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**SUDDEN
MANHATTAN**

**ADRIENNE SHELLY
WRITES AND DIRECTS**

**ALSO: SLAMDANCE
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EXHIBITION**



FIVE



OUT OF WORTEX

WITH *SUDDEN MANHATTAN*,
ADRIENNE SHELLY
WRITES AND DIRECTS HER FUTURE

BY DEIRDRE GUTHRIE

"YOU DON'T MIND IF I SMOKE, DO YOU?" ADRIENNE SHELLY ASKS inside the car. "I get kind of rattled after a screening: need to relax a bit."

Like her characters on screen, Shelly isn't an intimidating, imposing figure. She's a tiny thing, with a lion's mane of hair and a voice that makes you think of a cartoon princess. She leans a bit closer to me.

"Did you see that fat man in the back row?"

"No," I reply.

"He had these cards on the sides of his glasses."

"Playing cards?" I ask, confused.

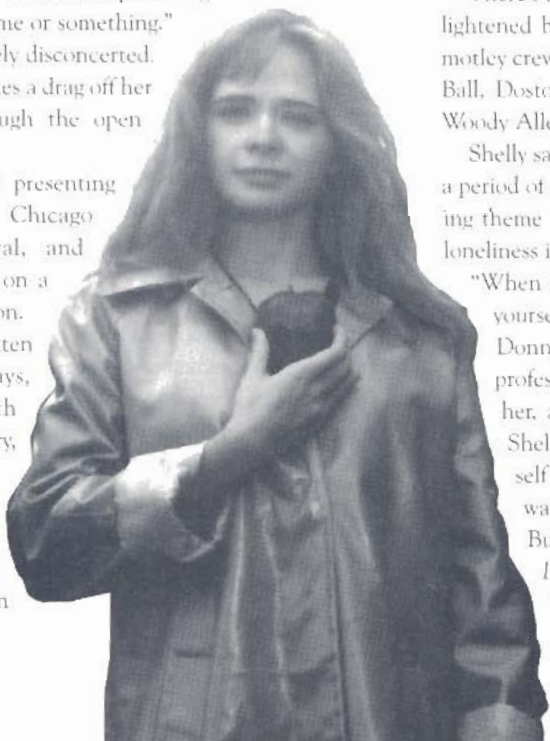
"Yeah, miniature playing cards. He kept staring at me like he was going to kill me or something."

"Weird" I concur, genuinely disconcerted.

Thus unburdened, she takes a drag off her cigarette and exhales through the open window.

Shelly has just finished presenting *Sudden Manhattan* at the Chicago International Film Festival, and we're heading to her hotel on a crisp, blue, October afternoon.

Although Shelly has written and directed several plays, *Sudden Manhattan*, which opens theatrically in February, marks her first attempt at writing, directing, and starring in a feature film. In it, Shelly again masters the aura of a feminine Holden



Caulfield. Her character, Donna, is an aimless, analytical loner who wanders Manhattan's streets looking for wisdom in graffiti philosophy and fortune-teller prophecy. The guidance she finds there is bleak: "The meek shall inherit shit" reads a spray-painted wall. And Dominga, the omniscient gypsy, played by Louise Lasser, predicts, "All is suffering, torture; and then you die."

There's an undertone of despair and cynicism in Shelly's writing; it's lightened by humor, but is weighty nonetheless. I'm thinking of the motley crew she's named as mentors: people like Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball, Dostoevsky, Camus, Ingmar Bergman, Patricia Rosemont, and Woody Allen.

Shelly says the writing of *Sudden Manhattan* three years ago followed a period of depression in her life and no doubt reflects it. The underlying theme of her film, she notes, is an exploration of "the humorous loneliness in our lives."

"When I began *Sudden*," she says, "I was thinking 'Okay, now write yourself a future.'"

Donna attracts needy, inadequate men like Murphy, an English professor who sadistically lusts after his own idealized image of her, and Adam, a struggling young actor who can't get it up.

Shelly has Donna glide down city streets, attempting to lift herself from despair by doing her best Mary Tyler Moore imitation, waving a flimsy wrist and grinning pathetically at passers-by.

But the fortune teller's words ring over and over in her mind: *I am in a vortex. I am in a vortex.*

"Donna is definitely an exaggerated version of me in my

twenties," Shelly admits. "Back then I was living like her character—scouring the underbelly of Manhattan, floating in my own fantasy world, getting entangled in bad relationships." She laughs, "As Lily Tomlin says, I was 'searching for signs of intelligent life in the universe.'"

FROM THE OUTSET, SHELLY KNEW she'd be following an independent low-budget course with her directorial debut—a fact she kept in mind when writing the script. "I knew that such a film wouldn't find funding if it were written for a large budget, so I kept it real small—few locations, a couple of recurring characters, lots of street exteriors to be shot in a guerrilla filmmaking way: quick and on the fly," she says in her production notes. She condensed all the film's locations to within a few blocks of her West Village home. And she hired Jim Denault, known for his award-winning cinematography in *Nadja*, because he came from a lighting background, and "what suffers most in quick, guerrilla-style filming is lighting."

By early 1995 it was time to find the cash. Shelly's script had a public reading as part of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's "Fifth Night Series," a hotbed for ambitious screenwriters and talent scouts. The next day she had more than 20 calls from interested producers. Marcia Kirkley, then acquisitions director at October Films, was among those in the audience who was impressed. Shelly found Kirkley to be a convincing suitor and credits her as being the "first important door" that opened.

Kirkley and I spoke over the phone. "Adrienne's script was one of the funniest, smartest, and most original scripts I had ever encountered," she said. At first she took the script to October, which "seriously considered" it for a while but eventually declined. "They weren't making many low-budget films then," says Kirkley, adding, "and still aren't."

So Kirkley used her business connections and MBA smarts to put together a comprehensive financial package that convinced 16 savvy private investment bankers to finance the film. She says her investors didn't know who Shelly was and probably didn't care.

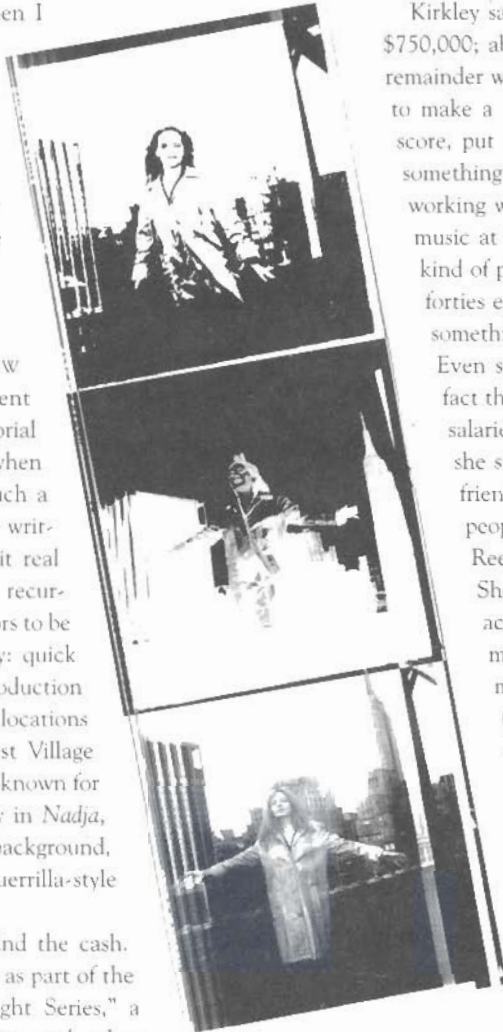
When asked how she convinced such straight and narrow businessmen to finance a risky, artistic endeavor like an independent film, Kirkley says, "These people know me and my experience. But ultimately, they had to go on faith." With their support, Kirkley left October in August to start her own production company, Homegrown Pictures, and within weeks the cameras were rolling. (Kirkley has associate-produced two low-budget 35mm features shot in New York: *Bad Girls* by Amos Kolleck and *Zero Cool* by Isaac Zepel; and executive produced Eve Annenberg's indie feature *Dogs: The Rise and Fall of an All-Girl Bookie Joint*.)

Kirkley says *Sudden Manhattan* was put together with a budget of \$750,000; about \$500,000 was the operational cash budget and the remainder was deferred. Luckily, Shelly found it a delicious challenge to make a film with so little money. She offers her creative music score, put together by Pat Irwin of B-52s fame, as an example of something wonderful that might not have happened had she been working with a bigger budget. Irwin found several pieces of mood music at low cost at the Corelli Jacobs music library. This is the kind of place, Shelly says, where "You can go in and say 'I need a forties early reggae piece reminiscent of Sinatra,' and they'll find something for you."

Even so, Shelly laments the downside of low budgets, like the fact that many members of her cast and crew agreed to deferred salaries. "I can't wait until I can pay people what they're worth," she says. It probably helps that her cast is made up largely of friends and acquaintances, although a few parts were given to people she'd never worked with, like Louise Lasser, Roger Rees, and Hynden Walch.

Shelly is grateful she wasn't pressured to cast more famous actors. "I didn't have to worry about expensive trailers, meals, special treatment, hissy fits. There just wasn't the money for attitude." She and casting director Ellen Parks (*Flirting with Disaster*) chose people for their talent as well as their ability to handle "no-frills" conditions.

Probably her most difficult casting decision was putting herself in the lead role. After auditioning 80 actresses, Shelly realized that "in writing Donna, I had written myself. Either someone was going to have to do a really good imitation of me, or I would have to play the part. In the end, it was a storytelling decision."



ON A STORMY HALLOW'S EVE, SHELLY AND I continue our interview by phone. Her cat purrs at her feet, and my dog snores beside me on the couch. It's 9 p.m. and she's been directing a screenplay she wrote for Lifetime's Independent Woman's Film Fest since four in the morning. With a weary sigh, Shelly lets out a little low-budget frustration. "One day I'd like to shoot everything just the way I wrote it." Today a scene involving 40 extras in a ballroom ended up being shot with two couples in a living room.

The movie's main character, Lois, is loosely based on Shelly's own mother. (Her mother also makes a cameo in *Sudden Manhattan* as the "bunny lady.") Shelly describes the story's plot: "Lois is a suburban, middle-aged housewife who reads Harlequin romances, fantasizes about the lawnboy, and plays mahjongg all day."

Shelly, born in a suburban Queens neighborhood that's 95 percent Jewish, "couldn't wait to escape," so she started acting at age fifteen, studied theater in Manhattan, and performed in summer stock. After graduating from high school on Long Island, Shelly studied film at Boston University where she "learned nothing." But her education was cut short when she took ill her junior year. "I caught a virus, Bell's Palsy, that paralyzed half of my face. It had happened once before when I was fifteen and lasted a month. It wasn't supposed to come back, but it did."

The therapy included large doses of Cortisone that left Shelly deranged and wandering about seeing halos. "I'm not sure what was happening to me biochemically, but it was very scary. I told myself then

that if this ended, I would quit school and follow my real heart's desire to Manhattan and pursue a career in acting." Within a year, she found her acting coach, Richard Niles (who is still with her today), and indie director Hal Hartley, who put her on the map with his first two films, *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990) and *Trust* (1991). Shelly snared the role of Audrey in *The Unbelievable Truth* by answering an ad in *Backstage*. She sent in her headshot, got called back with 200 other women, and then had to audition three times for the part.

Her performance in these films garnered her international appeal as a kind of underground cult heroine. Shelly laughs at this image, but agrees, "I do appeal to a certain audience. And if they are underground, that's fine with me." She says she has turned down high-paying TV parts in order to preserve a certain level of anonymity that she enjoys in the United States.

It is true that she may be better known abroad. This December, there was a retrospective of her work in Taiwan, while in Chicago a lady in the audience tells Shelly, "You were very natural in the film. Have you ever pursued acting?" Shelly smiles and says, yes, actually she's done twelve films.

And yet Shelly has a loyal following among American audiences.



She spoke of two nervous eighteen-year-old film students who came up to her after the screening to let her know how much they appreciated her work. "They also told me, as aspiring female filmmakers, how hard it is to be heard, how no one cares. It is depressing at times. For instance, I was the only American woman invited to the Chicago Film Festival." Her advice to the young female filmmakers was to resist being silenced and "never apologize or feel like what you have to say isn't important."

She credits Hartley with inspiring her tenacious attitude. "With Hal, well, there's nothing namby-pamby about him. He has a specific style and idea and he bluntly, forcefully, yet kindly, carries it through." She continues, "We as women have been encouraged to accommodate everybody, not step on anyone's toes, follow the ol' rule book. Hal helped teach me to aggressively pursue my vision."

In directing *Sudden Manhattan*, Shelly needed to maintain this kind of confidence. "For instance," says Shelly, "I used a playback monitor to direct but couldn't let myself get self-conscious. I literally looked at

myself as a piece of set furniture. I was only interested in how I was working in the scene as a whole."

Sometimes she faltered. Shelly recalls a scene where everyone had just arrived at Donna's apartment. Looking at replays of the scene, Shelly felt she was acting "too neurotic." It brought up another Hartley lesson: how important it is for the central character in a comedy to remain grounded.

"It's tempting when your supporting actors are going nuts to join the party, but I had to relate to the audience and therefore be somewhat normal," she says. "Donna may doubt her sanity in my film, but her behavior itself isn't batty. That's why my performance in that scene was giving me trouble."

She had the same problem in directing Tim Guinee as Adam. "When he started to go *boing* with the other actors, I'd remind him 'Tim, leading man.' Above all, the storytelling, the hero's journey, has to be a bit universal."

She found that stumbling blocks for a first-time director are inevitable. But in retrospect, her worst experiences during the making of *Sudden Manhattan* were due to circumstances beyond her control. She says the key is not to panic when a) your DP, who is supposed to shoot in three weeks, quits for a higher-paying job; b) you catch a stomach virus and have to go to the hospital for dehydration two weeks before shooting; c) you break up with your boyfriend during the sound mix; or d) your apartment is completely cleaned out by thieves during editing.

Her advice to aspiring filmmakers is "Don't show a film before it's ready." She thinks she jumped the gun by showing *Sudden Manhattan* in L.A. before tightening it up and doing some test screenings. "When you have to edit that fast, it's so easy to become entrenched in the work and lose all objectivity, because you just want to show that finished product."

Phaedra Cinema, a new independent distributor and production company out of L.A., has picked up *Sudden Manhattan* as its first release. Greg Hatanaka, president of Phaedra and CEO of Filmopolis, a new theatrical distributor (which handled *Ma Saison Preferee* with Catherine Deneuve), says, "Phaedra seeks to give low-budget films exposure." This support for female, independent talent is what attracted Shelly and Kirkley, who declined an offer from a bigger distributor in favor of Phaedra, which ultimately will open the film in a greater number of cities.

When asked whether she'd like to move on to bigger budgets as a director, Shelly says she's happy in the independent arena. "I like the freedom of independent film, the spontaneous, industrious process whereby you have to think by the seat of your pants."

Although she wouldn't refuse a bigger budget, Shelly doesn't think her writing will attract Hollywood anytime soon. "The women in my films are not window-dressing."

When all is said and done, Shelly remains true to her heart's desire. "My films are not a calling card," she declares. "They're my life."

Deirdre Guthrie is a freelance writer published in the Village Voice and is currently writing a piece based on her travels with the Big Apple Circus