the difference is that Peggy has waited a *really* long time to make a decision for herself to find a new way of defining herself. I think I did that in my '20s and '30s. You know, she's waited much longer than I'd be willing to wait.

CHF: *Did you do anything special to prepare for the role?*

LAW: You know, I'm Jewish and I grew up with my mom and my grandmother and my great-grandmother having Seders all the time, so there was a lot I knew about the tradition of the Seder. But having left the religion to, you know, sort of find my own way when I was a teenager, and sort of finding my own spiritual center and belief system, it was interesting to be re-introduced to it as an adult and to hear and learn and understand what as a child I sort of followed by rote. So I was able to bring the memory of what I experienced, but to inform it with an adult perception.

CHF: *Do you think that non-Jews will get as much out of this film?*

LAW: I think they will because I think it goes well beyond religion. I think that's the purpose of the movie in a lot of ways is to... You know, for sure there's a specificity because it's a Jewish family, but it's a family that the dynamics are typical to any family. I mean this is a highly identifiable, relatable set of circumstances that occur in all families. And I think it's easy to pick yourself out in the group. You know? Just about anybody from all the ages. So I think that the reason that it's done well in film festivals is because... the divisive lines between religion or color or whatever are broken down by the identifiable behaviors of people—and then everybody can go, Oh yeah, that's me, yeah my brother's that way, or, you know—and then there's no longer that separation.

CHF: *Right. It's just about family and acceptance and love.*

LAW: Yes, and growth and change and forgiveness and moving on... Yeah.

CHF: *I'm curious how this project may be different than others you've worked on. In terms of it being an independent production, were you given more room to craft the character the way you wanted to?*

LAW: You know I've done a lot of independent movies and the great part about doing independent films is that generally speaking it's the Director's vision. When you're doing a studio film it's much more costly and so there are more people involved in making decisions. So unless it's a really incredibly strong and legendary type of director, they generally have to listen to a lot of other input. Whereas in an independent film the financial stakes are lower and the Director is really the one at the helm. Therefore, there is a lot of—you know, there is a lot of personal vision. And the actors are allowed to explore with the Director that vision and don't have to answer to anyone but the Director, basically. And that's exciting for actors. I think that ultimately it's the director-actor connection that makes it an exciting experience for an actor.

CHF: *Well I've heard a lot of actors talk about feeling "safe" with a director. Was this experience kind of like that for you, where you felt like you could kind of expand your skills to really embrace this character?*

LAW: Well since this is an ensemble film, in a funny way a lot of the work comes with the other actors. And because it was so interdependent, there was so much connection with all of these family members and so much history to be created,

that a lot of the work came from the actors themselves working with the other actors. You know, now Sal [Litvak, the Director, Co-Writer, and Co-Producer] certainly had very specific ideas and definite viewpoints but ultimately a movie is a living, breathing organism and it takes on its own life in a way. Because we were all around this table for almost two months [laughs] we were creating a family amongst ourselves. And I would say that that was where the primary work was.

CHF: *Were most of the scenes shot with the entire family?*

LAW: Yeah.

CHF: *So that had to be quite the experience.*

LAW: Oh yeah. [Laughs] I mean, there were days people weren't talking to each other, and then, you know, I'm your best friend, and then I hate you, and you know all of that stuff that goes on... [Laughs] Lots of laughter, tears, just like normal life.

CHF: *Like a family.*

LAW: Like a family. [Laughs] Exactly.

CHF: *So it took two months to film?*

LAW: Almost.

CHF: *Where was it filmed?*

LAW: It was filmed in L.A. and it was on a sound stage and, you know, we were there at that Seder table. I thought if I saw another matzoh ball I was going to shoot myself.

CHF: *I bet! [Laughs] And that probably also brought up all kinds of demons from your childhood that may be reasons why you left the religion?*

LAW: The truth is, you know, I think for me, I don't like the idea of formal religion per se—for me. Just for me. It was something I needed to develop and find for myself. And I've done that over the years. But, you know, in the end it was actually... I mean, culturally, I'll always feel like a Jewish woman. In terms of religion, I've moved into a different direction.

CHF: *Well that makes sense. So, a little off topic... What it is like being a strong, diverse—I mean, you do lots of different diverse roles—female actress in Hollywood? What's the experience like for you?*

LAW: Well, they did an A&E Biography on me once. Steven Soderbergh was interviewed and they said to him, "Is she tough?" And he said, "You have to be tough to be a woman and survive in Hollywood." And that's the truth. You know, it's so cutthroat, it's so brutalizing in certain ways. Everything that women in real life go through is multiplied many times as an actress, I think. You know, the sociological, cultural emphasis on youth and beauty is inescapable. So I think that you have to keep your eye and your heart on what is important to you. And, for me, it's always been that I'm passionate about acting. And so with all the ups and down that any career brings—but I think especially when you're in the public eye in a particular way—you really have to create strong inner life to survive.

CHF: *Well I really admire you. I see you on screen—which is actually probably much different than you are in real life—but you don't seem to be really demonized by all of that. Perhaps it's that you're more centered.*

LAW: I think that I've worked really, really hard to be that. And it's hard work to be that.

CHF: *Well you always seem to have this fun-loving attitude and I know that a lot of people will remember you as "Sophie" on Desperate Housewives, this woman with such a vibrant attitude. Is that kind of how you would describe yourself in real life?*

LAW: You know, I think I'm a real paradox. Because there's this part of me that is really girlish and childlike and playful and loves to laugh and loves to have a good time. Then there's equally a serious side that's prone to crying jags and [laughs] you know, my feelings get hurt easily. I'm sort of this combination of both of those factors. And I think that's why I've sort of been able to do drama as well as comedy, and kind of easily flow from one to the other. Because there's sort of this schizoid part of me [laughs] that covers all factors. [Laughs] You know, I had a relationship once who said it was like living in a three-ring circus. [Laughs]

CHF: *Well, at least you keep things exciting, right?*

LAW: Yeah, it's definitely exciting for those around me. [Laughs]

About Lesley Ann Warren: *One of Hollywood's most versatile actresses, Lesley Ann Warren plays emotionally fragile women, tough-minded careerists, hardworking single moms, and downright wacky ladies with equal verve and skill.*

She made her first show-biz splash right out of her teens, playing the lead in a 1966 TV musical production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella. Walt Disney saw her and signed the wholesome, fresh-faced Warren to play a supporting role in The Happiest Millionaire, the last film he personally supervised. She also appeared in the Disney studio's The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band before taking "adult" roles in the TV series Mission: Impossible and a slew of made-for-TV movies, as well as the lowbudget Pickup on 101. She worked extensively in TV movies and miniseries throughout the rest of the decade, most notably The Legend of Valentino, Portrait of a Stripper, and Beulah Land.

Blake Edwards gave Warren a juicy part on the big screen in Victor/Victoria, competing with Julie Andrews for the attentions of James Garner; she showed a real flair for broad comedy, and was Oscar-nominated for her uninhibited supporting performance. She followed up with Choose Me, Songwriter and Baja Oklahoma, in which she starred as a Texas barmaid who wants to be a songwriter. Mel Brooks gave her a good showcase in his Life Stinks as a homeless woman teetering on the edge of sanity. She remains active on television, and starred in Willing to Kill: The Texas Cheerleader Story and the feature Color of Night.

When Do We Eat? is now available for purchase on DVD. Buy it online at Amazon.com. Or, to learn more about the film, visit the movie's official web site at www.whendoweat.com.

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***Carly Hope Finseth** spends much of her time pondering what she wants to be when she grows up. She alternates between days filled with cozy socks, hot tea, and meditative reflection—and others, which are loaded with caffeine fixes, high-powered lunches, and stints as a metropolitan city tour guide. When she's not sifting through e-mails, house hunting, dropping her cell phone, or sticking another reminder Post-It on her desk, Carly also somehow finds the time to write and reflect on important (and the occasional not-so-important) feminist issues.*



"Every woman has the right to become herself."

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