

Painfully Funny

Since her debut feature, *Walking and Talking*, Nicole Holofcener has been balancing between funny and sad. With *Friends with Money* she continues the journey.

By Amy Dawes

It's the everyday mortifications—the dozens of ways people can really embarrass themselves and those around them—that inspire writer-director Nicole Holofcener.

Like in *Lovely and Amazing*, when the fiftyish mom played by Brenda Blethyn flirts with her liposuction doctor, or the thirty-something Catherine Keener gets caught making out in a car with a kid half her age—by his mom.

"Those unguarded moments are so heartbreaking," she explains. "They're really a way of seeing into a character, as opposed to talking about a character. Let them embarrass themselves. Let them do something stupid as opposed to listening to them talk."

Holofcener's third movie, opening in March, turns on a subject that many people find uncomfortable, even if

it does occupy a large part of their internal lives. It's called *Friends with Money*, and it's about cash, bread, do-re-mi, and how it affects people and their relationships.

"It's such a loaded subject," the filmmaker says, tucking her flip-flopped feet under her at a West L.A. editing facility, where she's been running through music cues and other postproduction issues. "Everyone I know has really weird money issues, not excluding myself. People have strong feelings about it—how they'd spend it if they had it, how they think their friends should spend it. Those conversations were just coming up in my life, and I was finding them really entertaining. Not always in a pleasant way."

As a writer, Holofcener tends to draw inspiration from her own life, focusing on the quotidian travails and hilarity inspired by family and friends. After that, "it's all about casting," she says. "What interests me are the actors. That's why I'm there."

At the same time, she says, "I certainly hope that I've evolved visually. Every D.P. I've worked with helps me to learn." For her latest, shot in Super 35mm and widescreen, Holofcener teamed with Terry Stacey (*In Her Shoes*, *American Splendor*), a director of photography she describes as "a good collaborator, with a lot of ideas."

That's something she looks for in a cinematographer because, she says, "I think that's my weakness—I'm much more focused on the nuances of performance, than I am in setting up an incredible tracking shot. Everything else—the camera, the locations, the light—just helps me express things about the characters."

Holofcener focuses as clear an eye on herself as on her characters. "All I have to do is watch my first movie, and I think, 'I'm never going to do that again!'"

For example? "Like, if I had backed up a little, or



FRIENDS AND FAMILY:

Jennifer Aniston (top) plays a teacher-turned-house cleaner in *Friends With Money*.

Holofcener regular Catherine Keener is a would-be artist in *Lovely and Amazing*.



DIRECTOR'S VOICE

followed this character, instead of cutting to that character. Or if something had a little more grace to it.... Or, why didn't I tell that actor to stop doing that thing that's driving me crazy? You know, I didn't want to hurt their feelings."

Experience has made Holofcener more assertive on the set. "I've certainly learned never to let things go if I'm not happy with them. It used to be, if something was nagging at me when I was watching a scene, I was too timid to try to get it exactly as I wanted. I didn't want to bug the actors. Now, I don't want to look at it in the editing room and be kicking myself. I'm more able to get what I'm after. I'm pushier, more precise."

Precision was a necessity for *Friends With Money*. The Los Angeles-area shoot had to be pulled off in an intense 24-day schedule with little rehearsal time.

And, of course, ironically, money was an issue. Though she had her biggest budget to-date, she still had to call in favors for locations. "Are you kidding? We shot at my mother's house, my

boyfriend's house. I had six million, and I was still making that phone call—'Um, mom...' 'Honey, I thought you had more money this time.' 'I thought so, too.' But shooting a movie about rich people when you're not working with a lot of money is hard."

It was a plus that the team included players she knew well—producer Anthony Bregman and editor Rob Frazen had helped to guide and shape *Lovely and Amazing*. Returning to the cast is Keener, who has been in each of Holofcener's films. Here she plays a character closest in profession to her creator—a Hollywood screenwriter. The rest of the ensemble includes: Frances McDormand as a successful L.A. clothing designer who's burdened with nonstop rage; Jennifer Aniston as a former teacher turned house-cleaner; and Joan Cusack and Greg Germann as a couple with children and a life cushioned by her abundant family money.

Holofcener's admiration for Cusack dates back to the late 1980s, when the actress was

appearing in movies like *Say Anything*, and Holofcener was an NYU and Columbia film school grad trying to launch her career in New York on the strength of a sly, funny student short called *Angry*. "I wanted her for *Walking and Talking*," she says, "but back then, I couldn't get arrested."

She can joke about it now, but at the time it was, no doubt, a lot less funny.

Fortunately, things have gotten easier the third time around. Holofcener landed her blue-chip cast on the strength of the screenplay and her earlier work. Sony Pictures Classics stepped up and financed the entire film once Aniston signed on. "The money was definitely cast contingent," she admits.

What's remained constant through all three of her films is her desire to "make movies that move me and inspire me." And then, in keeping with the theme of her film, she laughs, "and also pay me. Unfortunately, they never seem to go together." ♦