

Time Out

New York

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DINNER WITH THE SOPRANOS

Restaurants that serve a side of Verdi

SURF CITY

Local beaches where you can hang ten

LITTLE WOMEN

Kids' clothes even you can wear

Now *that's* twisted!

One Hour Photo

Connie Nielsen is picture-perfect in Mark Romanek's edgy new thriller

PLUS Darkroom confidential! Sordid tales from NYC photo labs. (Hint: Donkeys are involved....)

INTERVIEWS

Neil LaBute

Neko Case

Lee Hazlewood

and Marianne Faithfull
on the Hot Seat



a beautiful



mind

Blessed with goddesslike looks and possessing a passion for philosophy, *One Hour Photo's* Connie Nielsen is one bright star

By **Jay A. Fernandez** Photograph by **Stephen Danelian**

Connie Nielsen may be the first actor-philosopher hyphenate to succeed in Hollywood. Thoughtful and articulate, she is deeply humanistic in that particular well-educated European way. Her effortless braininess wafts through her conversation like the incense swirling about the Japanese garden behind Elixir, a tonics-and-teas shop on Melrose, where she's sipping Bengal chai and describing the joys of rereading Jean-Paul Sartre's memoir, *Words*. "It's really interesting," she says, fixing her listener with a direct but blissful stare and taking a puff on a Marlboro Light, "because you see an older man looking back at his childhood, and how his experience in childhood seems in hindsight to have inevitably led him to have the kind of thoughts about existence that he has, and what forms identity, or the idea of You and the Other."

This sort of intensity has shone through the 37-year-old Dane's wide-ranging roles: in *Gladiator*, as a cunning royal who is caught between the machinations of her brother and a former lover; in *The Devil's Advocate*, as an exotic lawyer who turns out to be Satan's daughter; in *Mission to Mars*, as an astronaut who finds time to zero-gravity dance to Van Halen; and in the soon-to-be-released psychological drama *One Hour Photo*, as a wife and mother who is being stalked by an unstable photo clerk. "She's capable of a stunning amount of emotion at the drop of a hat, but she approaches things in a very analytical, cerebral way," *Photo* writer-director Mark Romanek says. "This is a woman who reads Kierkegaard on the set."

If only Søren had looked liked this. Newly coiffed in a short haircut bleached so blond that she looks like a much taller, Scandinavian Jean Seberg, the stunning Nielsen has just flown from Italy to L.A., where she's promoting *Photo* with costars Robin Williams and Michael Vartan (*Never Been Kissed*). In the film, Nielsen plays snap-happy Nina Yorkin, whose seemingly perfect family has become the obsession of lonely guy Sy Parrish (Williams), the photo-lab technician at the local convenience mart. Sy has watched Nina, her husband (Vartan) and their young son (Dylan Smith) over a decade of developing their birthday and vacation pictures. As his desperate efforts to maintain his "close" relationship with the Yorkins become more invasive, Nina must deal with unhappy revelations about her marriage while balancing the kindness and uneasiness she feels toward Sy.

"I felt sympathy for her, but I was also critical of her at times," Nielsen says of the character. "She's a little too concerned with how things look—but that doesn't mean she deserves to be unhappy." Nielsen says that the exploration of the conflicts between image and reality is what appealed to her about Romanek's nuanced script. "You see this couple when they're very young and they've just had the baby, and they're still in the beginner house and the beginner car, and there's something really beautiful and innocent about them," she says. "Then, the richer they become, the more they lose themselves because they're hankering after the image of themselves." Radically changing her persona has become a sort of Nielsen trade-

mark, both physically and in the breadth of characters she's chosen to play. The atypically restrained Williams was impressed with Nielsen's chameleonlike quality. "She seems to transform," he says. "You hear her normal Danish accent, and then all of a sudden she has this flawless American accent. Then you see her in *Gladiator* and you go, 'That's the same lady? It's like, Whoa!'"

One might have the same reaction to Nielsen's ability to blend in with the testosterone crowd. In many of her films, such as *Gladiator*, the sci-fi actioner *Soldier*, and two upcoming thrillers, *Basic* and *The Hunted*, Nielsen is the sole female, holding her own among a tough-guy collective: Sam Jackson, John Travolta, Russell Crowe, Tommy Lee Jones, Kurt Russell. She doesn't shy away from rough stuff, either. In *Demonlover*, a provocative French thriller about corporate espionage in the world of Internet torture porn that divided viewers at Cannes this year, Nielsen has a ten-round two-fister with costar Gina Gershon. "Three days it took to film that scene," Nielsen says. "I said, 'Don't think that we're going to make like a catfight and be scratching each other—that's just not gonna happen.' Man, we were black and blue after those days." For her role as an FBI agent tracking an assassin in *The Hunted*, she learned stunt driving and impressed her FBI trainers by scoring high on one of the Bureau's video-simulation courses. "I have this 16-year-old boy inside of me that struggles with the woman," she says, and lets fly a laugh that is throaty, unself-conscious and just a little dirty. "That boy was really gratified."

The eldest of four children, Nielsen was raised in the small village of Elling, in northern Denmark, by her father, a bus driver, and her mother, a seasonal actor and writer who got Connie involved in a local comedy revue at age 15. Three years later, she took off for Paris, Milan, Rome, London and then South Africa. During that time, she

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studied acting and opera, picked up a half dozen languages, married an Italian man (with whom she has a son, Sebastian, now entering his teens) and made a handful of European films. Eventually, in 1993, she settled in New York City (she also keeps a home outside Milan, where her ex-husband lives).

In addition to Nielsen's striking dramatic skills, her exotic physicality has brought her more than a little notice. For the picture-perfect couple in *Photo*, Romanek wanted to cast actors who "looked like Greek gods," all the better to contrast starkly with Sy's banality. "I don't want to sound sexist," Romanek says, "but she's so stunningly attractive—and yet her personality is such that you can actually forget that, because she's a complicated, interesting and surprising person." ("It's a beauty that's like a force of nature," Williams chimes in. "She's so fuck-

ing gorgeous it's amazing; I just see her, I go humina-humina-humina!")

Onscreen, Nielsen has often played up her sensuality, in everything from kinky scenes in *Devil's Advocate* and *Permanent Midnight* to her cameo as a fantasy mom in *Rushmore*. "There is a certain narcissism when you're younger, a certain expressiveness that you feel comfortable with," Nielsen says. "As you mature, you almost feel more reserved about it, like you want it more for yourself, more private." Just the same, she's prepared herself for the day when one of her son's schoolmates comes to him with news of his mother's cinematic sins. "I have told him that that might happen," she says. "But he has to understand that if you're too worried about what other people would say or think or do, my God, you're not free!"

In the future, Nielsen hopes to further stretch herself by doing comedy and perhaps parlaying her singing and dancing experience into a film role. In the meantime, she's about to travel to Shanghai and

Australia to shoot the World War II drama *The Great Raid* with director John Dahl (*The Last Seduction*, *Joyride*). Sebastian, as always, will go with her and study with tutors, but Nielsen doesn't seem burdened by playing the on-set dual role of mother-actor. "It doesn't feel hard at all," she says. "It's actually the thing that relaxes me and makes me feel good. It's really life-affirming."

But are there ever times when the single mother and competitive Hollywood actor, like her character Lucilla in *Gladiator*, gets "tired of being strong"? She bursts into another big laugh. "Yeah, sometimes. But I don't think that I'm particularly strong. I think that whole thing is a myth, maybe. What's a strong woman or man? Just people who are trying to deal with whatever serves them. And they do the best they can."

One Hour Photo opens Friday 16.

Negative impact

Photo developers don't *really* look at your pictures, right? Wrong. And they've noticed some freaky stuff. By **Reed Tucker**

Photograph by **Koshtra Tolle**

The most shocking thing most of us are likely to see while at work is some fat guy photocopying his ass. But consider the helpful folks down at your local photo shop.

Whether they like it or not, these technicians are privy to strangers' confidential and disconcertingly personal moments on a daily basis. Hoping not to find any characters resembling the wacko portrayed by Robin Williams in *One Hour Photo*, we dialed a few shops around town and asked the employees to shoot straight about the weirdest batches of film they have processed. Judging by the photo album's worth of bizarro scenarios that resulted, some of you amateur shutterbugs should look into getting digital cameras and leaving these shell-shocked developers in peace.

"We'll get weird stuff of people with their pets. These people have set up a whole elaborate shoot, like them and their dog sitting in a gazebo, having tea. There's also one person who likes to bring in pictures of broken old baby dolls, lying in a wooded area, posed in suggestive positions. Some of them have half their heads missing, or arms or whatever, and the photographer shoves them into one another."

—**Raechel, clerk, Spectra Photo**

"I once developed some medical photos. They showed some kind of disease—terrible infections on the arms and legs. I've been doing this for many years. I've seen everything—but those gave me a chilly feeling."

—**Steve Lee, owner, Photo Lab Part VII**

"Someone does roll after roll of self-portrait, and it appears as if she's masturbating. The pictures always look the same. It's some sort of fetish. We've probably had 300 of these photos come in at different times. It's like a roll every two weeks."

—**Anthony Accardi, owner, Green Rhino**

"One woman had a light leak in her camera [causing the film to become partially exposed]. She'd shot pictures of an interior of a house, and the photos came back with yellow and red streaks on them. We tried to explain to her—"You have a light leak"—but she thought the house was possessed."

—**Skip Robinson, manager, Westside Camera**

"One man brought in a picture of the New York Mets that hung on his wall—not to develop, but to restore. It had a big bullet hole in it from a



PET PROJECT Dogs dressed up for tea time are among the very strange things glimpsed by NYC's photo developers.

shotgun. He'd shot the picture after the team lost, and I had to fix it."

—**Dan Demetriad, owner, Demetriad Creative Media**

"One girl came in with a roll of film she said she'd found. She didn't know what was on it. It turned out to be pictures of her tied to a bed. There were also shots of her buttocks, which had been freshly whipped. And she was a very conservative-looking girl. Later, she came strolling in with her friend, paid for the roll and started looking at them—and got very embarrassed. Needless to say, I never saw her again."

—**One person just photographs bellybuttons. Every**

time he had a roll of film, he would have bellybutton pictures on it. Another guy was someone who enjoyed having people crap on him."

—**Ron Simon, co-owner, Foto Nouveau**

"I have one customer who shoots only the sky—the clouds, actually. She's very interested in the clouds. She's brought in one roll a week for the last three or four years, just clouds."

—**Alan Tang, president, Photomax**

"We get weird dental stuff. Dentists would document their work on patients: putting in a post, pulling the teeth, before-and-after photos of the patients. Funny."

—**El Kazan, photo lab chief, Time-Life Photo Lab**

"I once saw an autopsy of a monkey. I guess the guy was a doctor. The photos showed the brain, the organs. That was shocking to me."

—**Clara, clerk, Q Photo**

"We always get people making love. We get a couple pictures like that a month. They're not especially graphic; they're just normal."

—**Ken Ishi, manager, 7 Hour Photo**

"We're on Wall Street, so we don't get many strange photos. People are very normal around here. But sometimes somebody brings in lots of pictures of a cat—every other week, rolls and rolls of a cat. They don't have kids, so they shoot their cat."

—**Sam, clerk, In a Flash**

"Many years ago, we had a photo lab on 42nd Street. The weirdest

pictures I ever saw came from a grandfather. Almost the entire roll was normal stuff—pictures of his granddaughter's birthday, a family reunion, him with his wife, whatever. And in the middle of the roll—bang!—there's four or five pictures of Grandpa with a prostitute, dressed all in black latex and giving him oral sex."

—**George Manos, owner, the Perfect Picture Store 2**

"We get some photos of people with farm-animal fetishes...pictures of people having sex with mules. We don't pay attention anymore; we take their money and we let them go. Why do they bring them in? I guess some might get off bringing them into the store."

—**anonymous, a midtown photo lab**