

# Lena's Dreams

Winner of Four American Film Festivals!

**H The Audience Award H**

Minneapolis International Film Festival

**H The Cassavetes Artist Award H**

Cinema Arts New York Film Festival

**H The Vision Award H**

Urbanworld Film Festival

**H Best Feature H**

Laguna Beach Film Festival



The New York Times, Lawrence Van Gelder

**“Anyone who has ever struggled to achieve success as an actor in New York is likely to identify with Lena’s Dreams. Marlene Forte is a passionate centerpiece...in a film that keeps the romance of show business alive.”**

The Village Voice, Amy Taubin

**“Bold, resourceful, honest and smart: more than any other film besides Opening Night, it gets inside the process of acting. This is a film that John Cassavetes almost certainly would have loved.”**

The Los Angeles Times, Kevin Thomas

**“A terrific, quintessentially New York movie--intimate, passionate, bristling with intelligence and vitality.”**

The LA Weekly, Ernest Hardy

**“As Lena, Marlene Forte is amazing - you can’t stop watching her.”**

Presskit v.3

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## SYNOPSIS



Lena is a Broadway actress hitting her mid-thirties and fighting to have a career, a relationship and a life. With her phone cut off and twenty cents in her pocket, Lena is running from audition to audition as her boyfriend Mike, also an actor, hunts for “a civilian job” to prove to her that they can have a real life outside of show business. With “children, marriage, a real home and health insurance” seeming to be one choice, and “waiting tables, poverty, and rejection” seeming to be the other, Lena can’t decide what to do when offered one of the biggest new roles on Broadway just

hours after vowing to quit the business forever. Maritsa, her eight-years-younger rival, thinks she’s crazy to hesitate at the part in the extravaganza “Castro”, but “if Lena doesn’t take it I’m marching right down to that theater tomorrow morning to audition.” Her friends Suze (who quit the business to become a rather cavalier lawyer) and Johnny (who is happy as long as he gets another sneaker commercial) are too busy rekindling old flames to give her advice. “Dreams of success are just something people like you invented to hook people like me on. I don’t want them any more. I want my life back,” she says to her manager, Jorge. Her day’s journey through agencies, casting halls, theaters and the home of a famous acting teacher is filled with vivid moments of courage, rage, love, and humor. Filmed in an exhilarating, spontaneous style, *Lena’s Dreams* features a cast that have the distinct buzz of imminent success.



## IMPORTANT DATES

*Lena’s Dreams* was filmed in February 1996 and completed in March of 1997; had it’s world premiere at the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival on April 4th, 1997; and has been presented in 16 world film festivals, the most recent being the Havana International Film Festival, December 1998. It’s U.S. commercial premiere was December 18th, 1998 at NYC’s Anthology Film Archives.

# PRODUCTION NOTES



**Chip Garner:** *Ok, so I'm going to interview you for the presskit. You guys have been struggling in this business for a long time.*

**Heather Johnston:** Well, I graduated college in '86, we started shooting *The Big Dis* in '87, Gordon graduated in '88, and we finished the film just in time for Sundance '89. Sundance was a different world then; the media had barely heard of it. *Sex lies and videotape* was in the competition with us. Our film was a \$25,000 multi-racial sex comedy that we shot handheld in black and white in our Long Island hometown. It took us a over a year to get a distributor [First Run Features] and a theatrical release. In the end we got a video deal, a cable

deal, sold the remake and tv rights, and eventually we got a couple of screenwriting deals, but we had no idea how fortunate we were. We were kids who thought life as independent filmmakers wouldn't be too hard, so when we won some grants we jumped right into making another film, hoping to making something less "rough" and "arty" and more accessible.

**Chip:** *You mean more commercial.*

**Gordon:** Sadly, no. Finishing *Scenes*, which was a lot more adventurous in size and cast, took forever. Kind of a classic sophomore error, we should have tried to keep it smaller. Anyway, we kept running out of money. All our credit cards overflowed and got canceled. We got hardship deferments for our student loans, and we were evicted from our Brooklyn apartment and moved into Joanie's [Heather's mother] basement. We got full-time jobs in the suburbs at \$200 per week, and slowly started paying debts. Eventually Heather got a bookkeeping job back in New York, and I got a job as the assistant to the owner of the same company. We started looking for an apartment, but I thought we were exiled to the suburbs forever.



**Heather:** Meanwhile, our film was finished, played festival after festival, got some good reviews, but the industry consensus seemed to be "too hard to market," and "ethnic audiences don't

go to see independent films." And the soundtrack rights effectively kept our producers from selling it. It had been eight years since we started shooting *The Big Dis* and where were we? All I could think was, what are we, crazy? Our friends and family certainly thought we were. Why are we doing this? Why can't we just quit and spare ourselves the misery? And we had no good answer.

**Chip:** *So you started writing Lena's Dreams about that.*

**Heather:** Right, the metaphor Mike talks about in the film is that being a serious actor, or an artist, is like an addiction you can't kick. You better get used to living with an occasional high and lots of lows.

**Chip:** *That's cheery.*

**Heather:** Well, it's kind of bittersweet in the film. It's not sad, it's exciting. When you have something to fight for, life is worth living.

**Chip:** *I got involved when you finished the script and started having readings to raise money. But Armando and Marlene had been in it from the first.*

**Gordon:** We've known both of them for years. Marlene, as you can see, she's a terrific actress, but she's been struggling to make a living, waiting tables, sleeping on friend's couches or in sublet apartments, dead broke most of the time. In real life she has the same frustration we gave Lena: being a light skinned Latina that people won't cast, in spite of her talent, because she's not immediately identifiable as some-



# PRODUCTION NOTES (CON'T)



thing. And Armando has been scraping along, hoping to get an agent and some big commercial work, and shooting independent features for fun, basically, since they don't really pay anything. He's been so depressed by his inability to make a living that he has seriously contemplated going to China and becoming a monk. All of us being desperate together made us feel a little better, so so we wrote this film for Marlene to star in and Armando to shoot.

**Chip:** *When Marlene got her apartment we finally could start shooting because we had a set.*

**Heather:** The dream of every New York actor: Marlene finally got her name on her cousin's lease of a rent controlled two bedroom in Hell's Kitchen for like five hundred a month! We cast the film out of the Latino Actor's Base, a workshop

Marlene belongs to, sold shares in the film to friends who had real jobs, and did all the preproduction and rehearsal out of the offices we had our day jobs in, after business hours. And we got a \$10,000 dollar option on a remake of *The Big Dis* from New Line.

**Chip:** *And Joe hooked us up.*

**Gordon:** Our boss, Joe, a saint of a businessman, gave us two weeks vacation and let us shoot in the office space on weekends. You see, Joe may have been a businessman, but when he was young he was a struggling photographer who finally had to quit the photography business. He understood what this movie is about. That's why he helped us. So did my dad, who was a secret artist also, a painter.

**Chip:** *The film was shot in twelve days in February, in 16mm, with a borrowed camera and Nagra. No day went over ten hours. We fulfilled SAG and WGA contracts. Except for one song, all the music is public domain or original. The final budget on the whole picture is \$60,000.*

**Gordon:** Those were some very producerly facts.

**Chip:** *Ha ha. Anything else? Style notes? You want to drop in some French film terms? Or mention Cassavetes?*

**Heather:** One of the more noticeable things about the style is that we filmed almost everything in master shots. What you see is really how it happened in front of the camera, there's little cheating with cuts. We would spend all day lighting and blocking, and then shoot 8 pages in half an hour and go home. The actors got to do some serious acting without so many technical concerns getting in the way.



**Gordon:** When *The Big Dis* got compared to *Shadows* I thought it was an enormous compliment. And when Amy [Taubin, of the Village Voice] mentioned *Opening Night* in the production column about *Lena's Dreams* I was very excited. You know I love Cassavetes' films. But I think there are a lot of films getting made now that are stylistic homages to his work without the substance. That is the last thing we would want to make. Cassavetes' quasi-improv style hides a lot of very sophisticated writing, a very intimate approach to character. *That's* what people should be imitating, and I hope that's what we have in common--

**Heather:** --hooray for quasi intimate stylistic homages! What are you talking about? You never mentioned that to me! More women, I vote for more women who aren't bimbos or psychos! And real people of color! That's why I'm still making movies in this miserable business!

**Chip:** *Me too. HJ, I think I'm ending this on your rant. Enjoy our film, people! We're proud of it!*

## ABOUT THE DIRECTORS



**Heather Johnston** and **Gordon Eriksen** have been married for nine years and live in Brooklyn with their new baby, Erika. They have been picked as one of ten independent filmmaking teams to watch by MovieLine magazine, and have been the subject of profiles in the New York Times, Newsday, The Village Voice, New Word, and Egg Magazine. They have been the recipients of grants from The Ford Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The New York State Council for the Arts, The Jerome Foundation, and The Donnet Foundation. Their two narrative features *The Big Dis* and *Scenes From The New World* and the award winning documentary *Manchild: A Portrait of Adolescence* have competed in over forty international film festivals, including Sundance, Berlin, Havana, Avignon, Toronto, Montreal and San Sebastian.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCER

**Chip Garner** was an Associate Producer at ABC News before joining with childhood friend Heather Johnston to produce *Lena's Dreams*. During his five years at ABC he produced segments of the award winning shows *World News Tonight* and *20/20*. He graduated from Amherst College with one of the first film theses at that school. He is currently a freelance indie producer looking for ways to pay his rent.



## ABOUT THE CINEMATOGRAPHER



**Armando Basulto** has been chosen by *Filmmaker Magazine* as one of six hot young D.P.s to watch. As a student at NYU, he won the Kodak Cinematography Award with a short film. He has shot six independent features, one of his most recent being *No Ordinary Love*, which recently won the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Film Festival and opened theatrically in the U.S. in April. In addition to commercials and music videos, he has served as second unit D.P. on the t.v. shows *Renegade* and *Silk Stalkings*, and recently completed a television pilot, *Urban Legends*, for the director and actor Paul Sorvino.

## ABOUT THE CAST



Gary Perez, Marlene Forte

**Marlene Forte** (Lena) recently starred in the NYC indie features *Shooting Vegetarians* and Jim McKay's *Our Song*, had co-starring roles on *Law and Order* and *The Accountant*, did a variety of commercials for food products, and has been in show business even longer than Lena has. In the last year **Gary Perez** (Mike) recently starred in the Merchant Ivory production *Side Streets*, co-starred in *Witness to the Mob* (NBC), and was nominated for the Bay Area Critics Award for Best Actor (in *Cloud Tectonics*). **Susan Peirez** (Suze) is a cabaret singer in New York City, has toured with several Broadway shows, and not so long ago was chosen by American Express as "the best waitress in the United States." **Jeremiah Birkett** (Johnny) appeared in the Broadway production of *The Grapes Of Wrath*. He has appeared in a dozen primetime television shows and cable movies, and is a series regular on Showtimes' *Sherman Oaks*. **Judy Reyes** (Maritsa) starred with Stockard Channing in *The Prosecutors*, Barry Levinson's ABC hour drama. **David Zayas** (Jorge) made regular appearances on *New York Undercover*. His "bread & butter job" is being a cop in Time Square. **Kai Adwoa** (Angela) is a professional dancer, English teacher, and playwright in New York City. **Ronald Guttman** (Bob the Director) recently starred in the PBS mini-series *Liberty*, and co-starred with Andy Garcia in *The Scalper*. **Christine Clementson** (Dee Dee) was one of the leads in *Scenes From The New World*.



Jeremiah Birkett



Susan Peirez



David Zayas



Judy Reyes



Kai Adwoa



Ronald Guttman, Pat Lucenti

# Credits

An Olympia Pictures/Lena's Film, Inc.  
Production Of A  
Johnston/Eriksen Film  
Lena's Dreams

Producer  
Chip Garner

Written & Directed by  
Heather Johnston &  
Gordon Eriksen

In Memory of  
Joel K. Eriksen  
(1941-1996)  
&  
Joseph A. Portogallo  
(1935-1996)

## Cast



**Lena...Marlene Forte**  
**Mike...Gary Perez**  
**Suze...Susan Peirez**  
**Johnny...Jeremiah Birkett**  
**Jorge...David Zayas**  
**Maritsa...Judy Reyes**  
**Angela...Kai Adwoa**  
**Casting Director...Pat Lucenti**  
**DeeDee...Christine Clementson-Smith**  
**Reader...Al D. Rodriguez**  
**Melissa...Suzette G. Powell**  
**Street Musician...Don Braden**  
**Bob...Ronald Guttman**

Co-Producers  
Marlene Forte  
Armando Basulto  
Ignacio Quiles

Director of Photography...Armando Basulto  
Prod. Sound...Noah Vivekanand Timan  
Art Director...Robert Nassau  
Editor...Steve Silkensen  
First Assistant Director...Karen Graff  
Gaffer...Carsten Gopinath  
Wardrobe...Jennifer L. Eriksen  
Makeup/Hair...Ronnie Sibblies  
Music.....Don Braden

First Assistant Camera...  
Kerwin Devonish & Mitch Malpica  
Boom Operators...Michael McDermott  
Michael Pisani  
Jane Hansen  
Betsy Nagler

Second Gaffer...Michele Samuel  
Grip...Edwin Figueroa  
2nd Assistant Director....Tania Hoben  
Add'l 2nd Ass't. Director...Molly Lewis  
Key Production Assistant...Josh Perra  
Production Assistants...Chomba Dunn  
Christine Ploch  
Fabio Sanchez  
Leslie Peirez

Set Photographer...Ivan Saperstein  
Mixer.....Alex Markowski

Camera & Sound Package...John O'Brien  
Lens...Hand Held Films, Inc.  
Add'l Sound Equipment...Audio Services  
Lighting Package...Edwin Figueroa &  
Studio Akiva  
Angela's Apartment.... Adele McGann Interiors  
Editing & Sound Post...Spin Cycle Post  
Accountant.....Leo Jones  
Legal Services...Susan Bodine  
of the Law Offices of Bodine and Herzog  
Production Counsel...Ivan Saperstein  
Caterer...Two Steps Down

## Extras

Chomba Dunn	Christine Ploch
Jennifer L. Eriksen	Marvin Reid
Leslie Garner	Fidias Reyes
Carsten Gopinath	Joselin Reyes
Jennifer Lee Gutierrez	Giselle Rodriguez
Al Horcher	Fabio Sanchez
Emily Horcher	Ronnie Sibblies
Sharon Joseph	Richard Smith
Denise Perez	Cindy Zayas-Navarrito

## ABOUT PREVIOUS JOHNSTON/ERIKSEN FILMS

### THE BIG DIS (1990)

**WINNER! SPECIAL JUR Y PRIZE TORINO FILM FESTIV AL**

"*The Big Dis* is a **BREAKTHROUGH FILM** : America's first matter-of-factly inter-racial sex comedy." Jay Carr, *The Boston Globe*.

"**EXUBERANT** . The filmmakers have constructed a very funny, engaging, congenial movie...the hip-hop soundtrack has a touch-talking but light hearted humor that mirrors it's middle class characters." Caryn James, *The New York Times*

"**HILARIOUS YET THOUGHTFUL** ... "The Big Dis" puts bigger films to shame." Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*

"**REVOLUTIONAR Y**. Gritty, bright, and very funny. My pick of the week." Dave Gradetta, *LA Weekly*

"**YOUNG, FRESH, SMAR T, AND GUTSY** ...I'm already looking forward to their next film." Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*

"**WRYL Y FUNNY** . An impressive feature debut and the most pleasant surprise of 1990." Carrie Rickie, *Philadelphia Enquirer*



*The Big Dis* is a comedy about a young soldier on his first leave home to his middle class, multiracial, Long Island hometown. Full of himself in his new uniform, he wants to "mix bodies with a female" and to aid him in his search, he enlists two old buddies, G and Russ, as well as his brother, Kevin. Things have changed, however: G's fiancée appears repeatedly to warn women away from JD, Russ insists on playing his new guitar (badly) while sending him to a series of disastrous parties, and Kevin lends him a car that barely runs and certainly impresses no one. Instead of getting what he wants, he gets repeatedly dissed by old girlfriends, and his strict West Indian mother makes him walk the dog, mow the lawn, and buy his grandfather lottery tickets.



*Scenes From The New World* is a multilingual (English, Spanish, and Chinese) ensemble comedy about a multiracial boarding house in Queens, NY: When Alex Chan, a twenty-something schoolteacher, accepts his grandfather's offer to run an illegal boarding house, he doesn't know what he's getting into. He immediately talks his outspoken Dominican girlfriend, Mirabel, into moving in with him, and, together, they find three African American roommates: Myles, Stephanie, and Lee. Meanwhile, however, The Old Man has found his idea of perfect boarders: Nicky, Wing, and Bob, three respectful - and well-off - Hong Kong students. Just when the resulting tensions are dying down and a functional, if absurdly overcrowded, multicultural household is emerging, some neighbors begin worrying about their "property values," and then the *real* troubles begin.

### SCENES FROM THE NEW WORLD (1994)

**WINNER! THE GOLD MEDAL LONG ISLAND FILM FESTIV AL**

"**A VER Y, VER Y FUNNY** , poignant coming of age film with a lot of insight into families and relationships."  
*WOR-AM (NY)*

"**VIBRANT, EXHILARATING, AND AUTHENTIC.** A New York comedy that combines the best self-denigrating cynicism of Woody Allen with the urban hipness of Spike Lee!" *Positif (France)*



"**TRUE INDEPENDENT CINEMA MADE WITH A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND ENORMOUS TALENT.**"

*Diario de las Palmas (Spain)*