

# RUNNING ON EMPTY

WITH JUDD HIRSCH AND CHRISTINE LAHTI



**B**ack in the early 1970's Christine Lahti was enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts program at Florida State University. "I was going to be a mime" she remembers "partly because it was a real 'artiste' thing to do — I had this real 60's hippie non-ambitious image for myself." The idea of going to Los Angeles or New York to really try and make it was way too conventional.

And then one night she saw Richard Dreyfuss in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. "There I was in Tallahassee, singing in a blues group and living with my

boyfriend. And I think the next day I left for New York. I just said, *Whoaaa!* I want to be an actress. What am I doing here? I *am* ambitious, I really *want* to be great.

"That feeling had been building up" she adds "but it was Richard's performance that was the catalyst. It was incredibly inspirational for me."

The tall, direct, self-amused Lahti did become an actress. And in the judgement of many, she has also become a great one. There has been, after all, an Academy award nomination for her role as Goldie Hawn's buddy in *Swing Shift*. But awards are more or less beside the point, because all you have to do is look at the woman and her work,

which are never less than warm and individual and telegenic. Just ask the director Norman Jewison. Ten years ago he tuned into the television drama *The Last Tenant* to see the veteran actor and teacher Lee Strasberg. Instead, he couldn't take his eyes off Lahti playing opposite Strasberg.

Afterwards, Jewison cast her to play Al Pacino's spunky girlfriend in...*And Justice For All*. Since then she has gone on to one starring role after another — as Richard Dreyfuss' sympathetic doctor in *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, as Gary Gilmore's cousin in *The Executioner's Song*, as romantic competition for Mary Tyler Moore in *Just Between Friends* and most recently as

Sylvie, the wayward aunt trying to care for conventional nieces in *Housekeeping*.

"My father very much encouraged the idea that I was special" she observes "that I really could do whatever I wanted. He encouraged all of us. It was terrific."

Now Lahti plays Annie Pope in **Running on Empty** which ironically takes her almost back to where she started. Annie is a former 60's hippie living in Florida. 15 years earlier, she had been part of a radical anti-war group which blew up a napalm laboratory. They hadn't meant to hurt anyone. They purposely set the bomb off late at night. But a hapless janitor was inside. And so, for the last 15 years, Annie and her husband (Judd Hirsch) and two sons have lived underground, under assumed names, always just one step ahead of the FBI. But relentless time is about to change all that because their 17 year old son, Danny (River Phoenix) wants to go to university, to live a normal life. And if he does that, he'll never see his family again.

"The portrait of men and women together is real important in everything I do" says Lahti who grew up in suburban Detroit, the daughter of a surgeon and a painter. "It's a very personal thing to me to portray women in an enlightened way, to find a positive way for them to relate to men.

"On stage once" she adds "I played a woman who thought of herself as a sex object, who was a real Playboy bunny kind of woman. And it was important to me to reveal what kind of insecurity, what fear stopped her from being assertive, to like herself. In *Whose Life* it was important to me to reveal the other side. The doctor I played was a strong woman, but I wanted to reveal what her fears were, what her vulnerabilities were."

Lahti admits she's never considered herself especially beautiful, so the glamor which comes with the notion of being a major actress has been a bonus. "A few years ago" she says "I did a photo session for *Redbook* and I'd never done anything like that before. We had this really great make-up artist, a hair person. I looked like a covergirl. I never *imagined* myself that way, ever. And never really wanted to. But looking like that was really *fun* for the night. I started getting really" — Lahti flips her hair aside — "saucy" and she then laughs a deep, resonant laugh.

—Lyle Slack

