

A Wig, a Fence, and One White Horse



Patricia Williams

Joan Micklin Silver talks with Kenneth Turan
about the making of *Hester Street*

In July 2003 the National Yiddish Book Center held a five-day conference exploring “Jewish Stories on the Silver Screen.” Among the featured faculty were film director Joan Micklin Silver and her husband, producer Ray Silver. Their 1975 film, *Hester Street*, based on Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*, has become a classic of independent filmmaking, a highly empathic, creative interpretation of the Jewish immigrant story. On the final evening of the conference, before an engrossed audience, Joan Micklin Silver spoke with *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan about her life and work.

KT: Let’s start at the beginning, back in Omaha, which is not thought of as a center of Jewish life, but it is.

JMS: Yes, my parents were born in Belarus and both came over as children with their families, so I am first generation. At the time I lived in Omaha, there were 6,000 Jews – enough Jews to have an Orthodox synagogue, a Conservative synagogue, and a Reform synagogue. Anyone who could supported them all, so that everybody could have a place to worship to meet his preference. When I am in New York, I feel the sense of Jews and Jewishness all over and I don’t have to think about it so much.

We didn’t have it that way in Omaha, and I worked a little harder at being Jewish and cared about it more and treasured it more.

KT: You have said you had a grandmother who was “tough as an oak” – a wonderful phrase.

JMS: My father’s mother was a tiny little woman, very thin, but when you put your hand on her arm you felt as if you were feeling a tree. She spoke only Yiddish, which I never learned to speak well so I couldn’t really communicate with her, but when she spoke everyone listened. She had a lot of authority in her family.

KT: You started out writing. What first set you in the direction of film?

JMS: When Ray Silver and I came to New York from Cleveland, in 1967, I met someone who helped me get a freelance job as a writer in educational films. That was a time, before videos, when the schools received stipends from the government to show and purchase films. They were called audio-visual studies, if you remember. That was my first break.

KT: Was it always in the back of your mind that film directing was what you wanted to do?

JMS: Yes, but I always thought I would do everything in a nice ladylike way. I would learn to write, and I would learn to write very well, and then I would write for several of the great directors, learning my craft at their feet. But my first experience was so hard on me that I changed my mind about the approach I wanted to use. The first Hollywood film I wrote was called *Limbo* and it was a sort of early anti-Vietnam War film about three wives of prisoners of war and MIAs. I wrote it from my research with these women and it was sold to Universal. The director Mark Robson brought me out to California and suggested some changes. I was very green, and I said, “No, no, no. I’ve met with these women. We should do it this way, we should do this.” When I got home he called and said they were going to get another writer, which was really stunning to me. My first exposure to how it all happens. But he did a very nice thing: he invited me to come down to Florida, where they were shooting the movie, to observe, because I had never been on a movie set. So I thought to myself, “Well, I can either stay home and be mad or I can go down there and learn something.” And so of course I went. I started observing these scenes. Nothing was as I had written it and I realized that even if it were my script, it wouldn’t have been my movie anyway. Because even just in terms of cast, in terms of where the cameras were, in terms of what the sets are like, directors make all the decisions that create the film.

When I got home I said to Ray, “I had this plan to write and write and get there little by little. Well, I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to start directing now.” I was in a very shaky psychological state. Ray said, “Go ahead, jump in the water. You might as well see if you can swim. If you can’t swim now you probably won’t be able to swim six years from now.” Word for word, that’s what he said to me. That gave me the gumption to go back to the head of the educational film company. I said that I would like to direct as well as write and he said, “So you can make your mistakes on me?” and I said, “Yes.” And he said, “All right.” Everybody gets one break like that, right?

So I wrote and directed three short films for that company. One was a story on immigration for high school stu-

dents. The company head told me right away I couldn’t use Jews because they were too atypical. I picked Poles, mainly because I didn’t know that much about Poles – not Jewish Poles, but Catholic Poles. There was a Polish community in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and I felt I’d be able to use the resources there. So that was a little presentiment of *Hester Street*. It whetted my appetite, and I started reading all the immigrant literature I could. I didn’t need to, I just wanted to, and that’s when I found the story, Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*, that was the basis of *Hester Street*.

KT: How did you know it was time to do a feature?

JMS: I had observed many young men who had made prize-winning shorts and I’d seen them all move on to do features and I thought, “Why can’t I?” But when I went around and tried to get a directing job, I couldn’t. I think of the period as one of high sexism, when women were not being hired at all to direct. One executive said to me, “Feature films are hard to make, expensive to market, and women directors are one more problem we don’t need.” He actually said that to my face. I was really at the end of my rope and Ray was observing how I was struggling and he didn’t like it. It made him angry. He said, “Look, if you can write and direct a film for a very small amount of money” – he was at that time a real estate developer – “I will go to some of these people I’m always raising money from and I will raise the money.” He figured that he could raise \$350,000, and I went home and wrote *Hester Street*. Cahan’s story was in the public domain, so we didn’t have to pay for any rights. Ray raised the money, and we did it.

KT: Why did you choose this subject matter?

JMS: I thought I would never get to make another film. The atmosphere was not exactly encouraging and I thought I’d make one that will count for my family. I came from an immigrant family that talked a lot about the immigrant experience. I have in my life observed families who never talk about it, because it’s traumatic, it’s the past, they’re ashamed of it. But my family talked about it all the time. I heard great stories around our dinner table about people who’d gone and people who’d come back and people who’d gone crazy and people who’d left their wives. Often some of the words were in Yiddish, so my parents would translate. The stories had great dramatic lines and they were interesting to listen to. So this seemed to me a good thing to do.

KT: Why did you pick the Cahan story as the vehicle?

JMS: I loved the story line, the idea of a woman who sort of “wises up” as she goes along in the immigrant experience. One of things Cahan says in the story is that in just a few short months you would see these immigrants turn from the yokels, the greenhorns they were, and begin to take on

the sophistication of the city. I loved acting out that story. I thought it was marvelous. And it's a sort of profeminist story, with a woman as the main character.

KT: You made some subtle, interesting changes to the story. Was it hard to give yourself permission to do this?

JMS: How did I change it? I don't remember.

KT: In the film you see more of Jake's relationship with Mamie and more of Gitl's relationship with Bernstein than in the story. It's much richer in the film.

JMS: I didn't find the screenplay terribly difficult to write because it had such a good story line from Cahan. The New York Public Library had file after file of pictures of that period that were so evocative. They were all in black-and-white, which affected my desire to make the film in black and white. There was also an exhibition – now you can get the book – of Roman Vishniac's *A Vanished World*. Although his photos are from the 1920s and the 1930s and my story took place in 1896, they made you think and made you feel and made you understand the world these characters come from. I made all my actors go to see that exhibition.

KT: I want to talk a little about the casting. The person we think of first is Carol Kane.

JMS: That is one way I really did change the story. In the Cahan story, Gitl is described as being plump and dark and I had always imagined that I would hire somebody who was just a little soft and dark. And Carol Kane walked in and she was just phenomenal. She lived in New York, she was perfectly available, and she gave a wonderful reading. I've had to see *Hester Street* a lot of times and I still can look at her performance and her close-ups and find them very affecting. She was into her part 1,000 percent. While we were shooting, the hair man came to me – the man who did the wigs and so on – and said that Carol wanted to take the wig home and rehearse in it and that we couldn't let her do it. I asked why not and he said, "Because it's such a cheap production and we only have one wig." I said, "I'll take the responsibility; you let her take it home," because I knew that Carol would kill to protect that wig. She just took it all so seriously.

KT: What happened to Steven Keats, who played Jake?

JMS: He committed suicide. It was one of the saddest possible memorial services. I went with Carol and the two of us were just clinging to each other. He has two lovely sons and one of them got up and said, "My father had family that loved him, and he had work, and he had a lot of friends, but whatever it was, it wasn't enough."

KT: That's sad. And Dorrie Kavanaugh?

JMS: That is another sad story. Dorrie Kavanaugh, who played Mamie, died of breast cancer. The actor who played

Bernstein, Mel Howard, took the part quite late in the game because the actor that I had hired quit. This was terrifying, since we had only enough money to hire a Yiddish teacher to do parts with the four principals; everybody else who spoke Yiddish in the film was a Yiddish speaker. Mel Howard was a crew person, not an actor, and I brought him in at my cinematographer's suggestion. He had been raised in a Lubavitcher family, and he spoke Yiddish.

KT: One person I was happy to see in the cast was Zvee Scooler, who plays the rabbi, especially because he also appeared in *Uncle Moses*. What was he like?

JMS: He was an actor who had a Yiddish radio program in New York. He was just thrilled to play the rabbi. He really got into it and he wanted to know what he was going to say and then he'd come back and say, "No, I think she should do this with her hands, and this." The man who played the peddler was the same. His trouble was that every moment he added another line. The part started out as three lines but all his additions were so wonderful it was hard to be too angry with him.

KT: Did the rest of the cast have any connection to the material?

JMS: Doris Roberts, who is so wonderful in "Everyone Loves Raymond" and who keeps winning Emmys, brought us lines like, "You can't pee up my back and make me believe it's raining," which her grandfather used to say. At one point the wig and makeup guy came to me and said, "We have a big problem. Doris Roberts insists on wearing false eyelashes." And I said, "False eyelashes in 1896?" I went back into the makeup room and said, "Doris, in 1896 people didn't wear false eyelashes." She said "Oh?" and whipped them off. It wasn't too difficult.

KT: Music is central to your films. I hadn't realized that it was William Bolcom who had done the music for *Hester Street*.

JMS: I interviewed tons of composers who wanted to do cello music in B minor, they wanted to do Yiddish themes and Jewish melodies, and so on. What I wanted was the sounds of America that an immigrant might have heard when he was walking past a bandstand. I wanted somebody who knew the music of America at that time. Steve Keats suggested Bill Bolcom, who is a composer of note, and Bill Bolcom brought Jerry Schwartz, who was first trumpet of the New York Philharmonic, over to our living room. I can still remember Jerry putting down all this paper on the floor, because when people play the trumpet they have to keep shaking out the spit. They played the entire oeuvre of Herbert L. Clark, who was the first trumpet of Sousa's band and also a composer, and they just had the perfect sound.

KT: I wanted to talk to you about the decision to have the actors speak Yiddish, to have that be a central part of the film. Was that a tough decision?

JMS: My father, who came to this country from Russia when he was twelve, had told me about the problems he had because he couldn't speak the language and he would misunderstand people. He remembered a traumatic experience when he was a paperboy. He was on a bus, and somebody said to him, "Is this Parker Street?" and he said, "No." But when he got off the bus he realized that what the man was saying was, "You left your pocketbook." Things like that happened, and it seemed to me that the film just wouldn't seem real without acknowledging that language is a huge problem for every immigrant.

KT: Were the actors O.K. with this?

JMS: Oh, actors love all this. Actors are the best mimics in the world.

KT: You found coaches for them?

JMS: We had this Yiddish actor, a lovely old man. We didn't have enough money to keep him for the whole time. But he had meetings with each actor, and put their parts for them on tape.

KT: I wonder how you came up with the title *Hester Street*. Clearly *Yekl* is not the greatest title for a film.

JMS: We used to sit around the dinner table with our three daughters and bat around ideas for the title. Finally we just called it *Hester Street*, because there was a street by that name. Now it seems like the most perfect title.

KT: It seems very natural now, as if it couldn't be called anything else.

JMS: At first I called it *The Discovery of America*.

KT: We tend to romanticize this immigrant period, and yet it was a time of all kinds of hardships, of deserting husbands, of broken marriages. We tend to gloss that over and it's wonderful that this film recognizes what really happened.

JMS: That's true. But my parents didn't talk about it that way. My parents talked about it as it was. I heard the good, I heard the bad.

KT: Did the filming itself go smoothly, in general?

JMS: The biggest problem was that we had such a limited budget: \$350,000 to do an ambitious period film. For



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example, we were at one location and we were scheduled to be there for two hours. But it took two hours to get into it because it hadn't been properly fixed up or arrangements hadn't been made properly. The whole time I was directing the scene I was saying to myself, "How am I ever going to make up for the time?" This isn't the best thing to think about when you're directing a scene. There was that constant pressure. We were scheduled to do four-and-a-half days outside on what we called "Hester Street." If it had rained, I don't think I'd be here tonight, because we couldn't afford to "de-prop" the street. We just threw some plastic over it and we had a

guard to watch it, and everything was there like that for four-and-a-half days. God looks after children and fools, as my mother used to say.

KT: I think there's a story about a horse?

JMS: It would appear to you, if you saw the movie today, that there were several horses. But in fact the horses cost more than the actors. Each horse came with his own teamster and had to be driven there and driven back. Just ridiculous. So we hired one white horse. We had a marvelous scenic artist, a little Italian man who hardly spoke English. He would paint the horse with watercolors, which he would wash off right after a scene. So it looked as though there was a dark horse, then a white horse, then a horse with some markings. You have to be a little clever.

In the scene at Ellis Island there's another example of how hard you have to work when you don't have enough money. I realized that the most important thing about the experience of Ellis Island was the separation between those who were already here and those who were trying to get in. So we spent \$800 on a wire fence. It was the most expensive thing on the set and it worked. A limited budget forces you to figure out the emotional qualities you want to evoke. You can't say, "I'll fix it in the editing room."

KT: A lot of screenwriters have the impulse to direct because they want to protect their material, but they don't necessarily like directing. A friend who is a good screenwriter says, "You either direct or be miserable, and I've chosen to be miserable." But directing seemed to suit you.

JMS: One of the things some directors don't enjoy is work-

ing with actors. I really love it and I've had so much fun with so many wonderful actors and so many projects. I love working with the crews, too. Some crew members tell me that on a first film often a male director will pretend to know things he doesn't really know, because he doesn't want to admit his ignorance. But I was always saying, "I don't know. Somebody help me." For women it doesn't diminish us at all to admit we don't know how to do something. But at times, for men, that's much harder to say. I was so clear about what I didn't know, everyone rushed in to help.

KT: Obviously once a film is finished the next battle is distribution. I read that John Cassavetes encouraged you to distribute *Hester Street* yourself.

JMS: We had a terrible time. Ray was in charge of trying to send the film around, hither and yon, and nobody wanted to distribute it. I had one of the worst winters of my entire life because I thought I'd made a film that couldn't be distributed. People told us we could put it out for the synagogue market in 16 mm. Ray got mad again and he called John Cassavetes, who was the hero of all independent filmmakers, a brilliant filmmaker. John Cassavetes said, "Do it yourself. Not only that, I'll send some guys I've been working with to New York. You can use them." So he did and they did and that's how we distributed *Hester Street*. Ray's the hero of this story.

KT: You were in the vanguard of so many things with this film – in the vanguard of being a woman director in that era, of independent filmmaking, of films about ethnic groups. Did you feel as if you were doing all those things at the time?

JMS: No, I didn't, and it was wonderful in a way. Nobody knew what I was doing and nobody cared and that took the pressure off of me. There wasn't a single person who wanted to interview me while I was making this movie.

KT: Despite everyone's qualms about the film and reluctance to distribute it, *Hester Street* got a wonderful reception.

JMS: Ray sent it to Cannes, where it was picked up for Critics' Week. Then he sold the rights in four foreign countries, and that gave us enough money to open it in New York at the Plaza Theater. We had always heard about the best weather for getting crowds out to the theater. It can't be too hot; people will stay home. It can't be too cold and miserable; people will stay home. If it's just pleasantly warm they want to go out and do things at the park. So we woke up the morning of the opening and it was just pouring! One of the guys that Cassavetes sent called Ray and said, "I'll meet you over at the theater." Ray said, "I'm not going to the theater. I'm just going to watch the football game. I'm not going to see nobody go and see the movie." Then we got

another call and the guy said, "I think you should come down here." And we went down to the theater and there were people standing in line around the block with their umbrellas. Carol Kane's mother took pictures of the people with their umbrellas so that afterward we could prove we hadn't made this whole story up. From the beginning there were people who were really interested in the subject. It was 1975, and there were still lots of people who had lived in the Lower East Side. I was a little bit scared. I thought, "There are going to be people who tell me I don't know what I'm talking about because I wasn't there." At the Plaza Theater they held a Golden Age screening in the afternoon, when "Golden Agers," as they used to call them, paid a lower price. I sat in the audience one afternoon. We got to the scene where they're at Ellis Island in front of the immigration clerk. There were three women behind me. One of them said, "Tsk, oh no, oh no," and I was thinking, "Oh, my God, I just can't bear it. I'm going to find out what a terrible thing I did." And then one of them said, "She shouldn't pick him up at his age. He's much too heavy." I'll never forget it.

KT: One of the terrible things about the movie industry is the underestimation of the audience. There's a sense that they only want something stupid but, in fact, if something of quality gets out there people often embrace it. It's one of the great frustrations for me as a critic and I'm sure for you as a filmmaker.

JMS: It certainly is.

KT: There are films like yours, that are not afraid of emotion, but on the other hand it also seems to me that there are films that really overdo the emotion. Your films have a kind of balance.

JMS: That's a great compliment.

KT: Is it just part of who you are that your films turn out that way?

JMS: I don't think it's something that I would think of logically. It's an instinct and it probably also reflects the kind of film I like. One of the greatest influences on me was Satyajit Ray, the great Indian filmmaker. Before we moved to New York, before I even got a chance to start in film, I saw his Apu trilogy at the one little art theater in Cleveland. That trilogy made such an impact on me because Ray took the time to say what he wanted to say and the emotion was so intense and had such power. We were invited to a film festival in Calcutta with *Crossing Delancey*. Satyajit Ray lived in Calcutta and the person who was part of our delegation knew I had this worshipful attitude toward him. He had been very ill but he was directing and so we were allowed to go on his set and watch him direct. That's one of my lifetime thrills.

KT: There's a sense of real ensemble feeling in your films. Everyone seems to be working together. How do you create that?

JMS: Some directors don't want the actors to rehearse because they feel it takes away from their freshness. Some actors won't even get their script beforehand or they only



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see the scene that they're in. Milos Foreman feels like that, and Woody Allen. But there are others who rehearse to a fare-thee-well like Sidney Lumet. What's worked best for me is to have the actors come in for a week before we start. We all sit around a table and we read and talk about the material. We begin to form an ensemble. You find it little by little by little, gently. I'm a little like a sheep dog. If I have good actors, I sort of nudge them, let them go out, but then nudge them back, so they don't get too far.

KT: Why is it that the kinds of films we both like are getting harder to see?

JMS: Part of the reason is that the studio has got to be interested in doing it. If a studio wants to do it, it will spend

the money. Plus, a filmmaker has to deliver the "A" list actor. It's so hard for independent filmmakers to bring along that kind of actor.

KT: There has to be a change in climate to get things done. What's in the future for you and Ray?

JMS: We're working on a comedy about six women, of all ages, who meet at a bingo parlor. They plan to knock over a high-stakes poker game, posing as maids.

KT: What would you want to pass on to young people who want to do what you did?

JMS: I didn't think about it a lot. I never had time to look in a mirror and say, "I really want to do this." The fact is that even if we had known how awful it was going to be, we would have done it, because it is something we love so much. So I don't know that there's much you can tell kids. They're going to try it. They're going to see if they like it. And if they want to continue at it, whether they're good or not, they're going to. And if they don't, they won't. That's a decision they're going to make, and I wouldn't know what else to say to anybody.

KT: My last question is about Ray Silver. I know how important he is in your life and your work.

JMS: I don't think I'd be making feature films at all if Ray hadn't stepped up and said, "I'll raise the money if you want to make *Hester Street*." There were no offers. After a while you feel you're getting so battered and bruised because you keep trying and trying and nobody's giving you a chance. In the early 1970s, before I started, Ray and I went to a lecture at the 92nd Street Y in New York by Arthur Penn, a wonderful director and somebody I had a lot of respect for. One of the questions from the audience was, "Do you think women directors are going to have more opportunities now?" He said, "I'd like to say yes, but I'm going to have to say no, because movies cost a lot of money, and men don't trust women with a lot of money." That was the thinking of the time.

Certainly things have improved. I used to make it my business to go to every new movie that was directed by a woman. I wanted to be the first one there, I wanted to show the flag. Also, I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be part of a group of people who were doing film. Now I can't attend every film premiere because there are so many women directing, and that's a good sign.

And as far as Ray? We've been married a long time and a lot of people have said to me, "Isn't it hard for you to work together?" We didn't start until we'd been married eighteen years, so maybe by that time we'd already kind of ironed things out. We just had our forty-seventh anniversary, so it's worked for us. **PT**