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INTERVIEW
LISA ROVNER

LAKE

For a long time, the comedy world, with a few notable exceptions, was a man's world. As Yael Kohen points out in her book We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy, in the 1950s comic success for women meant ridiculing and desexualising yourself. Thanks to comedians like Elaine May and Lily Tomlin, the women's movement and Saturday Night Live, female comedians are no longer expected to adhere to stereotypical gender roles. Now funny actresses can be smart, attractive and confident. It's a great time to be a woman in comedy, as actress, writer and director Lake Bell exemplifies.

“*The funniest comedy is tragedy taken so seriously that it becomes funny again.*”

Lisa Rovner: You grew up between the Upper East Side in NYC and Florida, but then chose to go to drama school in England. What was that like? What brought about that decision?

Lake Bell: My mum was adamant, she insisted that if I were to become an actor that I would have to train in England. “Train in England.” I had no idea what that meant. I went over there for a summer course to satiate her, but when I was there, I realised just how much I had to learn. I ended up auditioning for a proper BA Honours Degree in Drama at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama and staying in England. Film school is highly respected in England and acting is considered a very honourable profession. It was inspiring to be surrounded by such a supportive culture. In America, when you tell people you’re an actor they say, “Oh, what does that mean, you’re a waitress?” **Lisa:** Sanford Meisner, who developed a method technique for acting, once said, “Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Are you a method actor?

Lake: I don’t practice method acting. In no way, if my character is enemies with someone, am I enemies with them off the screen. That said, part of what’s so great about being trained is that you are aware of all the different techniques. As you grow up and away from your training, you end up pulling from a myriad of different theories and using what works for you.

Lisa: How do you prepare for your roles?

Lake: It depends on the project and the character. If you are playing an occupation, you want to familiarise yourself with that occupation. Or if you’re playing someone from a specific region you might need to learn an accent. There’s always some sort of research involved. In comedy, the best way to prepare is to get a good night’s sleep so that you are focused and alert, so you can improvise, be alive and in the moment.

Lisa: Meisner was fond of the “less is more”. In past interviews, you talk about having to exercise restraint when you act. Can you elaborate?

Lake: I think especially coming from theatre, I’ve had to exercise restraint in all parts of my life. In comedy, especially when I’m tired, I can default to something too big and therefore not funny. I think it’s important to rein it in and to shed all of the wink wink. The funniest comedy is tragedy taken so seriously that it becomes funny again.

Lisa: Do you often work with an acting coach? What do you do with them?

Lake: I went to drama school for four years so the last thing I wanted when I got to Hollywood was to be coached and trained again. For me, work is the best training. The more you work, the more you learn. You put in your 10,000 hours and that’s how you become great. The only time I worked with an acting coach was recently for *In a World...* Because I wrote, directed and starred in it, I felt the need to take the script to an acting coach, and pretend I didn’t write it. So I could investigate the script and the protagonist again. It was a nice place to go to take a step back. I couldn’t afford to have an acting coach on set so I asked a good friend of mine, who is an up and coming writer and director, to be my acting buddy. She came with me to the fancy acting coach sessions and was there with me every day during the shoot. So when I’d be juggling 5,000 things, I’d look to her to help me honour the integrity of the protagonist.

Lisa: You’ve said that directing is the best lesson for actors.

Lake: I think when you direct, there is this incredible lesson you learn, which is that you are an important but small cog in a very large machine. Knowing that you are but one element in a massive moving system helps to keep you focused. The other lesson I learned is that as an actor you can be helpful, with continuity, with props; it’s OK to be another helping hand. I definitely already had that attitude but directing certainly enforced it.

Lisa: The first film you directed, *Worst Enemy*, is about body image and female insecurities. It’s been described as “a hilarious metaphor for the literal entrapment women face in pursuing beauty”. In an interview about the film, you talk about how the media is at the root of female insecurities but you also ask women to share some of the responsibility.

Lake: I think women, like men, are guilty of all kinds of media influences. Women are constantly berated by images of what women should look and sound like. One needs to remind oneself that brand images are fantasy. I think it’s sad to see women my age wrestle and hurt themselves to adhere to an impossible image. The film is based on an extreme example of this, the main character is a misanthrope who could be in control of her life yet chooses not to be. I am inspired to write about arrested development. I think it’s the zeitgeist of our generation.

Lisa: Your new film, which you wrote, directed and starred in, is called *In a World...* It takes place in the world of Hollywood vocal talents, and begins with a tribute to the king of voice-over artists, Don LaFontaine, who died in 2008. Don LaFontaine was the author of and voice of the famous “In a world”. I read he was in about 5,000 TV shows and 750,000 commercials! Your film is about a female voice-over artist who sets out to conquer the male dominated world of voice-over. You play a vocal coach who is trying to find her place and her voice, both physically and metaphorically.

Lake: Yes, voice-over is a world I’ve always been obsessed with. I’ve collected accents since I was young, I had a tape recorder and recorded them. I have shoeboxes full of cassettes of different dialects! People collected stamps, I collected accents. With your voice you can play anybody. Any sex, any social *niveau*, any nationality. I find great power in voice.

Lisa: Speaking of the power of the voice, *In a World...* pokes fun at the sexy baby voice trend and the problem that it engenders for women. The point that the film makes is that young women today are not utilising the power of their own voice to its full potential. As your character says, “A great voice is not only a blessing, it’s a choice.”

Lake: Vocal trends have always turned me on. Sexy baby, the submissive, 12-year-old girl voice, that involves pitch, voice and affectation, as in speech, is something that is running rampant. People who have that voice lose me at “hello”. It’s not their lack of education, there are perfectly educated women who sound like a baby. It’s hilarious but it’s also tragic. The voice-over world became an umbrella to tell a larger story. You know, there have always been vocal trends. Marilyn Monroe, for example, had a brassy sexy voice that every ingénue in Hollywood tried to imitate. Vocal trends exist within different cultural subgroups. Within the homosexual community, for example, there’s a vocal cue that says: “I’m a part of this community, here’s my orientation.” The sexy baby voice pandemic which says “I’m submissive” is perhaps OK for the bedroom but really that’s it.

Lisa: Do you believe that films can bring about social change?

Lake: I think movies can spark a conversation and probe awareness. A great documentary might change how you eat, but it’s rare to have a movie instil long-lasting change like that. When I make movies, my expectations are in check. I don’t think I am going to change an entire generation to be more aware of their voice. I’m not comfortable saying *In a World...* will change the world, I’m comfortable saying it will make you laugh. I just want people to enjoy the movie, have a great time and perhaps by mistake they’ll take a message home with them.

Lisa: The beauty of comedy is that it’s so disarming. It really seems to me like the best way to get messages across. Your film also comments on the sexist environment in Hollywood.

Lake: I never felt at a disadvantage because of my sex. In the independent film world there are a myriad of female film-makers. Don’t get me wrong, the boys’ club, which I talk about in my movie, does exist, but there’s also a brewing girls’ club that’s more inclusive than one would expect.

Lisa: How do you direct and act simultaneously?

Lake: I had a stand-in, who actually auditioned for the role, so I could watch the actors and the frame, and when all the kinks had been worked out, I’d jump in. I would always watch playback on the first take to fix the little things, mainly camera notes. And then I would look at myself. It doesn’t bother me to see myself on the screen, I learn things that way. I think, “Oh, that’s interesting, that works or that doesn’t work.” I’m not emotional about it at all. I never looked at myself and thought, “Eww, I don’t like the way I look.” It’s not a vanity piece, I mean, I don’t look great in the movie.

Lisa: The artist Ed Ruscha has this great painting that claims “Hollywood is a verb”. How would you describe Hollywood?”

Lake: [Laughs] Blue skies and lot of smoothies. I would never knock Hollywood, Hollywood has treated me very well... It’s funny to think of it as a verb because there’s something inherently inactive about Hollywood. It’s easy to get stuck in the “perfectness” of the weather and the quality of life. Arrested development is ripe and festering in Hollywood. While Hollywood can be incredibly productive it can also be a beast and eat you if you’re not careful.

Lisa: What role do you think talent plays in Hollywood?

Lake: Success in Hollywood has little to do with talent. It has to do with talent plus ten other things. Some of those things aren’t even tangible: luck, looks, ambition, endurance, stamina... Talent is a massive ingredient, but talent alone doesn’t get you in the door.



Brocade dress by A.F. Vandevorst.



THIS PAGE: Grey cashmere dress by *Céline*.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Vintage slip from *South Paw Vintage* NYC, necklace by *Céline* and shoes by *Miu Miu*.



Hair: RHEANNE WHITE at *See Management*. Make Up: KIM BOWER at *EA Management*
Production: SOPHIE RUTHENSTEINER, JOLENE KAO. Photographic Assistant: MICHAEL PREZIOSO
Stylist Assistants: JESSICA DELL, TARYN SHUMWAY