

Christine Lahti

A THIRD ACT WITH WENDY WASSERSTEIN

By Deborah Behrens

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**“WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE,
I THOUGHT I COULD
CHANGE THE WORLD AND
ALL I DID WAS CHANGE THE
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT.”**

LAURIE JAMESON IN *THIRD*

CHRISTINE LAHTI WALKS HER TALK. No one better embodies the generation of feminist women late playwright Wendy Wasserstein so famously chronicled than the actress/director once described by the *New York Times* as “a woman warrior going into battle for her sisters.”

This past spring alone Lahti both moderated the honoree panel and gave a speech at the Feminist Majority Foundation’s Global Women’s Rights Awards, appeared in separate videos reclaiming the Julia Ward Howe peace movement origins of Mother’s Day and documenting ageism against women in Hollywood, then blogged on *The Huffington Post* about the pride she felt watching her 10-year-old daughter become a feminist at the 2003 March for Women’s Lives in Washington, D.C.

“I talked about the definition of feminism,” says Lahti when asked about her speech after a midday photo shoot in Venice. “All it means is someone who believes women should have equal rights. It doesn’t mean you’re a lesbian and wear Birkenstocks! If you have a conscience and a mind then you are a feminist.

“I have to be an activist,” she adds. “Otherwise I don’t know what I’d do. Stay home and eat a lot of chocolate. I’d be horrible to live with. It’s my way of feeling like I’m doing something. I can’t just sit back and watch this shit happen. I’ve got three kids who are going to live in this world.”

It is exactly the type of lecture you’d expect from Laurie Jameson, the liberal college professor Lahti is set to play in the West Coast premiere of Wasserstein’s final play *Third* at the Geffen Playhouse directed by Maria Mileaf (opens Sept. 19). The fall production includes Jayne Brook (*Boston Legal*, *Chicago Hope*), Matt Czuchry (*Gilmore Girls*, *Hack*), Sarah Drew (*Everwood*, *Daria*) and M. Emmet Walsh (*Christmas with the Kranks*, *Blood Simple*). The play begins in September 2002 and covers the months leading up to and immediately following the start of the second Gulf War.

In a *Time* magazine interview given just four months before her early death at 55 in January 2006 from lymphoma, Wasserstein stated, *Third*’s primary focus concerns a feminist literature professor “looking at political beliefs she formed 30 years ago she thought would be the dominant beliefs in her life and in the country, which no longer are. She is looking at the third part of her life.”

And in a case of life imitating art, so is Lahti. Over the past 18 years she has examined these beliefs right alongside Wasserstein, replacing Joan Allen in the fall of 1989 as Heidi Holland on Broadway in the playwright’s Pulitzer Prize and

“No one wrote for the contemporary women of our generation like Wendy did. She was our voice.”



Tony Award-winning work *The Heidi Chronicles*, playing Surgeon General nominee Lyssa Dent Hughes in Lifetime's 2000 film adaptation of Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* and now tackling the politically inflexible 50-something Laurie in *Third*.

“I think it's an important play,” she emphasizes. “It not only examines the rigidity of liberals but also sheds light on the rigidity of the right. Both edges of the spectrum are not helping the world situation by being so divisive. I really believe that the division between the red states and the blue states has gotten to a point where we simply cannot go on like this. We have to find some way to be purple and not red or blue. The Republicans are at fault but so are we.”

Lahti brought the play to Geffen's Artistic Director Randy Arney and Producing Director Gil Cates in 2006. They'd been looking to work with Lahti but couldn't do the piece right away. A potential Broadway production delayed getting the rights for nearly a year. Lahti worried the play's political topicality might expire in the process but both fortunately and unfortunately it's still as current as ever.

“My goal as an early fem

Third marks Lahti's first return to the stage since 1995 when she co-starred in *Three Hotels* with Richard Dreyfuss at the Taper, reprising the 1993 Drama Desk nominated role she originally created with Ron Rifkin at Circle Rep in New York. Previous Los Angeles performances include *Love Letters* and a 1988 staging of *Summer and Smoke* at the Ahmanson where she played Alma opposite Christopher Reeve.

“I loved doing that,” says Lahti perched atop a stool in the loft of an industrial photo studio. Dressed in white linen blouse over slim white pants and matching beaded espadrilles, she looks light years away from Tennessee Williams drab minister's daughter. “I'm not immediate casting for Alma,” she laughs. “She's sort of like Olive Oyl. Timid. Marshall Mason from Circle Rep wanted me to do it. He really wanted to see what that would do to the play.”

Having already prowled the boards as Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre, the Williams heroine Lahti really wants to tackle next is tortured southern belle Blanche DuBois. “She's not going to be passive and all girlish. She's going to have some fight in her. It's a different way to go for Blanche and I'm hoping to do that. I love that play so much. I've got to play that part!”

She'd also like to try her hand at Lady Macbeth or almost any Chekhov. "I dream about Chekhov actually," she admits. "Chekhov is something I really want to do both as an actress and as a director. I find my sense of comedy and tragedy and the line that exists between them is so Chekhovian sometimes. I'd love to explore that."

Making Tough Choices

IF LAHTI WERE A BRAND, it would stand for strong, intelligent, respected, authentic, empathic, capable and anchored women. She cites the lack of respect given her mother and others of that '50s generation as the catalyst that both ignited her outrage and guided her choices of theatrical, film and television roles from the very beginning of her career.

"My goal as an early feminist was never fame or fortune. It was respect. I didn't see my mom or any of her friends have it. That's why I could never play the part of a woman who was less than three-dimensional or the script was misogynistic or sexist. If the message they were putting out in the world was that women were less than, I couldn't do it. Still can't. That limits my choices. I love the

feature film directorial debut *My First Mister* opened the 2001 Sundance Film Festival.

Critically acclaimed television movies, a starring role in the WB series *Jack & Bobby*, two new films, *Smart People* and *Yonkers Joe*, plus preparation to direct her second feature have all occupied her time since then. Somewhere in between she also managed to marry and have three children with the Emmy winning executive producer and director Thomas Schlamme, known for such television series as *The West Wing*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *Jack and Bobby* and *Sports Night*.

According to Lahti, none of it would have happened without the early theatrical training she got in New York. A theatre major at the University of Michigan, she headed to the Big Apple in 1973 to pursue an acting career after a year of graduate school at Florida State. She waitressed, auditioned for commercials, performed mime in Central Park and did lots of off off Broadway productions for the princely pay of two subway tokens. She spent several years studying her craft with such renowned acting coaches as Uta Hagen, William Esper and Kristin Linklater.

The work finally paid off. In 1978, Lahti landed

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challenge and journey of a woman who has a quiet voice or no voice but who then finds it at the end.

"There were plenty of roles out there. A lot of women said OK to them and their careers skyrocketed. But I couldn't live with myself and do that. As a feminist I couldn't play those parts. I just think you've got to be accountable as an artist."

It's why Lahti says she never did a nude scene.

"I would now!" she laughs. "I'd be happy to do one now, but no one wants me to! But when I was just starting out, no! That was the last thing I wanted to do. I didn't want to be 'the babe' ever. I didn't want to portray women who were sex objects. They could be sexy. I love playing sexy parts but not diminished in that way."

No one would view Lahti's more than 30-year career with anything less than the utmost esteem. She earned her first Oscar nomination as Goldie Hawn's Rosie-the-Riveter buddy in 1985's *Swing Shift* then took the statue home 10 years later as a first-time director for her short film *Lieberman in Love*. In 1998 after multiple nominations, Lahti won both the Emmy and her second Golden Globe Award—TV movie *No Place Like Home* was the first—for her portrayal of Dr. Kathryn Austin on *Chicago Hope*. Three years later her

her first Off Broadway role in Ted Talley's *Hooters* at Playwrights Horizons. The next year she won the Theatre World Award for David Mamet's *The Woods* at The Public Theatre and wowed critics for holding her own against Al Pacino in the film *...And Justice for All*. Her Broadway debut came in 1980 in *Division Street*, followed by *Scenes and Revelations* then *Present Laughter* directed by and starring George C. Scott with Kate Burton and Nathan Lane. Lahti claims it was she who encouraged Burton in their dressing room to accept a date invitation from the play's stage manager—Center Theatre Group's Artistic Director Michael Ritchie.

Other Off Broadway roles followed including *Landscape of the Body* directed by Gary Sinise, *Country Girl* opposite Hal Holbrook and later *Little Murders* in 1987 which garnered her an Obie Award. She also did *Moon for the Misbegotten* and *Lucky Spot* at the Williamstown Theatre Festival.

To Lahti, being on Broadway didn't seem any different than doing a play anywhere. "It was the same amount of work, the same commitment and I guess a little more nerve wracking because the stakes are a little bit higher," she recalls. "It just felt like another job. Another great challenge. It was really an exciting time. I loved it, especially playing Heidi."

Wendy & Heidi

"NO ONE WROTE for the contemporary women of our generation like Wendy did," says Lahti, citing Wasserstein's many plays like *Uncommon Women*, *Isn't it Romantic* and *The Sisters Rosensweig*. "She was our voice."

If Wasserstein was the voice of the women's movement, then Lahti was certainly one of its star disciples. Their friendship began in 1989 when Lahti was asked to replace Joan Allen in *The Heidi Chronicles*. Shooting in Los Angeles at the time, she flew to New York and instantly fell in love with the play. Then promptly asked director Dan Sullivan to re-stage it.

"I wanted to do something else," she admits. "I wanted to explore it at a deeper level. The arrogance of me just coming in and saying I'll do it but would you mind completely rethinking the play. Dan said sure! Let's do it. He had to recast the whole thing anyway because everybody was leaving so he completely re-blocked and re-staged it. I didn't know how to fit into Joan's interpretation, which was great, but it wasn't going to be mine."

Lahti says she found a soul mate in Wasserstein and her feminist heroine. "Wendy and I didn't see a lot of each other over the years but when we did it was always really meaningful," she sighs. "I so hooked into her soul and what that character was going through in terms of being a feminist. Wanting to help women raise their awareness and realize their full potential. I think that's what Heidi was really grappling with in her wonderful speech about feeling stranded and abandoned."

Lahti also strongly identified with the idealism, optimism and intelligence of Lyssa Dent Hughes, a Surgeon General nominee in Wasserstein's 1997 play *An American Daughter* she portrayed in the 2000 Lifetime movie adaptation. When the play failed to earn a Tony nomination,

Lahti wrote an angry editorial to the New York Times that was never printed.

"I did some research into the Tony nominating committee which at the time was predominantly male," she explains. "I just didn't get that there was anyone there who could appreciate the female perspective in that play. To me it really wasn't reviewed with the right eyes."

The Third Act

So how does *Third* pertain to the third act of Lahti's life?

"It's so interesting getting older as a woman in this culture," she admits. "There's just so many reasons to want to give up but as a feminist you know that it's all just blah blah blah. For actresses it's the worst. How do you maintain your dignity and not succumb to the need to look 20? How do you grow old gracefully? How do you maintain a sense of self worth when your entire culture is saying, it's over. You're out to pasture."

"I find that Laurie is facing similar things. Some people think her classes are outdated. Some people think she's old news. These feminists. I think she's feeling at a crossroads. How does she make the last chapter of her life as meaningful and productive as the other two thirds?"

Lahti says she can relate to that. "There aren't that many meaningful roles out there now in film and television to be honest. I initially directed that short film in reaction to there are no parts so what the hell. What else am I going to do? Then I loved it. I found directing so challenging and empowering. I'm such a student at it that it's a whole chapter that's yet to be explored."

"How do I keep vital and keep working and not succumb to what the world is telling me? You've really got to stay true and focused and positive. And know that it's all just hogwash." ■

THIRD

Opens Sept. 19; plays Tues.-Thurs., 7:30 pm; Fri. 8 pm; Sat. 4 and 8:30 pm; Sun., 2 and 7 pm; through Oct. 2
Tickets: \$40-\$115
Previews Sept. 11-18 (\$35-\$60)
Geffen Playhouse
10886 Le Conte Avenue,
Westwood
310.208.5454 or
www.geffenplayhouse.com



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A LAST GLIMPSE

The last time Christine Lahti saw Wendy Wasserstein was in October 2005 at a preview matinee for *Third's* world premiere at Lincoln Center starring Dianne Wiest. Wasserstein was in the final stages of cancer and virtually unrecognizable. She would die three months later. The two had not seen nor spoken to each other in several years.

Lahti approached someone who she thought was Wasserstein feeling her way along the walls of the lobby with an assistant prior to curtain but was curtly rebuffed.

Confused, Lahti went to her seat but noticed during the first act the same woman was sitting in the customary playwright's seat next to Lincoln Center's Artistic Director André Bishop.

"At intermission, I went up to her and said, 'Wendy, I know it's you.' She said 'oh my god, Christine!' She hadn't recognized me. She thought I was some looky-loo person who was bothering her while she was struggling to get to her seat. We hugged each other but I couldn't say a thing about her illness. It was this huge elephant in the room. I couldn't mention it because she didn't.

"So we just talked about the play rather than how she looked or how she was. I was already so moved by it and crying. I said 'I'm telling you right now I have to do this in LA.' She smiled and said that would be so great. And that was the last thing I ever said to her or she said to me. Of course after the play I said goodbye and told her how much I loved it. She laughed because I'd already said I've got to do this before I saw act two! I knew it! I knew I had to continue this journey of Wendy and Heidi and Lyssa and me." ■