

## A Tête-à-Tête With The Emmy Winning Actress: Lisa Kudrow

Written by Kam Williams

Tuesday, 09 April 2013 17:56

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**Lisa Marie Diane Kudrow** was born in Encino, California on July 30, 1963 to Nedra, a travel agent, and Lee, a physician specializing in headaches. Lisa Kudrow came belatedly to acting, having focused more on athletics and academics both in high school and in college. She attended Vassar where she earned a BS in Psychobiology while playing tennis on the school's varsity team.

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After graduating from college, she returned to the West Coast where she contemplated following in her father's footsteps. In fact, she was working as a medical researcher when her brother's best friend, the actor Jon Lovitz, suggested she consider showbiz and encouraged her to audition for the legendary improv comedy troupe "The Groundlings."

The brainy beauty was accepted into the ensemble and proceeded to hone her skills until she started landing bit roles on TV shows like Cheers, Newhart and Coach. Her big break came in 1992 when she was hired to portray Ursula Buffay, a recurring character on *Mad about You*.

A couple of years later, she parlayed that success into the role she will probably forever be associated with, namely, that of Phoebe Buffay, on [Friends](#). During that landmark series' ten-year run, Lisa would win an Emmy and more nominations than any of her talented co-stars. Still, all three Friends' female cast members would make history by signing contracts paying them a record million dollars each per episode. Aforementioned, Mrs. Kudrow won Emmy Awards for *Friends* but also for *The Opposite of Sex*, *The Comeback* and *Web Therapy*.□

Meanwhile, Lisa's screen career heated up, too, in the wake of critical acclaim for memorable performances in everything from *Analyze This* to Romy and Michele's *High School Reunion* to *Wonderland*. And on top of her acting accolades, she was named one of the 50 Most Beautiful People in the World by *People Magazine*. The following year, she gave birth to a son, Julian, the focus of her and her husband Michael's life.

Here, she talks about all of the above and more, and about her new film, *Kabluey*, a "melan-comedy" co-starring Scott Prendergast where she plays a frazzled mother raising a couple of kids alone while her National Guardsman husband is serving in Iraq.

[This interview was conducted in 2008]

**KW: Hi Lisa [Kudrow], thanks for the time. I'm really honored to be speaking with you.**

**LK:** Sure.

**KW:** I've got four pages of questions for you, some from fans who I'd alerted that I'd be interviewing you.

**LK:** Oh!

**KW:** What interested you in this film and gave you the confidence to go with a first-time director like Scott Prendergast?

**LK:** Well, I've had good experiences with first-time directors, especially with director-writers, because they wrote it and know what the story is since they saw it as they were writing it. In Scott's case, I could tell from the script that he saw it as he was writing. There was nothing in there that made think, "Gee, that would be impossible to shoot." And then I spoke with him on the phone and he wasn't crazy, but just a smart, funny guy. Also, it turned out by coincidence that we had mutual friends since he had been in The Groundlings program.

**KW:** Who else was at The Groundlings when you were there?

**LK:** Let's see, Julia Sweeney, Kathy Griffin, Heather Morgan, Tim Bagley, Patrick Bristow, Mindy Sterling and Jennifer Coolidge were all there when I was in the company. And I remember voting on Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri.

**KW:** I saw that you were recently at an event in support of the new G.I. Bill. Is that something you feel passionately about?

**LK:** I was there because it was just the right thing to do. It's crazy that there's been any hesitation in signing it.

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**KW:** *Kabluey* touches on similar themes.

**LK:** One thing I liked about Scott's movie was that it wasn't really taking a stand on the war, except in that the National Guardsmen were the first to go, and they kept getting extended, and the people at home hadn't signed up for military careers, none of them had. Meanwhile the benefits are being cut.



**KW:** Tell me a little about your character, one of those military wives left behind to care for two young kids all alone.

**LK:** Leslie, who I played, is not one of those extraordinary people who could cope. She's a regular person who had difficulty coping with something she wasn't prepared for. The movie doesn't make her a hero, really, but not everybody is extraordinary.

**KW: I was pleasantly surprised by how different the movie was from *Stop-Loss* and those other heavy-handed dramas exploring similar issues.**

**LK:** Right. No, it doesn't take a stand on the war. It's just that the war is so destructive of these people who aren't really equipped to cope. The whole world that Scott created in *Kabluey* is a bunch of numb people who aren't even listening to each other or even thinking two steps ahead. It's almost like a science fiction movie to me. They're like Zombies.

**KW: Even Scott's character inside the mascot costume somehow served as a metaphor for a sort of detachment, despite all the slapstick.**

**LK:** Yes, I liked that, too. And when I watched the movie my reaction was, "Ooh! I'm like the drama." I'm in the drama portion of the movie.

**KW: This is a movie which could have easily fallen apart, but you had the ability to combine the comedic and dramatic elements convincingly and seamlessly.**

**LK:** That's really a testament to Scott. He wrote it and directed it. And it's a tricky movie. It's a comedy and a drama.

**KW: Scott calls it a melan-comedy. Despite your being associated with comedy because of [Friends](#), we can see from this film that you can do drama, too, and have an extraordinary emotional range. Which is your preference drama or comedy?**

**LK:** I don't think I have a preference. I like doing both a lot. I do love comedy, especially these darker comedies. But when I'm doing anything, I often wonder whether I should turn on my version of what the comedy switch is, because it's always either on or off.

**KW: It must be hard for you at times to hold back, given not only your tremendous success but your intelligence. People shouldn't be fooled by any of the bimbos you've**

**played. I know that you have a degree in Psychobiology. In fact I read that your nickname is “Smart.” Is that true?**

**LK:** No, although in college someone did call me Einstein. But I think he was being sarcastic.  
[Laughs]

**KW: After you graduated from Vassar, you returned to Los Angeles. Were you planning to follow in your father’s footsteps?**

**LK:** Yes, though not exactly following in his footsteps. I planned to do graduate work to have a better understanding of brain chemistry and how it has evolved.

**KW: Is it true that Jon Lovitz played a pivotal role in your altering those career plans?**

**LK:** Yes, he’s my brother’s best friend, so I grew up with Jon, and knew he was always studying acting. And after he finished college it was always exciting watching when he was a guest star on a show. Then, when I graduated, he got *Saturday Night Live*. That was really inspiring to me because I’d seen him struggling for so long. Before that, I always thought of the actors in movies as almost mystical, as if that never happened to regular people. So, John’s success made me realize, “No, no, if you pursue it, then it’s a possibility.” He suggested that I go to The Groundlings, because he said that’s where he learned the most useful stuff of all the acting schools he went to. So, I followed his advice.

**KW: Had you studied acting before?**

**LK:** No, not at all. In junior high, I wrote some sketches, but not in high school or college. I was pre-med.

**KW: I read that you went to school with Daniel Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was beheaded by Muslim extremists in Pakistan just for being Jewish.**

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**LK:** Yes, we went to the same junior high school, and a good friend of mine was very, very close to him.

**KW:** Did your family lose anyone in the Holocaust?

**LK:** Yes.

**KW:** Were either of your parents survivors?

**LK:** No, my parents were both born here, but they were first-generation American. It's funny you should ask because we're currently producing a genealogy show called "Who Do You Think You Are?" which was a hit in Great Britain. Just yesterday, in fact, I was giving my family history to the producers, so they could start their research to see if there are enough documents to support a whole episode.

**KW:** Sounds interesting.

**LK:** But it's so strange that you would ask me that, because I was just thinking and talking about it again this morning. I was wondering, what would I do, if I learned that some of my relatives had been in concentration camps? I know that a lot of my family died over there [in Europe  
], but not in concentration camps.

**KW:** How far back can you trace your lineage now?

**LK:** I don't know much more than my grandparents. It all stops there. To me it's fascinating when you start putting your ancestors' lives in historical context, and how that forced some big

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decisions that made the difference between surviving and not surviving. I like the idea of looking at a lot of the little things that I always took for granted which explain why I'm even here.

**KW: Especially given what eventually happened in Europe. What will you do if it turns out some of your relatives were in concentration camps?**

**LK:** As part of the show, I'd go visit the places.

**KW:** In the last ten years or so, there have been a number of powerful Holocaust documentaries, like *Fighter* in which a couple of 70 year-old survivors return to Europe to return to their roots while debating what Jews could have done to prevent the genocide.

**LK:** It's called *Fighter*? That sounds very good.

**KW:** It's excellent. Let me shift gears again and ask you how did it feel to be named one of the 50 Most Beautiful People in the World?

**LK:** Oh... I guess I should just say, "That was really nice!" Except that... [hesitates] Oh, never mind.

**KW:** No, go ahead. What were you going to say?

**LK:** Honestly, mostly what strikes you is, "I'm not really one of the 50 Most Beautiful. It's just that I had a movie that did well." [Chuckles] Still, it's nice, if it brainwashes anyone into thinking it's true.

**KW:** I noticed that you're left-handed. They say that lefties are more creative. Do you



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**think that might have led you to the Arts?**

**LK:** I don't know. Are there a disproportionate number of left-handed people in the arts?

**KW:** I don't have any statistics, but that's what I've always heard.

**LK:** I think in certain fields, some of the extraordinary ones are left-handed. It always made me feel that lefties are special.

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