

Dorri Olds: Hats Off to Holly Hunter

She continues to blow us away



Academy Award-winner Holly Hunter (*The Piano*) continues to hit it big. With a career spanning 35 years, she remains an electrifying force. In our sadly still-patriarchal society, it is impressive to see any actress who is past 40, still landing the high-quality and sought-after parts. At the age of 59, Hunter is holding her own in an industry that hands over much longer shelf-life to male counterparts.

Hunter's voice still has that sweet-Georgia-peach twang, even though she has long been a New York City resident. But her Big Apple attitude gets her to where she's going.

It was a thrill to meet her recently at Manhattan's Four Seasons hotel. She was there to talk about *The Big Sick*, the runaway hit she has a starring role in. The movie premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 20 to glowing reviews. It was picked up by Amazon Studios and Lionsgate and given a limited release on June 23. The critics are still raving. It opens nationwide on July 14.

Hunter plays Beth, a wife and mother, married to Terry (Ray Romano). Early in the film—not a spoiler, it's in the trailer—the panicked couple rushes to the emergency room where doctors need to put their daughter Emily (Zoe Kazan) into a medically-induced coma, to save her life.



Left: *Holly Hunter* in *THE BIG SICK*
Photo: Nicole Rivelli

Opposite: *Holly Hunter*
in *STRANGE WEATHER*
Photo: Brainstorm Media

Labeling *The Big Sick* as a romcom is a tad misleading—not because it isn’t funny. It is. And the plot is about a romance, but, if we were gazing at a dating site, the box checked would be: “It’s complicated.” The story is based on the odd, real-life love affair between Pakistani-American comedian Kumail Nanjiani (*Silicon Valley*) and his now-wife, Emily V. Gordon, a former therapist. The couple co-wrote the script but went through many rewrites. It was really a group effort and took three long years until it was ready.

Just before speaking with Hunter, I had a private chat with *The Big Sick*’s handsome co-producer, Barry Mendel (*Trainwreck*, *Munich*, *The Sixth Sense*). I asked him what it was like working with Hunter.

“Uh, a little bit scary,” he said. I laughed and asked why. “Because she’s kind of like a very, very good bullshit detector. You really have to be on your game and ready to answer questions like ‘Why are we doing it this way?’ Or ‘Why is the story done that way?’ You have to get up to her level and when you do, it’s exhilarating!” He smiled, and then whispered, “But, it’s a scary proposition.” To clarify, I asked if he meant that she’d made suggested changes to the script. He nodded his head emphatically. “Yes,” he said. “A *lot* of suggestions. Many things in the movie came from her own experiences. She contributed a lot of herself to the movie.”

Hunter expressed a lot of respect for the producers, her co-stars, and especially for Gordon and Nanjiani. “It was interesting,” she said, “It’s a testament to the kind of overarching confidence that just manifests its way through the whole movie.” She explained that it began with the co-producers Mendel and Judd Apatow. Then she praised Nanjiani and Gordon: “They did this, Kumail and Emily. I mean they walked through fire in some ways to put this down on paper. I would imagine it couldn’t have been an easy thing to accomplish. Then we come along and we’ve got all these ideas, you know, Barry and Judd, Zoe and Ray and I, had tons of ideas....Then there was this kind of open-armed process of accepting all those ideas. Seeing if they might fly.” She described an intense rehearsal period discussing ways to rework the script to make the scenes even richer.

“That’s not always received as openly as it was with this project,” Hunter said. “There was just this whole other act where it was like,” throwing her arms up she said, “It was like ‘Come on, you guys, what’ve you got?’” Then she compared it to theater: “Like in a play, and working it into shape to fit it on stage.”

She described that what she loves is “to make a movie feel lived in, which I think is a very hard thing to do. With a lot of movies, you watch them and it’s pretty easy to feel like they’re fake. I think the things that we strived to do, and that because the acting was so good, we were able to [make it] feel lived in and real—like the wheels.”

You gotta just love the way this woman expresses herself.

The true story behind *The Big Sick* is when Nanjiani met Gordon ten years ago. He was a fledgling stand-up comic and she heckled him from the audience. They ended up spending the night together, intending it only as a one-night-stand. Complications ensued, however, when accidentally they fell in love. Nanjiani’s traditional Muslim parents wanted him to marry a Pakistani woman and being too chicken to oppose them, he broke up with Emily.

The high drama kicks in when Nanjiani finds out Emily is in the ER and realizes how strong his feelings for her really are and he rushes to be by her side. It is in the hospital's waiting area where he awkwardly meets Emily's folks for the first time.

Hunter is getting tons of awards buzz for her exquisite portrayal of an incredibly pissed-off mama bear. Beth can't stand even looking at Nanjiani because she and her daughter are close and Emily had confided in her. Knowing that her daughter had been dumped in such an abrupt and cowardly way, makes Beth despise him. That scene comes across very realistically—if I had been Emily, my own mother's loyalty would've made her behave in much the same way! I am not usually a big fan of romantic comedies; I'm drawn to darker fare like twisted psychological thrillers. But this is not a typical story, the acting is stellar and it is a very satisfying film.

Hunter and I also spoke about her upcoming HBO series with Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*). "It's called *Here, Now*," she said. "I've done one episode so far." She plays the lead, Audrey Black, who was a therapist before switching gears and joining the corporate world to make more money. Her husband Greg, played by Tim Robbins, is a philosophy professor who is questioning his life and purpose, sliding into depression. It's a much-anticipated 10-episode series that revolves around this middle-aged couple who adopted children from Colombia, Somalia and Vietnam, then have their fourth kid while they're in their forties. Audrey's marriage is straining at the seams and one of their kids begins seeing things that may—or may not—really be there.

She also spoke about her movie *Strange Weather*, premiered at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival. Hunter had nothing but great things to say about writer-director Katherine Dieckmann.

The indie is a portrait of Darcy Baylor (Hunter), who is forced to deal with her son's death many years after he had committed suicide. Hunter told *Deadline Hollywood* that her character, Darcy, "really uses revenge as the gasoline that she puts in her car to drive it." Despite the heavy subject matter, Hunter has once again found a film with a lot of humor in what she referred to as "very unexpected places."

For anyone not familiar with Hunter's background, her career has had an amazing trajectory since she began in the early '80s. Her first big hit was 1987's *Raising Arizona*. She played an ex-cop named Ed, who was the love interest of Nicolas Cage's character, an ex-con. When the two find out they're not able to conceive a child, they steal a baby. The quirky comedy is the brilliant brainchild of the fabulous Coen brothers—hence, it is hilarious.

Also in 1987, Hunter had another huge hit with *Broadcast News*, another romantic comedy drama co-starring William Hurt and Albert Brooks. Hunter's big Oscar win came in 1993 for *The Piano* when she played Ana, a mute woman in a steamy drama about love, music, and an arranged marriage. It is worth mentioning the other Academy Awards the film raked in: Anna Paquin won Best Supporting Actress as Ana's daughter. The 11-year-old Paquin had beat out 5000 candidates and it was her first acting role. If you've never seen Paquin's acceptance speech, check it out. It's precious. *The Piano* also won the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, and writer-director Jane Campion became the first woman to ever win the Palme d'Or, the highest prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

So, yeah, for being strong, sassy, and awesome, we knew Holly Hunter had to be included in *Honeysuckle's* HERS issue.