

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH JENNIFER JASON LEIGH

Jennifer Jason Leigh is remarkable for her chameleon-like ability to transform herself, physically and psychologically, for each of her roles. Her ability to inhabit her characters comes from an intensive process of preparation and research, and from a fearlessness that allows her to abandon her reflective personality and become another person onscreen. Leigh has consistently sought out risky, interesting roles, working for such directors as Robert Altman, David Cronenberg, and Alan Rudolph. She spoke at the Museum on the day she received rave reviews for her dazzling portrayal of Dorothy Parker in *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 23, 1994):**

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Jennifer Jason Leigh.  
(Applause)

I will just read from the *New York Times* review because I think that's the one that everybody waits for with the most anxiety. Janet Maslin said that you portrayed "a charismatic, unforgettable heroine, stunningly well played. As she confirms here and also showed with her amazing mimicry in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Ms. Leigh has greatly evolved from a promising young performer to an accomplished actress capable of dazzling surprises." What I want to start by asking you is, what is it like on opening night for a film? I mean, waiting for reviews and then your feelings about that.

LEIGH: It's nerve-wracking, of course. But I was really proud of myself last night because I've been sick—I had the flu—so I went to sleep at 8:30. I didn't go out at 10:00 and get the paper. I thought I was really becoming an adult now. And went to sleep at 8:30 and woke up at 8:00, and I'm in a hotel, so the paper was outside. Then I got it, and I was grateful! Yeah, it's nerve-wracking because you've done the work, and I happen to like this film a lot. I really love the movie, but you never know how people are going to respond to it.

SCHWARTZ: Now you said you felt like an adult now,

and one of the things that the *New York Times* review said was that this was some kind of turning point... I was wondering if you saw this film as some sort of turning point, or if you see what's happening right now in your career as a sort of turning point.

LEIGH: Well, I'm bad with the whole notion of career. I just don't think about it. I just feel really lucky to be working. And I hope to keep working! (Laughter) And that's about as far as it goes. I mean I—you always hope that you can get, that you get better. You don't want to get worse, you know. So now is a good time for me, because I've been working a lot, and I have another job now, so that's always very good.

SCHWARTZ: In fact, you've been shooting the next two movies after this.

LEIGH: Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: What was it like playing an older character, where the character ages?

LEIGH: That was particularly terrifying until we shot it because all I could imagine was—you know when you are in high school and you see a high-school play and the person comes out playing the granny and they're all hunched over with a cane? That was just in the forefront of my brain. So I called every actor I knew who had done it well—I didn't call the ones who had not done it well, because I didn't want to do that! (Laughter) And then I spent a lot of time with people who are 65, and I went to some

bars and watched women at that age drunk, and you notice that 65 ain't that old. You know?

So what I really tried to work on was the life that she had experienced from the time we had seen her until then. I mean, there are things you can do with posture, and with the way you see the world, but it's also the world that you've seen. And that's sort of the depth of your experience, which gives you age really more than anything. I mean, at that point you can still move your head. You know? It doesn't hurt to walk, it just hurts to think. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** You have said in talking about the characters you've played that you get to explore sides of life that aren't there in your real personality. In your so-called "real life." I was wondering what Dorothy Parker means to you. Here's somebody, first of all, who is incredibly dark and incredibly opinionated. One thing you've said in interviews is that you're not—you don't feel like you're a very opinionated person in real life.

**LEIGH:** No, and also when I have opinions, I usually don't share them! (Laughter) So that was a great—first of all, she's always been a hero of mine. Since I was sixteen, she was my hero. So that was an amazing thing to play. It was amazing to be inside her brain because she's so brilliant and so funny, and, I mean, the sadness I understood. And I also think that every woman who ever reads Dorothy Parker relates in a very very deep way.

**SCHWARTZ:** A lot of the choices that you've made in the roles you've taken—you've played characters who are confronting pain, dealing with pain, and it seems as though you are doing that in a way to get at a sort of honesty of portrayal. One of the things that typified Dorothy Parker [was] that she always told the truth.

**LEIGH:** Yeah, exactly. That's another thing I love about her. She just, she told it as she saw it, and she saw things pretty damned clearly. I just think that's a remarkable quality. She's so smart and so sharp. I have these interviews of hers when she was 65, and the things she said—aside from the fact that they are howlingly funny—she was just so smart, and she was never afraid to say exactly what she felt. And as harsh as she was on other people—she could decimate people with a sentence—she was that hard on herself, too.

**SCHWARTZ:** You once said that it's in the strange or the unusual that we find ourselves. I think this again has to do with I think some of the choices you've made in characters.

**LEIGH:** Yeah, I mean, I think that I said it. I do think it's true. It's like the movie. I don't know if you all saw *Sweetie*, but that's one of my all-time favorite movies, and you couldn't have odder, stranger characters. And yet you relate to all—you recognize them, whether it's you or your sister or someone else in your family—it's usually someone in your family. And I relate so strongly to that movie as opposed to movies where the people are really generic, and we are supposed to see ourselves, but all we feel is inadequate when we watch them.

**SCHWARTZ:** Working with Alan Rudolph must have been an interesting experience. One has the feeling in his films that as a viewer you are eavesdropping on a real situation. There is a sense—almost a documentary-like feeling in the way he uses the camerawork. What was that like?

**LEIGH:** Yeah, that's true. As an actor you feel that way, too. Because everyone, we're all wearing these [referring to microphones]—except you don't see them on the outside of our costumes. But everybody's miced. And usually in a film you are not allowed to overlap, so if you speak I have to wait at least a beat before I begin. And you have marks on the floor, like these chair marks,—you come to that mark and talk and move to another mark and talk. And on Alan's films everybody's miced there so you can overlap whenever you feel like it. There are no marks, so everything is spontaneous.

There is a lot of improvisation, which on this was hard, because we were inside these brilliant minds, which none of us possess. So we all had to really bone up! But we did, and we had the greatest time of our lives. We just had so much fun. And you don't know where the hell the camera is and where it's going, because the camera is set up over there, but it's moving all over the place. So it's incredibly freeing, and every single detail down to the silverware on the table is period. He creates something very, very real, and then you feel like you can live it, which is different.

**SCHWARTZ:** This is a quality that I think is true of a

lot of your performances that you seem to be totally inside the character and just really living that person. And we've heard a lot of your interviews when you talk about the preparation and work you do beforehand, and I just wondered what the experience is like when you are actually in front of the camera, and there are lights and microphones. There was a story I read once about your very first, like a Disney TV movie...

LEIGH: Oh, that was horrible.

SCHWARTZ: Where you were looking at the camera and looking at...

LEIGH: Yeah! It was so big! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: What is it like now in front of the camera? Is it truly, have you truly got to the point...

LEIGH: No, I love it! Now it's no problem. It's just there. When I was...I guess I was fifteen or sixteen when I did that Disney movie, and I am so atrocious in it. And it's Phoebe [Cates]—it's my friend Phoebe's favorite film because I'm so bad. You can literally see my eyes going from the person I'm looking at to the camera! Oh, you want to see it now?

SCHWARTZ: We left it off the filmography!

LEIGH: It's called *The Young Runaways*. It was a TV thing.

SCHWARTZ: Somebody saw it.

LEIGH: Oh, no!

SCHWARTZ: Okay. *Short Cuts*, where you work with one of the very greatest directors, actors' directors—your character in *Short Cuts* is one of the few that was not actually from Raymond Carver, that was invented, at least from what I understand, it was invented.

LEIGH: Well, it's from a Raymond Carver short story, but that character, obviously they didn't do phone sex back then. Well, they weren't paid to do phone sex!

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about how that character evolved?

LEIGH: Basically yeah he [Robert Altman] called me and said, "What do you think of the character of Lois?"—which in the script basically said Lois is on the phone doing phone-sex calls. That's all that was there. And I said, "I love it, it sounds great to me!" Because it really did. And he said, "Well, you go out, you find her. You get the phone calls, you do it. I just want it very real and very raunchy." So I thought, "Perfect! I love that idea." (Laughter)

So I just went to a bunch of phone-sex places. There was one that was literally a factory where people were in little cubby-holes side by side, and I think that's where the rubber band thing—there's a rubber band thing and an earlier phone sex thing that I got. And then I went to a very private, intimate office. And then I went to a woman's house. And then I went to a man who does it in the valley—he's a heavy-metal guitar player, but he had a broken leg so he couldn't work and he needed to make some money, so on the phone I think his name was Candy. (Laughter) But it was quite an education, you know. And all the phone calls in the movie are verbatim phone calls that I listened to, some of which I tape-recorded, which they didn't care about at all. I got to go through the files. A lot of people call. I have my next job in the bag with this thing! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: What is the process of internalizing a character like? Because you do incredible research work and external work in a way, in terms of getting the physical details, but you have talked about how acting is like a virus to you. Getting a character is like getting a virus—that it's something that is in your system and that it's with you throughout the film. What is that? How does that transformation work?

LEIGH: I don't know. I usually just do a lot of research. I read a bunch of things, and I meet a lot of people who I think are similar to the character or could be, and pick things from different people. And with Dorothy Parker there was just tons on her, and that was all I had to focus on, so it was a little bit easier in certain ways. I use paintings and photographs. On the last movie, I used a lot of Nan Goldin and Larry Clark photography. And different music and things like that. And I just work and work and work and pray to God it's going to sink in somehow. And then I don't know quite how it happens, but at a certain point you have to trust it.

You know?

**SCHWARTZ:** And then does something change when you hear the word “action,” for example? Alan Rudolph said, in praising you, he said you are the most anonymous actress he’s ever worked with—that you save it all for the screen, and then it’s electrifying when it’s on screen. There was a similar...

**LEIGH:** That’s nice!

**SCHWARTZ:** And then Robert Altman who said that you’re the actress who other actress will someday be judged against. He said that off camera you are like a ghost and that [on camera] there is some kind of transformation.

**LEIGH:** I’m very pale, it’s true! You know what it is? I’m shy, you know. And it’s hard. I think acting for me is a way—when I’m in someone else’s skin, and I’m saying someone else’s words and living their life somewhat, it’s a lot easier for me, and I’m much freer and more extroverted, and I can communicate. I can communicate something about myself that I wouldn’t dare communicate otherwise. And so I think that’s—I often feel like I have very little to say, and I’m awed by Altman. And I know there was a day when he thought I was—one day he came to visit the set, and he asked me to get him a cup of coffee. And of course you know I was delighted! I get to get Altman a coffee! And so I went and got it and everything, and then someone said that was Jennifer. And he thought I was a production assistant! (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** The Coen brothers, who are very different directors, who seem to be much more interested in surface and externals, and who made fun of you for your research.

**LEIGH:** Yeah, [Joel] called me a sissy or something.

**SCHWARTZ:** He said research was for sissies!

**LEIGH:** Yeah. Well, it is in a certain way, but they don’t have to do research. They are brilliant. I don’t know how their minds work. I never will understand that. Because they seem so normal when you meet them. (Laughter) It’s just beyond me. So they don’t need to do any research, but I do.

**SCHWARTZ:** *The Hudsucker Proxy*, is very much a movie about earlier movies that makes one think of *His Girl Friday*. In this case, how much was your research based on looking at old movies, as opposed to going out and talking to journalists?

**LEIGH:** I talked to Murray Kempton, who was great to talk to, and I did a little of that and a little bit about working in a newsroom in the 1950s. But the way I approached that was as though I were an actress in the 1930s doing a movie for [Preston] Sturges or [George] Cukor or any of those or [Frank] Capra. And so I read all their bios, and I was able to get gossip magazines with interviews with Jean Arthur and Katharine Hepburn and things like that and read their bios, and so that’s how I wanted to approach it. Because there’s no realism in the movie at all. It’s a screwball comedy. And I grew up watching those, and I always loved them so much, but I never thought I would get a chance to make one.

**SCHWARTZ:** You haven’t done that many comedies—a cameo or a small part of a big picture. What is the difference for you, if there is one, between drama and comedy? You don’t think there is one?

**LEIGH:** No.

**SCHWARTZ:** Is there in the process?

**LEIGH:** I think it’s all... I think *Miami Blues* is a comedy, too. I mean, it’s dark, but it’s hopefully funny. (Laughter) But no, I think you approach it the same way. It’s a human being, it’s just finding out who that person is.

**SCHWARTZ:** You once played a series of prostitutes in different films and now you seem to be playing journalists in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and in your upcoming movie *Dolores Claiborne* you play an *Esquire* writer. So what kind of empathy do you have for journalists who also do a lot of the same investigative work? I mean your approach to...

**LEIGH:** Yeah, they do. Because I met, I think, with ten or twelve journalists in New York and in Washington and interviewed them, which was nice. And they were really generous and really open and, boy, do I have the dirt on this town now, I really do! (Laughter) But I have a lot of empathy now. And the

frightening thing, though, is that I did this whole thing, all this research, and I thought, this is going to make me really savvy, and the next time I give an interview I'm not going to say this, I'm not going to say that, I'm going to be careful. But the problem is that because I had all this empathy, the next two interviews I did were like, "Whatever you want to know!" (Laughter) Which was not such a good thing. But, you know.

**SCHWARTZ:** How important is language for you in terms of creating the character? You've also played at least three roles we saw that really involved the use of language, and you apparently write diaries for all of your characters?

**LEIGH:** Yeah, I write diaries for the characters I play, in their voice. So if I'm in a scene, I can have their memories or what they ate for breakfast, or, who knows, something their father or mother said to them. So that I have a relationship that's in a memory of mine that's the character's.

**SCHWARTZ:** You've said acting is not cerebral; there's a lot of intellectual work that you do in your preparation, but that ultimately it comes from the gut. Is there any way to talk about what this split is?

**LEIGH:** When you do the prep it's very cerebral, and a lot of it is physical and practical, like learning to type or learning to shoot pool or whatever you have to do, and that part's fun because it's mindless. But the greatest part of acting is it's so freeing. You're maybe in the character's head, you're not in your own head, you're not questioning everything or pondering everything. You are pondering whatever they are pondering, which is a lot of times more interesting than your own thoughts.

**SCHWARTZ:** Before we open it up to questions, I just want to ask about a few of the earlier films. At about the time you made *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, this was around when *Pretty Woman* was made, which was a much different view of a prostitute, and you turned down the role.

**LEIGH:** I didn't turn down the role. He [Garry Marshall] would never have been interested in me for it!

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you talk about why you wouldn't be interested in doing a role like that, like *Pretty*

*Woman?* 20:56

**LEIGH:** Well, here's an example. When I first read that script, it was a very dark script for *Pretty Woman*. And I thought, "Wow, Disney is changing!" (Laughter) And I had just done *Last Exit* and I thought, "Gee, should I do another whore?" But I thought, "I like whores, I think they are really interesting. So, what the hell?" And the script was interesting.

So I met him [Marshall] and he had no interest in me whatsoever. So I read a scene that was very brief, a little short scene where she comes up to the car and she says to the guy, "You want a blow job?" And he says, "How much?" And she says, "Thirty bucks," or something. And we read that scene. And he said, "All right, I want to try it again, and you know, she's still really having a good time. She's only done this for about two weeks." And I thought, "How much fun is it to get into a car with a sixty-year-old guy and unzip his fly and give him a blow job? How much fun is that, Garry?" (Laughter) And I just sort of knew this was not going to be—so then of course the movie came out, and it was a fairy tale. It's a recruitment film. It's like *Top Gun* for prostitutes! (Laughter, Applause)

**SCHWARTZ:** One of your first roles that got you a lot of attention was *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Actually it's a movie that explores sex, it explores teenage sex, but is able, for one thing, to show real pain and real emotions, but also show it from a woman's point of view. I wonder what you think of that film, and what the fact that it was directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling, had to do with it?

**LEIGH:** I think Amy did a really remarkable job with the film, but with the sex scenes in particular because it's awkward and uncomfortable and sad and clumsy and sweet, but not in a cloying way. So I think she really caught that. The scene had to be cut down for the ratings board, which was disappointing to Amy and to me as well. But yeah, I think she understood it in a really great way because it wasn't glamorized or beautified at all. It's an awkward, clumsy, uncomfortable scene.

**SCHWARTZ:** In terms of other women directors you might work with, the obvious one that comes to mind is Jane Campion.

**LEIGH:** Jane Campion. I'd love to work with her.

**SCHWARTZ:** Have you ever talked to her about doing a project or met her?

**LEIGH:** I met her. I was at Cannes when they showed *The Piano*, which was an amazing night to be there. And walking into the party, she was right ahead of me. So I sort of tapped her on the shoulder, and I just told her how much I loved the movie. And that's the extent of my relationship with her. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you talk a little bit about *Georgia*, which sounds like it must be a personal project, because it was written by your mother and produced by you? 24:34

**LEIGH:** Yeah, I'm one of the producers, yeah. It was an idea that I had. I've always wanted to work with my mother. She's a really, really gifted writer. And I'd always wanted to do a movie about sisters because I'm very close with both of my sisters, and I always wanted to play a singer, but I don't really have much of a voice. So it's a movie about two sisters, one who has a voice from God and who's very successful and very grounded and has a family. And her younger sister, which is the part I play, Sadie, really doesn't have a great voice and is a complete fuck-up, and it's about their relationship, really. But Sadie's—Georgia is very contained and has a kind of peace about her, and Sadie has no peace. And she's just like, if there were a brick wall in front of her she'd go charging into it and get all bloodied and break her nose, and then she'd get up and say, "This time I'm going to get through it." And that's basically the character.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Given that you are shy, I wonder what it's like living in the fishbowl of Hollywood?

**LEIGH:** Well, you know, I grew up in Hollywood, so it's my home. I have friends from five years old who I am still really close with, and my mom lives a mile and a half away from me, and my sister lives there, too. So to me Hollywood isn't some—I don't go to premieres unless I'm in it, and you have to go. But I go to movies all the time, but I like to see them when I can have popcorn, and I actually really like nachos, so I like to go that way. So I'll go to movies three times a week, and I'll see my friends and go

to dinner. That's about it. You know I don't—that part of Hollywood I don't see because I don't—it's not that I don't care for it, it just doesn't excite me or interest me. It just makes me kind of uncomfortable.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** On the subject of your shyness again, how do you feel about doing talk shows—the Letterman show, Leno? Are those things that are intimidating to you?

**LEIGH:** Terrifying, yeah. I did Letterman a year ago and he was incredibly nice to me, thank God! (Laughter) But I had to work on that so hard because I was so scared. And also that studio was freezing! (Laughter) It was really cold. But you know what? I got through it. They made me the last one just in case it went really badly, so they could cut it short. And you're only on for five minutes, so it goes by really fast. So it went okay, and I liked him, but I don't think other talk shows—I might do Letterman again because I think he's really funny, and he was really nice to me, which I will repeat. But the other ones I don't think I could handle, no.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was curious [about] how much prep time you put in for each role, and whether you prefer to rehearse before shooting, and if you like improvisation?

**LEIGH:** I love to improvise. I just think it is so much fun. And I do as much prep as I have time to do. Like I'm going to do *Kansas City* with Robert Altman in April, so this gives me five months, which is great. If I could take a year and a half to prep something I would. If I have six weeks, and it's twelve-hour days, it's a real, it's a long workday every day. But I love prep. I didn't graduate high school, so for me it's a really great way to learn, and also just informs me about who this person is. So Did I answer all of the question?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was just wondering—that some actors like to rehearse—

**LEIGH:** Oh, I like to rehearse. I like it because then you can fall on your face a couple of times, and you can be really bad and try a bunch of stuff and you can do that in rehearsal. And then you can find things. But you're not always afforded that. But, yeah, I like it a lot.

**SCHWARTZ:** Was there a lot of improv in *Mrs.*

*Parker*? Because some of the ensemble scenes have the feeling...

LEIGH: Oh, a lot of it is improvised.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What is it like to watch yourself on screen? And have you acted on stage not on screen? If so, what's that like for you?

LEIGH: I did a play in New York probably about six or seven years ago at Circle Rep, *Sunshine*, and I really, I loved it. It was a three-character play. It was a character I really understood and loved, *loved* playing. I was always terrified before I got on stage, but once the play started—the nice thing about doing a play is that you get to go from beginning to end, and you get to have that whole experience. Curtain calls are always a little scary. (Laughter) And after the play was over, when I got to L.A., when I got back home, I just thought I didn't know how the hell I did it. Because I loved the experience, but when I got home I realized I must have been so fucking scared, you know? Yeah, it was a great experience for me. I was going to do *Simpatico*—I was supposed to do that last fall, but then the financing fell through. And then when they got the financing together, I was doing *Georgia*, so I couldn't do it.

Watching myself on screen really depends on what side of the bed I wake up on. Some days I will go, and if I've seen a movie before and—I will see it and think, "God, I'm dreadful in this. What happened?" And then I will see it a week later and I'll think, "Hey, that was good! I like that movie." So it really depends on how I'm feeling that day, I think. But always I feel if I have two or three moments that are genuinely alive and right—I really see that person as I met them—then I'm happy. If I can just have two or three of those. You know?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are there characters or stories that you really would want to portray if you had a chance? Any other heroes or other people that you really want to portray?

LEIGH: That's hard. I'm trying to—I loved *Bastard out of Carolina*, did you read that? That I really loved, and I would love to do that, but somebody has the rights already to that. It always happens: you read something and—this I'd love to do—and you call about it, and it's been gone for months and

months and months.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Jennifer, I want to thank you for doing this because I think you have done exceptional work. I spoke to author Kim Wozencraft not long ago, and she had high praise for your work in *Rush* and just your work in general. In movies like *Rush* and *Under Cover* you were more—a lot has been said about your victim roles, but you had basically tough-cop roles in those movies. Do you see yourself doing any more of those roles or action roles?

LEIGH: You know it's hard for me to—if I read something, when I read a script, again it's not a cerebral process. I either want to play that person—that person inspires me and is exciting to me—or I don't. And I can't always, I don't know for example that I definitely want to do this or... That's why I always say I can't speak about career because I don't understand it. It's not a word that is really in my consciousness. It's just not. But if I read something that had a character like that, yeah, I'd love to. Kim is great, by the way.

SCHWARTZ: You talked about not being happy with *Backdraft*.

LEIGH: Yeah, that's the one! (Laughter) I didn't want to mention it by name!

SCHWARTZ: A certain Ron Howard film! But you seem to have stayed away from a certain type of big, glossy, commercial Hollywood project. You've talked about not being interested in *A League of Their Own*, which had a lot of roles for women. But if you could talk about some of the roles you avoided, or why you don't wind up in these mega-buck productions...

LEIGH: Well, if you watch *Backdraft*, you'll know why I avoid them. Not because of the movie or Ron Howard, who I like a lot. It's just that I'm terrible in them. I can't connect to them at all. And I tried everything. All the research in the world could not save me in that. A lot of people were saying to me, "You should do a woman like this. You've never done anything like this." Now we know why!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Jennifer, you get so involved in your roles. Which movie did you see as a child that set you on your course to be an actor?

**LEIGH:** I saw a lot of movies when I was really little that I really loved. *Forbidden Games*, which is such a beautifully great film, and a lot of the old movies I really loved. And then, when I was fourteen, I saw *Dog Day Afternoon*, and that changed my life in a way. I mean I certainly ditched school practically every day to see—I saw that movie seventeen times. (Laughter) And every time, I had to get someone in line to buy me a ticket because it was R-rated. But it just had so much energy, and the characters were so interesting and so tortured and yet full of hope. And so that was one of them. At 14, I think that was the movie that inspired me the most.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Are there any roles that you were up for that you really wanted, but [that] didn't work out for you?

**LEIGH:** Well, sure. (Laughter) Yeah, I mean, I desperately wanted to get in on *The Piano*. I was shooting *Rush* at the time, and I couldn't—I was shooting every day so I couldn't fly in to meet Jane Campion. But the truth is that when I saw the movie I loved it so much—and I think Holly Hunter is so unbelievably brilliant in that movie—that I just felt lucky to be sitting there watching it. You know? And that's sort of the best feeling when you lose something or when you don't get a chance to even meet or read for something. I just loved being able to see that movie. There wasn't a moment of, "Oh, I still wish I had done it." I don't wish I had done it. I'm glad I got to see her do it. And when you go and see a movie where you really wanted it, and you see it and it's not very good, then you think, "It's not so good! No loss, no big loss."

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You have this reputation for researching so early, I wonder how it affects the people that you are going to be working with. Are they intimidated? Do they say, "Oh no, I have to work with Jennifer?"

**LEIGH:** Oh, no! I hope not. I don't think so at all. First of all, acting is a really weird thing, you know. There's nothing tangible about it. You can go down to the Village and get some guy out of a grocery store, and he could give the most brilliant performance you've ever seen. And everybody works differently. Some people do no research. Some people look at the script the day they get there. Some people do more research than I do.

And I just think that everybody has their own way of going about it. And that's the great thing about acting. Well, you can't do that on stage, but certainly in movies it's a very funny thing in that way.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Do you ever wish that you could do it like the guy in the grocery store?

**LEIGH:** Joel and Ethan said to me one day, "If we ever work with you again, you're not going to be allowed to do any research!" (Laughter) So yeah, sure, I'd try it. But I love doing research because, like I said, it's a way for me to learn. And then I can always draw from the truth. And the truth of the matter is, I couldn't come up with—certainly in *Short Cuts*, that stuff—I could never have come up with that! I mean, I witnessed that. There are things in life that are true—that if you don't have that experience and you don't know it, you could never come up with it in a million years, I don't think. And it's much more interesting and strange than what your imagination is, because your imagination is built on your experience in a certain way.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You see a lot in papers and articles about there not being very many good roles for women, but you seem to have a lot of brilliant roles, and I wonder what you think of that criticism. And I wonder if that's because you avoided some of the big Hollywood roles?

**LEIGH:** I think there aren't that many great roles for men, either, frankly. And I think I'm lucky in that the stuff that appeals to me—I have odd taste—it doesn't appeal to a lot of other people. I just like what I like, and I'm lucky that I'm able to find stuff that I want to do. And every once in a while the person who is doing it wants me to do it, too. Yeah, but I don't think there are that many good parts out there. And certainly not in the big, big films.

**SCHWARTZ:** But you've been getting better choices in the last few years. After *Single White Female* and *Rush*, which were your first real, pure starring-role vehicles, you worked with the Coen brothers and Robert Altman, and Alan Rudolph.

**LEIGH:** Yeah, life's changed a little bit.

**SCHWARTZ:** Is there more to choose from now?

**LEIGH:** What's lucky now is I'm getting to make movies that I'd actually want to go see. So yeah, things are easier, and I do get scripts—and scripts that I like and that I want to do.

**SCHWARTZ:** We haven't really talked about *Dolores Claiborne*. That was the film you shot before *Georgia*. Could you talk about that a bit?

**LEIGH:** That's with Kathy Bates, and I play her daughter, and we haven't seen each other for fifteen years. And the character I play is a journalist. She is also addicted to alcohol and prescription pills, and she has a tremendous amount of rage. It's the kind of person that if she walked into the room and you were in the room, you'd either want her to leave or you would leave because she's not a nice person to be around. And through the course of the film—and she loathes her mother. Just being around her mother just makes her back go up. And she doesn't know why she is the way she is, but she is very defensive against finding out. And through the course of the film, she discovers really what happened to her in childhood, and that her mother who she has been hating all these years—a lot of that hatred is really towards the father, who is dead. In her mind she has made him a kind of hero and her a horror.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Is there anybody you've seen who you either want to work with like Quentin Tarantino, or another actor again who you've worked with before and didn't have a scene with? Like in *Fast Times* you worked with Sean Penn but you had no interaction.

**LEIGH:** Sure, I'd love to work with Sean Penn. Sean Penn, I'd love to work with. I'd love to work with Alec [Baldwin] again. I had a great time working with him. We had a really good time. There are a lot of actors who I'd love to work with. Most of the cast of *Dorothy*—it was just an amazing group. I think Gwyneth Paltrow is quite something, I think she is really amazing. I would love to work with Juliette Lewis again. We were in *Crooked Hearts* together, but we really didn't have anything to do together. As far as directors, I would love to work with Mike Leigh. I'd love to work with Jane Campion. I'd love to work with Woody Allen. Martin Scorsese, of course, who wouldn't?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I thought highly of *Grandview*,

*U.S.A.* about ten years ago, which never seemed to find its audience, and I wondered what you recollect about making that movie. And also, how did your parents influence—your family influence your acting and your choice of material? And your approach to the material?

**LEIGH:** I liked *Grandview*. I had a good time doing it. I liked that part a lot. It was fun for me. I had a really embarrassing incident happen right when I guess I was going there. The character is into sort of kinky sex, so I bought all these really disgusting magazines, with these graphic, horrific pictures—you never, you just don't want those images in your brain. So I bought them, and they were in my suitcase in the zipper pocket, and unfortunately there were like seven of them. And as I was going through the airport, dragging this suitcase, the zipper was unzipped and all of these flew out, and there was this 6' 4" porter who scooped them all up. And I didn't even know, I was just sort of trying to race to the plane. He said, "Miss, you dropped *these!*" (Laughter) And it was really horrible, horrible. But I had a good time. I also had a root canal during the shoot of that movie. I just went in for a cavity, and two hours later he said, "Hey, I performed a root canal on you!" (Laughter) And there were women lined around the block for Troy Donahue. Lined around, literally, to get his autograph and whatnot.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What was [Randal] Kleiser like?

**LEIGH:** He was very sweet. He was funny. He was nice. It was—the whole feeling on the shoot was very nice.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I saw *Hudsucker Proxy* about two weeks ago, on video. Why do you think the film didn't reach an audience? Seemed like a terrific send-up of a Frank Capra film, very funny, but didn't go anywhere.

**LEIGH:** I don't know. I love it. I go to the first matinee of all their movies. For me even to read that script was a huge, huge deal. And to get to meet them was an even bigger deal. And then I got it—so the whole thing is unbelievable. I love the movie, but I never know what makes anyone go see anything, ever. And always, I feel if I like the movie, I just feel lucky to have made it and call it a day. Because you have no control over that aspect of it. It would

have been nice if people had gone to see it. That would have been great. But I guess it doesn't—see, I don't even know how well it did, how well it didn't do. I don't really keep reading those kinds of things.

**SCHWARTZ:** You've talked a lot in interviews about your older sister—getting a lot from her in terms of your acting—and I just wanted to make sure we touched on that a bit.

**LEIGH:** Sure. Carrie [Morrow] is three years older than me, and she was all gut growing up. If she felt something, she didn't say it, she screamed it. And she's just incredibly inspiring to me as a person. She's probably the most courageous person I know. She's lived so many lives that are so tough and hard and extreme. She really lived on the edge for a very, very long time. And she's also probably the most generous person I know, and in a funny way the most grounded, because she has just lived so much. And we are really close, and growing up we were [at] opposite ends of the spectrum. But she did all those—I really think that my personality largely is formed sort of in reaction to Carrie. And I think she is also probably one of the people that I admire most in this world, really.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** In *Single White Female*, you play sort of a shy, introverted character. Is that in a sense easier for you to play than something like—

**LEIGH:** She was psychotic! (Laughter) I don't know how introverted she was. I think she fell in love at first sight, basically. Here's this woman—she wants to be her, she wants to merge with her, she wants to possess her. You know? So it's, how do you go about that? How can you be that—how can you get this person [to] complete you and let you in? So it's more about making sure the ground is steady, because you want to stay there, and you want to make the right impression—you don't want to freak her out. You don't want to lose her. You want to get the apartment. You want to live there!

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Did you do research for that role?

**LEIGH:** Oh, tons, yeah. I got to meet—two twins!—twins that had been hospitalized for having trouble with merging and separation. They both tried to commit suicide. Obviously they didn't murder anyone, but they had threatened people and

without the other one they just felt, the boy said—they were fraternal. And the boy said that when he separated from his sister he felt as though they had been connected, like Siamese twins, and that she had been severed from him but they hadn't sewn him up and that his guts and entrails were just spilling out onto the floor all the time. That's how he felt. And I talked to therapists and there is so much—so many books on borderline personality, which is what Heddi was, I think. Although more on the psychotic end of borderline than the neurotic end of borderline.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What sort of research did you do for *Last Exit*?

**LEIGH:** I met with a bunch of streetwalkers and spent time with them, and I read a lot about the 1950s and that period in America. And I used a lot of George Grosz paintings, so that my wall was sort of plastered with them, and also pictures of New York in that period. And I watched movies that she would maybe have seen, one or two of those movies playing. And read the book a bunch of times, and talked to Hubert Selby a lot. And the music from the period, too.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** When you researched Dorothy Parker, what did you discover about her psychological make-up?

**LEIGH:** She was very complicated. She was incredibly myopic, but she almost never wore her glasses, and I don't think it was out of vanity. I think it was because she just saw things too clearly, and it softened the world. And I think the alcohol did the same thing for her. She had just the most miserable love life. And I think the mother dying at such a young age always makes you feel that you are about to be abandoned, and it's your fault. Because she felt, I think, somewhat responsible for her mother's death because her mother was 42 when she was born. So I think that had a lot to do with it. I think the fact that it was so painful for her to write—that she was known for fluff and for her witticisms and she wanted to be thought of as a great writer.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Why wasn't she? I mean, if she wanted to write—

**LEIGH:** She said, "I don't have whatever it is to write

a novel.” That’s what she said. And the other kind of amazing thing she said was, “I’d like to do good work and someday I hope to. I haven’t done it yet.” And this was at 65. She had written “Horsie.” She had written “Big Blonde.” She had written “The Lovely Leave,” “Soldiers of the Republic.” She had written the best-selling volumes of her poetry—and her poetry is so amazing. And I don’t think she was being humble when she said this. I mean, the first time you listen to this interview that I have, you think, “Come on. There’s just no way she could be saying this about herself.” But you realize, after listening to it a couple of times, she means it. She

said no writer ever puts down on his page what he really meant to be there. And that’s the curse of all writers.

**SCHWARTZ:** We are going to have to end on Dorothy Parker instead of dogs and prostitutes... So in a closing point, I want to urge people to go out and see the movie, of course, and very much thank Jennifer Jason Leigh for being here tonight.

**LEIGH:** Thank you. Thanks for coming. (Applause)

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