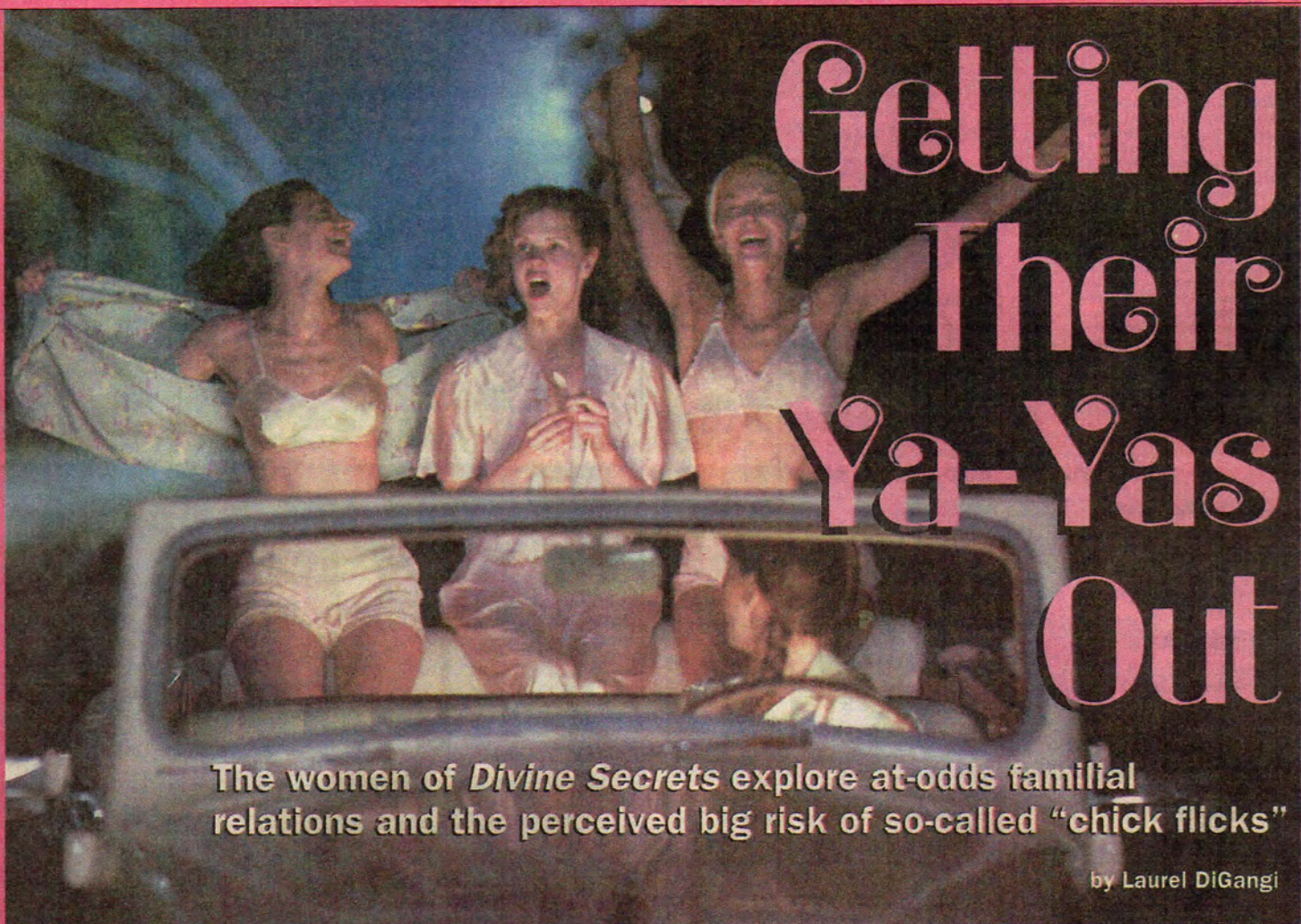


# ENTERTAINMENT TODAY

LOS ANGELES

ESTABLISHED 1967®



## Getting Their Ya-Yas Out

The women of *Divine Secrets* explore at-odds familial relations and the perceived big risk of so-called "chick flicks"

by Laurel DiGangi

**Book Report**  
filters Sept. 11  
through two  
different lenses

**Luna's**  
music floats  
effortlessly to L.A.'s  
El Rey Theatre

**The E3 Expo**  
investigates  
those games  
you play



# The Secret World of So-Called "Chick Flicks"

The filmmakers and cast of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* hope that women — and their male counterparts — cast filmgoing votes in the form of dollars

by Laurel DiGangi

**D**ivine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood director Callie Khouri, producer Bonnie Bruckheimer and cast members gather at the St. Regis Hotel to share a few not so divine secrets about "chick flicks" and roles for older women in Hollywood. After all, Ellen Burstyn has not been "sitting on her la la" waiting for her Ya-Ya Sisterhood role to come along. The 69-year-old actress has had a stellar career, from her breakthrough role in *The Last Picture Show* to her rousing 2000 performance in *Requiem for a Dream*. She's received a grand total of six Academy Award nominations and won the Oscar for her turn in 1975's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.

Yet for older actresses—even those barely in their forties—significant roles are in short supply. Burstyn admits that she's gotten some very good gigs lately, including her Ya-Ya Sisterhood role as the histrionic Vivi, but adds, "I still wish I had more to choose from. And I wish there were more to go around. I've been very lucky."

*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* possesses the hallmarks of what the industry considers—for better or worse—a classic "chick flick." Based on Rebecca Wells' best-selling novel of the same name as well as elements of her first novel, *Little Altars Everywhere*, the film boasts a large, mostly female cast and an emphasis on women's relationships to other women, in this case what seems to be an irreparable mother-daughter conflict.

The mother and daughter at odds are Vivi and Sidda Lee Walker (Sandra Bullock). Sidda's successful New York playwright who lets down her guard during a *Time Magazine* interview and reveals details of her sordid childhood. When Vivi reads about her maternal failings in a national magazine, she disowns Sidda Lee, who stubbornly refuses to beg forgiveness. Vivi's lifelong trio of friends, nicknamed the "Ya-Yas," are determined to mend this rift whether Sidda and Vivi like it or not.

The "Ya-Yas" are played by three stellar actors of Burstyn's generation: Maggie Smith as Caro, Shirley Knight at Necie and Fionnula Flanagan as Teensy. Through an unorthodox intervention, a hefty scrapbook, and a series of flashbacks, they attempt to expose Sidda to a fuller understanding of her mother's life and bring the two women together. Ashley Judd plays Vivi as a young woman and James

Garner plays the elder Vivi's patient, long-suffering husband.

Unfortunately, "understanding one's crazy mother" is not a theme that sends adolescent boys to theaters in droves, which perhaps explains Hollywood's initial reluctance to finance *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. "Every single studio passed," says producer Bruckheimer, whose All Girl Productions was the driving force behind another much beloved female-driven film, 1988's *Beaches*. "They didn't say why, you had to read between the lines. [But] they passed because it was a woman's movie."

Ironically, writer-director Khouri almost passed on *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* too. In 1991 Khouri received an Academy Award for her hit screenplay *Thelma and Louise*, hailed by many as a feminist masterpiece. When Khouri was first asked to pen *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, she was busy with other projects—but had other reservations. Says Khouri, "I also felt like, here we go again! I was much younger, and I thought, 'Oh, I want to do different things besides women's stories.' Then I thought, 'Oh, shut up! There's nobody doing this, and it's something you know how to do.' When it's done in a way I don't like, I'm always mad. So I might as well do it myself."

This time Khouri indeed does it herself. *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* is her directorial debut, fulfilling an ambition to direct that's been with her throughout her career. "I've had a production

it's so frustrating to me to not be part of that process [of bringing it to the screen]."

Khouri's vision came from a frustration with the way she's seen women portrayed in cinema. "My experience is that the women I know are always sharper and funnier and just cooler than a lot of the women I see in movies," she says. She also feels that although it's easy to categorize *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* as a "chick flick," this assumption is often unfair—to men. "Marginalizing [the film] by calling it a 'chick flick' does a great disservice to the millions of men who feel shortchanged by the dearth of emotional subject matter that makes it on the big screen," she says.

Flanagan is equally unfond of pigeonholing films. "I think this is a profoundly important picture for and about men," says Flanagan. "Because they're sort of put out there. When I grew up my father and his brothers weren't let into the kitchen and then of course they were blamed for not helping. They weren't given a baby to hold because they might drop it. Men weren't allowed into that domain, weren't allowed to be part of that nurturing and caring."

Adds Garner, "It's a [telling] fact that people make those distinctions. I just think that it's a good movie and anybody's going to enjoy it." He notes that he doesn't evaluate a film in those terms when taking on a role. "There were two pretty good scenes in it for me as an actor," he says, "and that's all I need."

Bruckheimer, on the other hand, feels that the designation of "chick flick" is a fair assessment for any film about women, but adds, "I feel that men relate to this movie. Everyone has a mother or had a mom at one time. So many people have difficult relationships in their family and there's nothing wrong with exploring that and there's nothing wrong with coming out the other side and saying, 'You know what? Maybe I should cut her some slack. Maybe she did the best she could.'"

Whether *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* garners a gender-specific or more inclusive audience, it does devote much screen time to older actresses, who often have a difficult time, in Hollywood's youth culture, finding decent roles. Says Flanagan, "I think that Hollywood only reflects what's in society, including the ageism. Women in the public eye are being pressured to adopt to some youthful look—we certainly feel it as actresses, God knows, but yeah, I think it's a refusal to look

at the value of older women."

Khouri had much to say about Hollywood's seeming resistance to films about women, and by extension, the lack of roles for older women



Director Callie Khouri calls the shots



Bullock and Garner commiserate, in character, over meddling mothers

in Hollywood. "The studios bet everything on that big opening weekend. And if they don't have a [guaranteed] big opening weekend, as far as they're concerned it's a big risk. It's much tougher to build a movie over the long haul than it used to be, so its really important for women to understand that if they want movies made for them, they must give it a big first opening weekend. Because I guarantee you, there will be 10,000 comic book movies made now that would never have gotten made because *Spider-Man* opened at \$114 million.

"It's more difficult for women to get baby sitters, etc.," she continues, "but if they want the product to be directed at them, they have to support it. And so I'm really hoping that word gets out and women understand, because it's up to them. They are voting with their dollar."

Oprah Winfrey did not become the wealthiest women in America because women aren't interested. There's a huge audience of women out there that if you direct things at them specifically, they will turn up, but this particular game has this one caveat. You must show up that first weekend and prove to the studio that there is an audience."

According to Khouri, major studios have no specific prejudice against making films with large female casts or emotional depth. It's just that "there is this high risk factor of having an audience that they can't count on to turn up," she says. "So if that audience turns up, I guarantee you that they'll start making movies for that audience." Bruckheimer agrees. "The only thing for women to do," she says, "is go to the movies, support this movie, and then, the next time, a studio may say, 'Yeah, we'll make that movie for women and we'll have that part for women.' There is no magic solution."

"The studios bet everything on that opening weekend. And if they don't have a [guaranteed] big opening weekend, as far as they're concerned it's a big risk. ... [Audiences] are voting with their dollars."

—Writer-director Callie Khouri



Burstyn, Smith, Flanagan and Knight share a few *Divine Secrets*

background and before that I studied acting," says Khouri. "To me, screenwriting was just the first part. It was never an end unto itself. When you're a novelist, when you write, you're done, but when you're a screenwriter, you're not finished. This thing still has to become real. And