



**IN THE LIME LIGHT:**  
Lubliner (left) and Gertz make  
movies they want to see

# Purpose Driven

Hollywood isn't brimming with do-gooder producers. Maybe **Jami Gertz** and **Stacey Lubliner's** first film, *A Better Life*, will inspire more

**A Better Life**, which opens in theaters on June 24, follows the travails of Carlos, an undocumented Mexican gardener, and Luis, his teenage son, as they eke out an existence—and a coexistence—in a bare-bones home in East L.A. The \$10 million film is that rare honest representation of the diversity and isolation of Los Angeles: The cast and crew shot in 69 locations in 38 days, from Bell to Bel-Air, Pico Rivera to Malibu. The majority of the crew was Latino, Spanish was the primary language on set, and former gang members from Father Greg Boyle's Homeboy Industries made up part of the cast—the cameras didn't roll until "Father G" blessed the set. The movie wouldn't have been made if not for two first-time producers: the actress Jami Gertz, who lives in Beverly Hills with her investor husband and three teenage sons, and Stacey Lubliner, a former ICM literary agent with two young children of her own. Gertz, whose acting credits run from *Square Pegs* and *Less than Zero* to *Entourage* and *Modern Family*, took her seat behind the director every day. "I didn't ask a lot of questions about their background, because I didn't really care," she says of the ex-gang members, whose ankle bracelets she sometimes mistook for props. "We were here to do a job. We ate lunch together, and it was lovely, I have to say."

Two years ago Gertz and Lubliner formed Lime Orchard Productions to make

# Escape to Napa

## Limited Time Offer!



### Weekday Vacation Package

The Hilton Garden Inn & the Wine Train are offering this fabulous getaway - Monday thru Thursday only. Dine on the Wine Train, enjoy a day in wine country, spend a relaxing evening in a well appointed room at the Hilton. Breakfast and other extras included.

Special ends June 30th.  
Only \$299 per couple

For Reservations -  
**707.252.0444**

800.427.4124 • winetrain.com  
1275 McKinstry St. • Napa, CA

## NAPA VALLEY



## WINE TRAIN®



**A BETTER MOVIE:** The film's director, Chris Weitz (center), with actors José Julián (left) and Demián Bichir

films that, well, mattered to them. They were drawn to *A Better Life* because, says Gertz, "it's a personal story about a man and his child. I have teenagers, and you go from being their hero to them being embarrassed by you. Add to that your father doesn't speak English or comes from another country." Movies like *A Better Life*—socially responsible, issue driven—rarely appeal to major studios looking for blockbusters. Not even smaller houses dedicated to advocacy material were biting when independent producer Christian McLaughlin went shopping for development money, although director Chris Weitz—whose *New Moon* has grossed \$700 million and counting—was attached to the project. Philanthropist Jeff Skoll's Participant Media, the producer of documentaries such as Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Waiting for Superman* as well as the upcoming adaptation of *The Help*, passed. So did the Latino companies McLaughlin thought would be a soft touch. "They all want to make commercial Hollywood movies," McLaughlin says. "Jami was willing to take a financial risk on an emotional reaction. The highway is littered with bodies who've done that."

Dealing with Lime Orchard means dealing with its principals; the company consists only of Gertz, Lubliner, and their assistant—which means zero bureaucracy. "You have people who have their own vision, taste, and passion," says veteran producer Paul Junger Witt (*Brian's Song*, *The Golden Girls*, *Three Kings*), who commissioned the film's initial screenplay some 20 years ago. "They'll make films that might be overlooked by studios who in this climate are interested in tent poles and comedies."

Small in terms of budget and story line, *A Better Life* stands to punch above its weight in impact, especially in Los Angeles. While Carlos, played by Mexican actor Demián Bichir (Fidel Castro in *Che* and Esteban, the

drug-running mayor, in *Weeds*), tends to the sprawling estates of wealthy whites to whom he is essentially invisible, his son is becoming distant, on the verge of being sucked in by neighborhood gangs. After Carlos falls victim to a crime, he is unable to report it for fear of deportation; he and Luis take matters into their own hands. The movie, a reflection on the everyday realities and challenges faced by immigrants in L.A., reduces a hot-button political issue to human scale. Prerelease screenings have garnered high marks, including from Latino audiences. Dave Karger of *Entertainment Weekly* pegged *A Better Life* as an early Oscar contender. "Jami and Stacey were our angels," says Weitz. "They believed in me and my collaborators."

\*\*\* \*\*

**The Sunset** Boulevard offices of Lime Orchard are spanking-new and decidedly feminine: white walls, white cabinets, white tufted love seats tossed with chain-stitched Jonathan Adler pillows. "We still don't have any art up," says Gertz. No paintings, maybe, but a significant piece hangs in the sun-filled conference room: a wood-framed poster of *A Better Life*.

"I was getting my hair colored," says Gertz, settling into the conference room with Lubliner, "and I'm weeping in the chair. Kelly, who has been doing my hair for years, said, 'What are you reading?' I said, 'I'm reading the most beautiful script—and I've read a lot of scripts in my day.'" The older Gertz got, the less interesting acting parts became—a common Hollywood lament. Encouraged by her husband of 22 years, Tony Ressler, cofounder of a successful private investment firm, she decided to take on producing. When she went looking for a partner ("I knew what I knew, but I knew I didn't know a lot," she says), she hit it off with Lubliner, whose work as an

COURTESY SUMMIT ENTERTAINMENT



DONNA CONLON, *Coexistencia*, 2003, Croatia video still, 5:26 minutes, @Donna Conlon (detail)

## UNRESOLVED CIRCUMSTANCES: PERSPECTIVES ON CURRENT VIDEO ART FROM LATIN AMERICA

On View Thru August 28, 2011

The videos in this exhibition illustrate the interconnections between the past and the present through recurring themes, and the proposals and shifts towards the future.

Sponsored by:

**EPSON**

Media Sponsor:

Los Angeles

**molaa**  
MUSEUM OF LATIN AMERICAN ART

628 Alamitos Ave., Long Beach, CA 90802  
Tel. 562.437.1689 ■ [www.molaa.org](http://www.molaa.org)

agent gave her the deal-making chops that Gertz lacked. "Aside from really liking each other, we bring complementary sets of skills to the table," says Lubliner. "It's not competitive or combustible, just 'Oh great, you're so good at that, you do it' and then calling each other in when necessary."

Both women credit their children for propelling their reinvention. Gertz, who is 45, was told by her boys she was "no longer welcome at the baseball games," she says with comic melodrama. "Then it was OK if I came, but I couldn't cheer. When did I become the loser mom who's not allowed to cheer?" Lubliner, 34, found that the 24/7 schedule required of an agent was increasingly incompatible with that of a young mother. "The whole point of this is, we want a life," says Gertz. "We want to be able to get our hair blown dry when we want to. If one of Stacey's kids is sick, she can go be with them. For many years I was on set and I couldn't. You should be able to do both." The women's husbands are a key part of the arrangement. Ressler and Gertz are the money behind Lime Orchard; Stacey is married to David Lubliner, an agent with William Morris Endeavor who counts Chris Weitz among his clients. Asked if they have a finite amount of cash to play with, Gertz says the topic hasn't come up. "If it were ridiculous, Tony would be like, 'Ah, honey? What's going on?' But we're not frivolous girls, so we haven't had to have that discussion."

Witt developed the project that became *A Better Life* after hearing a story about a friend's gardener. "It crystallized what was so different and mysterious about L.A.," he says. "Every morning there's this migration from the Eastside to the Westside, and we rarely put an identity behind the faces we see." Time and again he tried to get the film made; Cheech Marin and Sony were attached at one point. Then in 2007, Witt met McLaughlin and passed along the script, as he had been doing for decades. McLaughlin saw potential and drafted Eric Eason, the young award-winning screenwriter of *Manito*, a festival favorite, to do a rewrite. He gave the new version, titled *The Gardener*, to his old friend Chris Weitz. "It was," says Weitz, "the best script I'd read in years."

Weitz is part Mexican—his grandmother Lupita was a Mexican actress. His wife, Mercedes, is Mexican Cuban. "It was a part of his life he hadn't explored," McLaughlin says. After the crazy-money success of *New Moon*, Summit Entertainment, the distributor of the movie, was willing to back anything Weitz chose to do, and he chose *The Gardener*. "We said, 'You're sure?'" recalls Summit's president of production, Erik Feig. "When you can do absolutely any movie after the success of

*New Moon*?" Summit agreed to a budget somewhere around the \$4 million mark, but the movie Weitz envisioned required more than double that. Unbeknownst to him, he had an interested partner in Lime Orchard: Lubliner had received the script through her husband early on and loved it. She passed it on to Gertz, which led to the tears in the hair colorist's chair.

McLaughlin and Weitz met with Lime Orchard, then headquartered in Ressler's Century City offices. There were few degrees of separation in the room—McLaughlin had met Lubliner when she was an intern and he was an exec at Paramount in New York; Weitz had worked with her aunt, Karen Rosenfelt, a producer on *New Moon*. The meeting went well, and Lime Orchard got on board. Although nobody wants to confirm the figures, they seem to go something like this: Summit put up \$5 million, lottery-won tax credits from the State of California brought another \$1.3 million, Lime Orchard anted up about \$2 million, and Weitz added money of his own.

"We are not an ATM machine," says Gertz. "When you get us, we are fully immersed in the project." A hovering producer can be a director's nightmare. "But in this case," says Weitz, "it was a great experience. Jami is very emotionally committed. What you fear from producers is that you're just part of a slate." Gertz, no stranger to being a neophyte on a movie set, kept an eye out for José Julián, who is making his film debut as the son. "We called her Mama," says the 17-year-old actor. "She had an iPad, and we played Scrabble. She was so supportive."

As *A Better Life* makes its way to theaters, Gertz and Lubliner are developing several other projects: an adaptation of *Three Little Words*, a memoir about foster care and adoption, with director James Mangold and his wife, producer Cathy Konrad; an adaptation of Robert Goolrick's psychological thriller *A Reliable Wife*, with Sony; and a teen comedy that Gertz describes as "*Weird Science* for girls," with the Disney Channel. Although the projects cover a wide swath of subject matter, they're all character-driven stories, the big-screen equivalent of Oprah's Book Club choices. "The comic books, the creatures, the aliens, the world destruction," says Gertz, "that's not our wheelhouse. You have to think, 'What do I want to put out there?'" Lubliner shares Gertz's taste for the most part but comes at it from an agent's point of view, looking for the marketing potential, the trailer moments. Sometimes she has to rein in her partner. "I told Stacey I wanted to do a movie about a 16th-century excommunicated Jew," says Gertz. "She was like, 'I really don't see the poster.'" ■