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P. Schrader, 'Babes in the Hood'
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PAUL SCHRADER TALKS WITH LARRY CLARK

I always wanted to make the teenage movie that America never made," says Larry Clark, and from the first frames of *Kids*, his forthcoming feature-length film about a day in the intertwined lives of a handful of New York street teens, you'll think he may have done it.

Kids opens on a next-to-naked teenage couple locked in a deep kiss, interrupted only by the young-looking seducer's insistent rap aimed at talking his even-younger-looking partner out of her virginity. Unnerving in its studied predatoriness, his coaxing prevails. A brutally-too-few moments after the slam-bam confirmation, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick), a.k.a. "the Virgin Surgeon," hits the streets, high on his conquest and boasting of his taste for "little baby girls."

It's Telly's single-minded quest for virgin flesh that drives the narrative of *Kids*, which tracks him and his loose network of friends through 24 hours of roving exploits up and down the island of Manhattan. When Jenny (Chloe Sevigny), one of Telly's previous conquests, discovers she is HIV positive, and Telly's the only guy she's slept with, the film's inexorable logic is cemented. From here *Kids* unfolds with a race-against-the-clock urgency, as Jenny roams from haunt to haunt in a dazed quest to bring the bad news to the unsuspecting protagonist.

BABES IN
THE HOOD

Telly, true to character, is by now hot on the trail of an even younger prospect (played by the painfully fresh-faced Yakira Peguero).

Shot by cinematographer Eric Edwards of *My Own Private Idaho* fame (Gus Van Sant is Clark's executive producer), *Kids* feels like a documentary; the surprise is that it's scripted throughout (by Harmony Korine, a street-credentialed then-19-year-old whom Clark hooked up with in Washington Square Park). Much of *Kids*' considerable art, in fact, lies in the mesmerizingly vivid performances—are they acting or simply "hanging"?—that Clark coaxes from his largely unschooled actors.

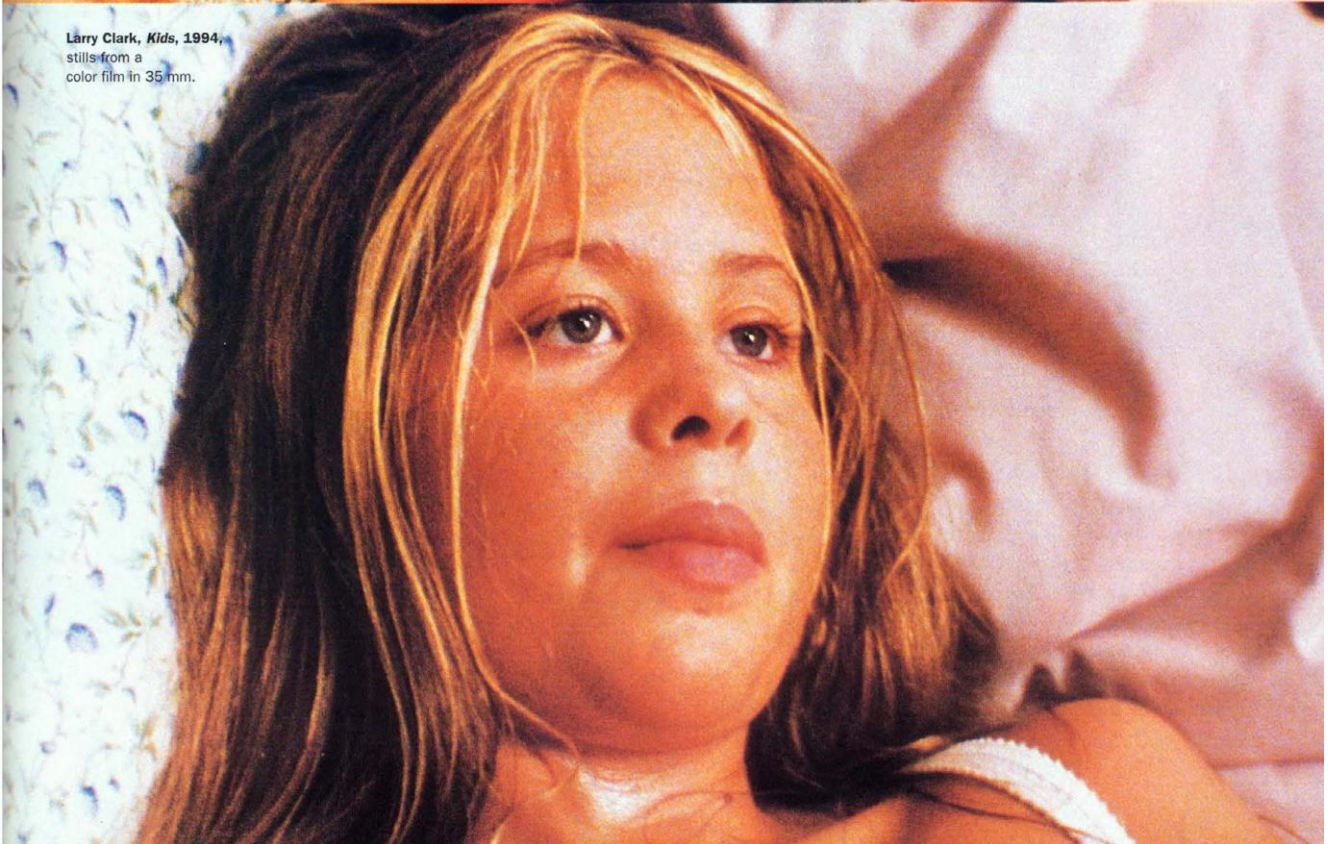
Amid industry speculation as to how Clark's matter-of-fact depiction of teenage sexuality and drug use will play out with Disney, parent company for *Kids*' distributor, Miramax (Disney is fervently anti-NC-17, a rating Clark's film seems likely to receive), a midnight sneak preview at the Sundance Film Festival turned *Kids* into an instant cult classic. The buzz since then has steadily grown louder. Whether the movie opens in mid July, as Miramax promises, or becomes mired in a ratings dispute, Clark has more than matched the gritty intimacy he made his signature in his now-classic books of photographs, *Tulsa, 1971*, *Teenage Lust, 1983, 1992, 1992*, and *The Perfect Childhood, 1993* (still unavailable in the U.S.). In fact, it seems he may have found in film his perfect vehicle.

Clark's photographic work numbers among its longtime fans the filmmaker Paul Schrader, whose scripts include Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, 1976, and *Raging Bull*, 1980. Schrader has also directed (as well as written) such movies as *American Gigolo*, 1980, and *Light Sleeper*, 1992. This March, he and Clark sat down at Schrader's New York office. They talked about *Kids*, and how Clark came to make it.

—JB



Larry Clark, *Kids*, 1994,
stills from a
color film in 35 mm.





PAUL SCHRADER: You've been working for about twenty-five years now.

LARRY CLARK: Yeah. Longer.

PS: How has your work changed?

LC: Well, I think it changed a lot structurally. The first book is very formal in a way.

PS: But when you began, your work was almost a hobby—taking photographs of people you knew. It's after the success of *Tulsa* that it becomes an occupation. You see that there's interest and that there can be a second book.

LC: When I started *Tulsa* I was working for my mother, who was a baby photographer, going door to door "kidnapping"—doing baby photography. I left Oklahoma when I was 18 and I went to art school, or, actually, to a commercial-



photography school in Milwaukee that was in the basement of an art school, and I started hanging out with the artists, who were like beatnik kids. I think my parents had sent me with the hope—it was never articulated—that I would come back and take over the family business. But I realized I could use photography for something other than baby photographs, and I started going back to Oklahoma and photographing my friends. I vaguely wanted to be a writer, and I wasn't a writer, but I wanted to be a storyteller somehow. When I did the early *Tulsa* photographs I saw them as a film, but I wasn't a filmmaker.

PS: There are clips of film in *Tulsa*, either eight or sixteen millimeter.

LC: Sixteen millimeter, in the middle section. In 1968 there was so much go-

ing on in Oklahoma, it was so complicated and there was so much action, I knew it had to be a film. I actually borrowed a movie camera and shot some footage, but doing it all by myself didn't work. That's when I decided to go back with just a Leica.

PS: Was that documentary footage, or was it worked out beforehand?

LC: I was just there and I had the camera and I would raise it and start working. But it wasn't practical, so I went back with the Leica. I was really waiting for the photographs to happen. I didn't know how they would happen or when they would happen, but I was certainly ready when they happened. That's why the last section of *Tulsa*, the '71 section, is so on—it's because



[snaps fingers] I was really there.

PS: Two things strike me as I look through your books: one, they become more autobiographical, and two, they become more montagelike. There is a progressive, intentional desire to be part of the story rather than an observer. In *Teenage Lust* you included written biographical material and photos of yourself. I'm not sure if there are photos of yourself in *Tulsa*.

LC: Yes, at the end of the book. Just one. But I've never been a distant observer, it's always been autobiographical. I was just one of the people, one of the guys. I happened to have a camera because my parents had this baby-photography business. When I was out with friends, shooting drugs, I would have my equipment with me, because I would be coming from or going to





PS: He's the one who's to the side, not driving the narrative. It's Telly [Leo Fitzpatrick] who drives the story.

LC: Telly drives the story. He's the guy who's focused on girls; all he thinks about is pussy, which is why he's successful. The reason the guys who really get the girls are successful is because that's all they think about. Whereas Casper is all over the place. He's just out getting fucked up, having a good time, and whatever's happening is what is, man, you know. So, I was thinking last night that I was Casper. I mean all the films I've ever seen about teenagers, there's a lot of bullshit in there. There's always something that doesn't ring true. I always wanted to make a film the way it really is, the same

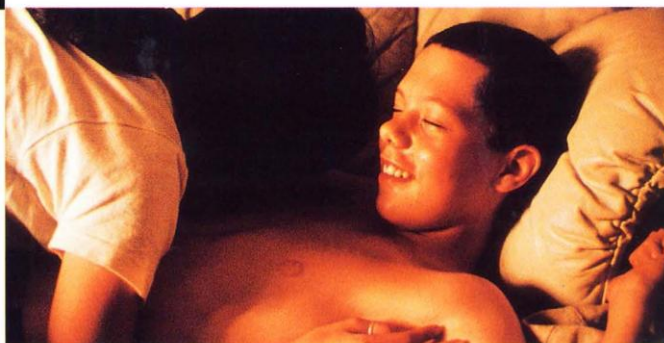
work. I think *Tulsa* worked so well because it was a natural thing. I was part of the scene, with no motive to cap on my friends or anything.

PS: When I first saw it I bought two copies, which I unfortunately gave away.

LC: Yeah, everybody did that.

PS: So, you're moving along as a photographer including more and more of your life—photos in jail, photos of drugs, photos of sex, correspondence. You're building up to an autobiographical body of work through these books. And then along comes *Kids*. Where does *Kids* stand in that progression?

LC: Well, I always wanted to make the teenage movie that I felt America never made—the great American teenage movie, like the great American novel. When I was a kid, the teenage movies were like *City across the River* and



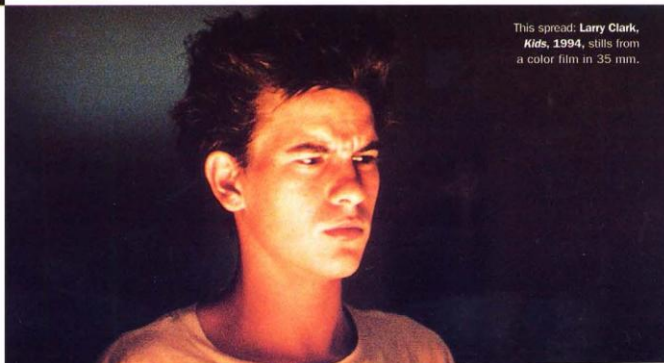
as I did in *Tulsa*. The one thing I wanted to do in *Tulsa* was cut through the bullshit and tell the truth.

PS: Yet *Kids* adheres to a classic structure. It's chronological, it has a fixed time-frame (24 hours), it deals with one subject at a time. There's some intercutting but it isn't a collage, and you don't enter into the characters' thought world or fantasy world. In some ways it's less complex than your most recent book, *The Perfect Childhood*, which in a way reminds me of some of Kenneth Anger's work: it's half in reality and half in fantasy. Anger will get lost in comic strips. He'll portray something that seems to be off the point. When you see *Scorpio Rising* you have to say, Is this happening or is this some sort of projection? That seems to me like *The Perfect Childhood*,



Amboy Dukes. I would see those movies and I would say, Those kids don't look like kids, they're all like older people, like grown-ups. In the teenage movies I do like—*Over the Edge*, say—they actually used kids. I guess I've been angling toward that forever. When you asked how my work has changed, I mentioned structure: *Tulsa* is very formally laid out, but then the books get more complicated, with the collages and the letters—more film-like, I think.

I was thinking last night about which of the characters in *Kids* I relate to the most, and it would be Casper [Justin Pierce]: out of control, drugs, alcohol, drugs, out of control.



This spread: Larry Clark, *Kids*, 1994, stills from a color film in 35 mm.



Top: Larry Clark,
Kids, 1994, still
from a color film
in 35 mm. Jenny
(Chloe Sevigny).
Bottom: Larry
Clark, *Kids*, 1994,
still from a color
film in 35 mm.

which is a scattershot of clips: it's like, I saw this in a newspaper, and I saw this teen spot on television with Matt Dillon or whomever. Did you perceive the tension between that kind of association, which is where your photo work seemed to be headed, and a chronological narrative?

LC: I realize that *Kids* is more like *Tulsa* than like *The Perfect Childhood*. My first film is like my first book, which I felt was the best way to tell this story. I thought a lot about it, and about ways *Kids* could have been edited. It seemed to need a straightforward approach, which fit better with the feeling of realism: is this scripted and acted, or is it real? There's a blur there. Sometimes you don't know if the kids are really acting or not.

PS: There are moments where you say, *Oh, that person was riffing, whereas other sections you know are scripted.*

LC: There's improv, but even the improv was suggested. A kid might say it in his own way, but he was fed the lines.

PS: If you look at Tulsa today, there's almost a quaint quality to some of it. The kids seem relatively well-dressed, they seem sort of put together, and you say, *Those aren't such bad kids. That's what time does. Have kids changed?*

LC: Well, I'm not sure kids have changed so much. When people see *Kids*, most of them, not all of them, will say, *Yeah, that's the way we were, that's the way kids are.* Some things have changed a bit. The relationship between

I was able to do that.

PS: But the private rituals are closed to you. You don't get stoned with them. You don't gang-bang with them. You don't get violent with them. At a certain point a curtain is drawn and they descend into their own culture.

LC: But I understand that culture, because I certainly am from that culture.

PS: Have you screened *Kids* for this group?

LC: A couple of the kids in the movie have seen early cuts. But no, they haven't seen it yet.

PS: How important is their approval to you?

LC: Extremely important.

PS: Let's back up: how did the film come about?

LC: I wanted to make a film. I had an idea to make a film about skateboarders: I liked the culture, I liked the freedom, and I got to know a bunch of skateboarders in California and I hung with them and started photographing them. At the same time, back in New York, I met a lot of skateboarders through my connections in California. My son was eight or nine years old, so I bought skateboards and we started skating. It was a good bonding thing, as they say, and I also wanted to learn how to skate so I could keep up with these skaters. I had to be able to skate good enough so I could stay on the board and have my Leica with me. So I started hanging out with skaters, which is pretty funny, because one thing about skating that's so seductive is there's no parents.

I'D BE WALKING DOWN THE STREET WITH THESE KIDS, JUST HANGING OUT WITH THEM FOR AN EVENING OR A DAY, AND I'D HAVE THE FEELING I FELT EXACTLY LIKE THEY FELT. THAT I WAS ONE OF THEM. AND THEN I WOULD REALIZE I WASN'T A KID, I'M A 52-YEAR-OLD GUY. BUT I WAS ABLE TO DO THAT.

boys and girls is different: everything is out in the open. The language is out there now—I mean nice little junior high school kids, well-dressed little mall kids, listen to them talk, it's all *Hey baby come suck my dick, you know.* That kind of interaction is perfectly natural for them.

PS: Certain things have changed. The availability of hard-core pornography—big change. The availability of drugs. Youth metal culture: the music is violence. But I guess I'm asking if you could comment on your roots of identification. Arthur Miller once said that the computer is programed from age 7 to 18; after that you just keep running the software, but your computer was programed at an earlier time. Is there an editorial switch in your head that tries to program today's kids in terms of when you were that age? Did you feel a desire to make the kids in the film like the kids you knew?

LC: No, I accept these kids for what they are, and I think I understand them and I think I know where they're coming from. I don't think it's changed much from thirty, thirty-five years ago, when I was a kid—I don't make that distinction. I'm just trying to show it exactly like it is. I really am concerned with these kids. It's almost as if I was one of them. I just become them—somehow that happens. Last summer I'd be walking down the street with these kids, just hanging out with them for an evening or a day, whatever, and I'd have the feeling that I knew I felt exactly like they felt. That I was one of them. And then I would realize I wasn't a kid, you know, I'm a 52-year-old guy. But

They're totally on their own. There's no gas money, they can go anywhere they want. It took a 12-year-old kid to figure out that the whole city is like a concrete playground. I was fascinated by that, and I started getting these ideas.

Then I was sitting at the fountain in Washington Square Park, talking to some skaters, and I had my camera and I think a skateboard. This kid sitting next to me started talking to me, and he was a talker. He asked me about the Leica and he mentioned Robert Frank—and I said, *Man, this is hip for a high school kid.* So we started talking and I said I'm going to make a film, I know this DP [director of photography] who'll shoot it for me, his name is Ed Lachman, and the kid, Harmony Korine, who was then in his last week of high school, said, *I know Ed Lachman. I worked with him on this film *Light Sleeper*, this Paul Schrader film.* And he started telling me stories about it, and he's making up a lot of them. I didn't know he was making them up, but the first thing he says to me is, *You know the sex scenes between Willem Dafoe and so-and-so?* I said *yeah.* And he said to get ready for the sex scene what they did was she like blew him for about 20 minutes, you know, and they got all hot, and then they shot. And he said, *That's how they do it!* He's making up all these stories and on and on, and he says, *I'm a filmmaker, I make films in high school.* He tells me he just wrote this screenplay, a short film, about a half hour. I said, *Man, that's amazing. We're talking and he knows everything about film. I think I'm talking to the next Marty Scorsese, right?* And as I get

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