

# THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT *Nancy*

Nancy Meyers has been making movies about women for 30 years, but her latest film has a beautiful twist: it is written and directed by her daughter, Hallie Meyers-Shyer. Scarlett Russell catches up with the duo to talk women on screen and behind the lens



**N**o one knows romantic comedies like Nancy Meyers. Between writing, producing and directing credits, her films range from *Father Of The Bride I & II*, *The Parent Trap*, *Baby Boom*, *Private Benjamin*, *The Holiday*, *It's Complicated*, *What Women Want* and *The Intern*. They've made her, at 67, the most commercially successful female filmmaker in the business. Her films share similar themes – working women, motherhood, age-gap dating, divorce – and are told in gentle, funny narratives, by loveable characters with ginormous kitchens and colourful throw cushions. This is feelgood storytelling at its finest. Meyers' latest project? Producing *Home Again*, this time written and directed by her daughter, Hallie Meyers-Shyer, 30. It stars Reese Witherspoon as a young divorcee with two daughters whose life flips into disarray when three young, charming and aspiring filmmakers move in with her. Like mother, like daughter, it's a classic Meyers-family movie – and very funny.

## Where did the idea for *Home Again* come from?

**Hallie:** “I noticed a lot of women getting divorced earlier in life and I thought [that being] a young divorcee was an interesting time in someone's life. A friend told me a story about her childhood where

three guys had stayed in her house and how that influenced her life. I just ran with it. I think I wrote 40 drafts and my mom gave me notes.”

**Nancy:** “How many?”

**H:** [Laughs] “Close to 40.”

**N:** “You're crazy. I probably gave her notes on 10 drafts. The other 30 she did on her own.”

## How did your mother/daughter dynamic play out on set?

**N:** “Hallie was very clear about what she wanted and how she was going to make the movie. But, as she was a first-time director, it was good she could turn to me. A lot of people on set want you to move along and get to the next thing, so it's a comfort to know there is someone on your side there, who doesn't have any other agenda.”

**H:** “Mom was the mother of the movie. She would tell the boys stories about Jack Nicholson in between takes, and could offer so much experience.”

## What did Reese bring to the table?

**N:** “She's such an important actress. She treated Hallie like she was an experienced director and asked her a lot of questions. She set the temperature on the set, no doubt about it.”

**H:** “Reese having that confidence in me gave everyone else confidence in me, and gave me confidence in myself. It set the bar higher for me, because I wanted to do right by her.”



Reese Witherspoon, Hallie Meyers-Shyer and Nancy Meyers

## Was it a very female set?

**H:** “Oh, yeah. We had a lot of female department heads. It felt very comfortable. I'd like to hire as many women as possible on set.”

## Why do women work so well together?

**H:** “Maybe it's a maternal thing, but they really looked out for me, and worked extra hard to teach me while also doing their job.”

**N:** “Honestly, women work twice as hard. I'm not saying men slack off, but they don't have the same work ethic. Women kill themselves. They care so much, they really want to do well, they want to be supportive of their leader – they devote themselves to their jobs.”

## Why, then, are there so few female directors?

**N:** “There are fewer opportunities. Women are not even considered a lot of the time. Also, being a director is so demanding. If you want kids, you need to have a significant other who's home a lot more than you are, otherwise it's very hard.”

**H:** “Last night I went to a screening of *Baby Driver* with a Q&A with its director, Edgar Wright. He said he shot for 14 hours a day, prepped for another six hours with his unit, then went to bed and did it all again – 20-hour days.”

**N:** “That sounds horrible.”

**H:** “The movie looked like it took that much work, but it would be so difficult for a woman with kids to work those hours.”

## Nancy, what do you remember about being a young working mother?

“I was pregnant with Hallie in 1987, and making *Baby Boom*. I remember going straight from the editing room to the hospital. It was a false alarm that inspired the false alarm scene in *Father Of The Bride II*. Anyway, she was born a couple of months before *Baby Boom* came out, then we were asked to make it a TV show, and part of the arrangement was that I had an office with a crib. It was in a cold warehouse I wasn't that happy about with a newborn, but it was all set up for her. It was easier back then.”

## How did you balance work and motherhood?

“The movies I produced were directed by Hallie's dad [Charles Shyer]. It's very different being in the passenger seat than the driver's seat. If there was a meeting that started at 7pm, I could go home. The director can't. I didn't direct until Hallie was 10, and then not again until she was

in her teens, so it was manageable but, as any mother knows, it's a constant give-and-take of your family life and work life. In those days, films were shot mainly in LA, close to home. Now directors leave town for six months. I don't think I would have been in the movie business if it was that way when my kids were little. I could never have left them for that long. And, I hate to say this, but I think it's going to be

harder for Hallie than it was for me.”

## Is that something you worry about, Hallie?

“I went into [directing] with false hopes. The hours my mum worked were intense, but I was so interested in what she was doing I was always hanging around. My sister Annie and I would go on set after school and do our homework in the trailer – it was amazing to grow up on movie sets. Now that I'm directing, it's definitely difficult.”

## Nancy, what's the best set you've been on?

“The best time was *Father Of The Bride*. Hilarious people 24/7, an overload of talent every day. We were all the same age and we're all still friends. I see Diane Keaton all the time, and Steve Martin whenever he's in LA. Sometimes we all get together. It was a relaxed, funny and cosy set. I think you feel it in the movie.”

## Would you and Hallie work together again?

**N:** “I don't think so. It was a unique and great experience for both of us, but I'll go back to my work now and she will move on and do great things without me.” >>



Nancy Meyers and daughter Hallie Meyers-Shyer in 2007



# “ACTING IS MY PASSION, PRODUCING IS MY MISSION”

As the star of Nancy Meyers' *Home Again*, if there's a woman's story to be told, Reese Witherspoon is going to tell it. Her commitment to filmmaking has made her an icon, on and off screen...

Words SCARLETT RUSSELL



“I want girls to grow up with characters who are the heroes of their own stories,” says Witherspoon

**R**eece Witherspoon is, it turns out, exactly as you'd want and imagine Reese Witherspoon to be: bubbly, chatty, friendly, funny; her Tennessee twang and LA enthusiasm making me hang on her every word. And she's on a roll. “When I think about *Legally Blonde*, where's *that* girl? What's the *Election* movie? Where's *Sweet Home Alabama*? And all those Sandra Bullock movies, those Julia Roberts movies. I *loved* those movies. I grew up on Goldie Hawn and Meg Ryan. I want girls today to grow up with characters who are the heroes of their own stories. I want to see women who represent my daughter and her friends. Oh, hey, honey!” There are some muffled voices in the background – Witherspoon is calling me from her family vacation – and I've temporarily lost her attention. We've been talking for 20 minutes already, but I've barely asked any questions. Turns out, when you get Witherspoon on the subject of women in film (or, rather, the lack of women in film), she needs no prompting. “Sorry, honey,” she says, back to me now. “I'm sitting outside a kids' club and a family I know just walked past. What was I saying? Oh, so it hasn't been a great time for seeing women starring in their own movies, especially comedy. You know?” I do know, but doesn't she need to go? I am, after all, interrupting her holiday. “Not at all!” comes the cheery response. Witherspoon is equally keen to discuss her latest project, *Home Again*. “I've been Nancy's [Meyers] biggest fan for the longest time, and now she's supporting Hallie. I loved the idea of using all the years of experience that

“I loved the idea of a group of **WOMEN** coming **TOGETHER** to help a woman. It was **EXCITING**”

Nancy and I have. I loved the idea of a group of women coming together to help a woman. It was exciting.”

Witherspoon is one of the most prominent and vocal champions of women in Hollywood. At 41, her movie career spans almost two decades and has resulted in 25 lead roles (*Legally Blonde*, *Cruel Intentions* and *Mud* to name a few) and one Best Actress Oscar (for *Walk The Line* in 2006, though she was nominated in the same category for *Wild* in 2015). Her films have grossed over a billion dollars in the box office. In 2012, bored of reading the same old scripts about the same old male-led stories, she set up her own production company, Pacific Standard, making films by women, for women. It's since produced *Wild*, *Gone Girl* and *Hot Pursuit* and has dozens more in the pipeline. “Acting is my passion, but producing is my mission,” says Witherspoon. “I honestly feel it's my mission to create more stories and opportunities for women, because I truly believe that there aren't enough. I feel very strongly about it.” As it was a predominantly female crew on *Home Again*, I wonder

what it is about women that makes them work so well together. Witherspoon pauses for the first time in our interview. “That's a good question,” she finally says. “I think it's because there's a lot of communication, there's a great instinct about emotion and there's an attention to detail that I think is just quintessentially feminine.”

Another of Witherspoon's productions was this year's colossal HBO series, *Big Little Lies*. Nicole Kidman, Zoë Kravitz, Laura Dern and Shailene Woodley starred alongside her and it told gripping, twisted tales of female »



friendship, rivalry, marriage, divorce and domestic abuse. Seven million viewers, not to mention the entire *Red* office, were hooked and Witherspoon has loved the response. Mostly. “I just spent a week with Nicole and we were sitting at dinner with a man who said, ‘I don’t think educated women are abused. I just don’t believe it.’”

You can imagine the backlash such a comment provoked. “We were like, ‘That is *unbelievably* ignorant. Of course it doesn’t matter socioeconomically where you’re at. You can be abused physically, mentally, it happens to so many women.’ Anyway, it’s interesting that it’s become such a conversation starter. I’m incredibly proud of it.”

As Madeline Mackenzie in *Big Little Lies*, Witherspoon played a woman so committed to her children she found herself wondering what else to feel passionate about. In *Home Again*, she’s 40-year-old Alice, fresh from divorce and with two young daughters, and the mother/daughter scenes – classic Meyers – are touching. Off-screen, she’s a mother herself – to Ava, 17, and Deacon, 13, with ex-husband Ryan Phillippe, and four-year-old Tennessee with talent agent husband Jim Toth. “Being a parent in real life,” says Witherspoon, “means I bring every piece of my life and reality to those scenes.” Witherspoon was just 24 when she had Ava. How has she balanced her career with motherhood? “Every time a movie comes up I balance my kids’ wants and needs versus my own. My job takes me far away, I have to travel to different countries and I might not see them until the weekend when I’m exhausted, so when I take a movie, I really need to think about that. Right now, Ava is applying for college, so I don’t work on acting jobs. There have been several movies I wanted to make and didn’t [because of my kids], and I wish I had made them. But they come on set sometimes and that’s really special. It was harder when they were younger, because they didn’t understand. Now I pitch them ideas about my movies.”

Signing up to *Home Again*, filmed close to her house in LA, and working with such stellar women, was a no-brainer for Witherspoon. But the storyline piqued her interest, too. “There are so many ideas in the movie that women are experiencing at different ages,” she says. “Getting divorced in your forties, taking over a new home, trying to re-enter the workforce after having kids and not working. I have a lot of friends that are questioning

whether they should ever have given up their job. ‘Am I not valuable because I’m older?’

‘Have I done myself a disadvantage by taking care of the children for so long?’

Questions people are grappling with all the time. I love films that deal with real-life conflict and find beautiful resolution.

I love that Alice learns how to love herself,

and she knows she’s going to

be okay. Because all we have at the end of the day is ourselves and our happiness and our family. That’s all that matters.”

As I am finally ushered off the phone by a publicist, I finish by asking Witherspoon what theme from the film relates most to her life now. “How life-altering some transitions can be,” she replies. “There are a lot of different chapters in our lives, right? I definitely feel that life transitions more now. I’ve certainly questioned things and asked myself, ‘Am I doing the thing I’m supposed to be doing?’” All I can think is, yes, honey, you are. 📺

*Home Again* is in cinemas 29th September



**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP:** In *Wild*; with Nicole Kidman; starring in *Legally Blonde*; in *Home Again*



## RED SMART WOMEN WEEK

Join us for an exclusive preview screening of *Home Again* a week before it is released, and a Q&A with producer Nancy Meyers and director Hallie Meyers-Shyer themselves. You’ll also get a welcome drink and goodie bag.

**When?** 7pm, 21st September

**Where?** Central London location

**Tickets?** For more information, and tickets, visit [Smartwomenweek.co.uk](http://Smartwomenweek.co.uk)

**Red**  
**SMART**  
**WOMEN**  
**WEEK**  
**2017**

WITH



**JAGUAR**