

## The Secret of Her Success: An Interview with Helen Slater

Gary Bettinson



Fig. 1. Helen Slater soared to fame in *Supergirl* (1984).

In the early 1980s, Helen Slater – aged eighteen and fresh out of drama school – found herself at the forefront of a major Hollywood blockbuster, *Supergirl* (1984), a spin-off entry in the successful *Superman* franchise (1978-1987) produced by Ilya and Alexander Salkind. The newcomer had won the coveted title role following an extensive audition process; now she would headline a US \$35 million mega-picture, starring opposite such screen luminaries as Faye Dunaway, Peter O'Toole, and Mia Farrow. Slater, a native New Yorker born in 1963, refused to be cowed by the burden of expectation, and turned in an indelible dual performance – as Supergirl and her alter-ego Linda Lee – that many observers consider definitive. Ultimately, *Supergirl* opened to a tepid critical response and failed to turn a profit. However, Slater emerged from the fiasco unscathed – Roger Ebert's contention that "Slater is the best thing in the film" reflected the critical consensus<sup>1</sup> – and her star continued to rise in a string of cult hits and popular blockbusters including *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985), *Ruthless People* (1986), *The Secret of My Success* (1987), and *City Slickers* (1991).



Fig. 2. Slater and mentor Peter O'Toole behold the Omegahedron, a plot macguffin and narrative "boon," in *Supergirl*.

*Supergirl's* detractors point – justifiably – to inexplicable holes in the film's plotlines, but on a macrolevel the screenplay exhibits a fairly robust narrative architecture rooted in mythic tradition. Screenwriter David Odell anchors the story in fairy-tale archetypes (pitting an innocent girl against a wicked witch whose omnipotence derives from a magical mirror, à la the legend of Snow White) and fairy-tale plotting (the heroine embarks, essentially, on a quest to return home, as in *The Wizard of Oz* [1939]). More specifically, *Supergirl* extends a lineage of ancient mythological storytelling, updating and elaborating the classical hero myth. Odell's script hews to the schematic plotline of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey"<sup>2</sup>: Supergirl's call to adventure is initiated by "a mere blunder," her careless mislaying of the Omegahedron (a Kryptonian elixir) the mishap that sets her on the path to heroism; the ensuing adventure leads her into unknown realms (Earth; The Phantom Zone) in which she must vanquish demons and surmount a string of other life-threatening obstacles and "trials;" she receives "spiritual aid" from a helper or guardian dwelling in her unconscious, as when Zaltar (Peter O'Toole) offers her counsel from beyond the grave; in the Phantom Zone she undergoes a spiritual death and "rebirth," shedding her former self and emerging, chrysalis-like, in a truly heroic identity; and having triumphed over evil forces, she returns home bearing the errant Omegahedron, a "boon" that restores her community to its former state of health and vitality. Add to this certain other mythological allusions derived from the comic book – such as Supergirl's home town being named for the ship *Argo*, on which Jason and the Argonauts set sail – and the film's ties to classical mythology are deep-rooted and multivalent.



Fig. 3. Arriving on Earth, Supergirl finds beauty in an unfamiliar natural world.

Still, the *Supergirl* screenplay can be faulted at the level of gender representation. As written by Odell, the heroic metamorphosis is one whereby Supergirl acquires “masculine” attributes. Initially, Supergirl is identified with traditionally feminine things. In Argo City, she is associated with the feminine realm of the imagination, while the masculine realm of science, logic, and mathematics confounds her. Arriving on Earth, she is compelled by flowers, rabbits, and brassieres. In the process of becoming truly heroic, she acquires masculine power and competence, becoming proficient in the “male” domain of science, logic, and reason (as when she effortlessly masters complex geometry puzzles) and growing ever more physically formidable. For some critics, Odell’s attempt at feminist progressiveness – equating the attainment of a heroic identity with the acquisition of masculine traits – was well-intentioned but misguided. As Slater observes in the following interview:

The character was fashioned in a man’s image. She was written with the approach of: What would Superman be like if he was a girl? As opposed to: What really are the feminine qualities that can inhabit a character like that?

The plot’s pseudo feminist strategy consists largely of gender reversal. While Supergirl becomes more masculine, the male hero, Ethan (Hart Bochner), becomes more feminine. Initially shown pursuing manly endeavors (pitching a baseball; hacking down trees), Ethan subsequently succumbs to a magical spell that enervates and feminizes him. He becomes desperately lovelorn, impelled by emotion rather than reason. He speaks in florid, poetic prose when addressing Supergirl’s civilian self, Linda Lee. A wholly passive agent, he spends

the rest of the narrative drugged, unconscious, or bewitched. Again and again, he is placed in positions of physical passivity: while he is unable to muster the strength to sweep Linda off her feet, Supergirl lifts him up with ease; later, the evil sorceress Selena (Faye Dunaway) keeps him manacled to a brick wall. In short, Ethan becomes the ineffectual male equivalent of a damsel in distress. He is also objectified by the villainess, who ogles his physique and squeezes him into immaculate white suits and crushed-velvet blazers.



Fig. 4. Supergirl grows romantically attached to the frequently passive Ethan (Hart Bochner).

All of *Supergirl's* male characters are feminized to one degree or another. Supergirl's nemesis Nigel (Peter Cook), hardly a model of male virility, is routinely emasculated and belittled by Selena, while Zaltar – another figure identified with the “feminine” realm of the imagination – sacrifices himself in the melodramatic fashion of a female martyr. If the film's gender dynamics seem to misconstrue feminism as a simplistic inversion of patriarchal norms, Odell's narrative climax inadvertently reverts to conventional male-female power relations. Pushed to the brink of defeat, Supergirl cries out “I can't!” only for Zaltar – her “supernatural helper” – to equip her with the mental fortitude to endure. “You can,” he exhorts: “[Go] on, girl.” Even the hapless Ethan comes to Supergirl's rescue during the final skirmish, and literally places the Omegahedron – the energy source that Supergirl has been seeking throughout the entire plot – in her hands. In sum, Supergirl's triumph crucially depends not only on her own incipient masculine traits, but also on the decisive actions of secondary male characters, even ones that are dumb (Ethan) or dead (Zaltar).



Fig. 5. The superheroine prepares to fly into action.

Notwithstanding its narrative flaws, *Supergirl* is distinguished by Slater's highly accomplished dual performance, alternately naïf-like and imposing, flirtatious and flinty. The film endures, too, thanks to several other memorable performances (especially Dunaway's deliciously ripe turn as the evil enchantress), composer Jerry Goldsmith's exultant title march, and some exquisite flying shots yielded by balletic wirework and front projection. Still, *Supergirl* foundered at the box office, grossing US \$14 million against a budget of US \$35 million, thus effectively torpedoing the Salkinds' plans for a sequel.



Fig. 6. *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985) showcased Slater in another seminal role and performance.

*Supergirl*'s lukewarm reception spared its star from the shackles of typecasting. Slater followed *Supergirl* with a string of films that demonstrated her performative range. *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985) furnished another iconic role and performance, the Slater character's mantra – "Fair is fair" – becoming a rallying cry for women and girls, lesbians and gays, and anyone subjugated by oppression and inequality. As the eponymous Texan teenager, Slater added anti-Establishment rebellion and androgyny to her burgeoning persona, only to deepen her star image still further by swerving onto comedic terrain throughout the rest of the decade. Films such as *Sticky Fingers* (1988) and *Happy Together* (1989) suggested that comedy might be Slater's natural forte. If the titles of some of these comedies – *Ruthless People* (1986), *The Secret of My Success* (1987), and (belatedly) *City Slickers* (1991) – invoke the capitalistic fervor of the 80s, the plots themselves at least superficially champion romantic love and comradeship over materialism, consumerism, and consumption.



Fig. 7. Opposite Michael J. Fox in the hit romantic farce *The Secret of My Success* (1987).

Often, the Slater character traces an arc of psychological (and often physical) change that permits the star's versatility full play. In *The Secret of My Success*, an office comedy cum bedroom farce, Slater's aloof business executive learns to become less reserved when she falls for Michael J. Fox's copper-haired farm boy. In *Ruthless People*, Slater starts out as a timid, introverted, skittish housewife, before discovering self-confidence and self-expression. Both films ultimately affirm romantic love over materialistic concerns. And in

both films, the Slater figure's psychological growth is externalized in more or less outrageous shifts in dress and appearance.



Fig. 8. In *Ruthless People* (1986), Sandy's (Slater) burgeoning self-esteem is partly expressed through wild coiffures and outlandish outfits.

But it is Slater's emotional range and authenticity – tracing a gradual progression from repressed or circumspect to assertive and vivacious – that makes the characters' transformations convincing.



Fig. 9. Patrick Dempsey and Slater star as incompatible roommates in the charming teen comedy *Happy Together* (1989).

College comedy *Happy Together* charts a contrasting character trajectory. From the start, drama student Alex (Slater) bubbles with hyperactivity. Impetuous, fun-loving, and uninhibited, she blasts through the film like a human cyclone, throwing the life of mild-mannered roommate Christopher (Patrick Dempsey) into disarray. The plot hinges on this pairing of opposites: While Christopher is earnest and self-serious, Alex is flighty, garrulous, and reckless with other people's feelings. By the end of the film, the mismatched roommates have fallen in love, changing each other's personality in the process: as Alex teaches Christopher to loosen up, Christopher finds ways to tame Alex's feckless impulses. Such steep arcs of character change enabled Slater to display a varied performative ability, enrich her star persona, and avert typecasting – the manic energy of motormouth Alex is far removed from both the stoic Supergirl and the self-effacing Linda Lee.

Slater's 1980s output reflects the nostalgia of the period. Steeped in allusions to classical Hollywood, *Happy Together* offers an updating of the classic screwball comedy. *The Secret of My Success* harkens back to the office comedies of the 1950s, while *The*



*Legend of Billie Jean* invokes 1950s Hollywood too, incorporating a scene from Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan* (1957). These films' anachronisms dovetail with a wider trend within 1980s Hollywood cinema characterized by allusion, nostalgia, and what critic J. Hoberman calls "the dreamlike superimposition of the 50s over the 80s"<sup>3</sup> – think, for instance, of *Back to the Future* (1985), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Also unifying several of Slater's films in these years is a ludic, even subversive, play with traditional gender representation. Like *Supergirl*, *Happy Together* traffics in a reversal of gender roles: much of its odd-couple humor springs from the conceit that Christopher is feminized (at one point, donning a party dress) while Alex behaves like the stereotypical college jock – sexually uninhibited, prone to all-night partying, refusing to study, and hopping capriciously from one romantic partner to another. If *Supergirl* and *Happy Together* animate diametric gender reversals, *The Legend of Billie Jean* complicates the gender binarism altogether: as Slater points out below, Billie Jean evolves into a heroic identity that is neither straightforwardly male nor female, facilitating multiple forms of audience identification.



Fig. 10. Slater scored a box-office triumph alongside Billy Crystal in *City Slickers* (1991).

In the 1990s Slater oscillated between movies and television. She featured prominently in the comedy *City Slickers* – a huge box-office hit in the summer of 1991 – although this Boys' Own Adventure, centering on homosocial camaraderie, rendered Slater's role somewhat marginal to the action. Thereafter Slater remained in constant demand,

accumulating an impressively varied body of work. Notable films include the sharply-scripted *12:01* (1993), whose time-scrambling plot anticipated the same year's *Groundhog Day*; the home invasion drama *A House in the Hills* (1993), opposite Michael Madsen; and a big-screen updating of *Lassie* (1994). The thriller *No Way Back* (1995) seems derivative of the era's in-vogue auteurs – cribbing action stylistics from John Woo; indulging in the sort of digressive pop culture monologues fashioned by Quentin Tarantino – but the film juxtaposes Slater's chirpy air hostess against Russell Crowe's ornery, hardboiled FBI agent to amusing effect, and presents a fascinating contrast in performance styles. At the turn of the decade, Slater found another plum role as a blind cellist in *Nowhere in Sight* (2001), a thriller modelled on the Audrey Hepburn vehicle *Wait Until Dark* (1967).



Fig. 11. In recent years, Slater (second left) has played a recurring role in CW's *Supergirl* (2016-21).

The 2000s have provided Slater regular acting roles on screens big and small. She has leant name recognition, production value, and fully-rounded characterizations to independent films including *Seeing Other People* (2003) (another showcase for her deft comedic talent), *Model Minority* (2012), *The Curse of Downers Grove* (written by Bret Easton Ellis), and *Confetti* (2021). Television, meanwhile, has furnished her leading roles in TV-movies and miniseries. She returned to the superhero fold in the TV series *Smallville* (2007-2010) and *Supergirl* (2015-2021), while also writing a story for DC's *Supergirl* comic book entitled "A Hero's Journey," explicitly riffing on Campbell's monomyth. A favorite on the Comic Con

circuit, where she is feted as the original movie superheroine, Slater remains active in television, film, and theatre. In the following interview, she discusses her landmark performances and films, her approach to screen characterization, and the mythological underpinnings of her most famous roles.

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Fig. 12. *Supergirl* (1984): Slater in the role that launched her career.

*Can you describe your life as an actor before Supergirl?*

I had just graduated from the Performing Arts High School, the school from the *Fame* movie and the TV show. I was eighteen. I had told my parents that I would like to take a year off to try to find work as an actress, because when I was at Performing Arts High School we weren't allowed to work. We were really being trained. I graduated in June and I auditioned for *Supergirl* that October or November. Before that I had done a few commercials. I was in an ABC Afterschool Special called *Amy & the Angel*, and I played Amy. The school did let me out for that. But mostly we were not encouraged to be working, and I really wanted to try and get work. I went on a few auditions before *Supergirl*. When you're eighteen, weirdly, there are a lot more opportunities, certainly, than when you get older – I think the opportunities get fewer and fewer. But I remember auditioning quite a lot before *Supergirl*; there were a lot of things coming up. It was a pretty busy time.

*Which actors were important to you at the beginning of your career?*

For sure, the sort of Grande Dame in our American cinema was Meryl Streep. She was the top actor; she could do anything. I found her always just so moving. She was probably my top pick there.



Fig. 13. Slater as Linda Lee, Supergirl's diffident alter-ego.

*In a 1985 interview about the casting of Supergirl, director Jeannot Szwarc stated that he was looking for an actress who came to the audition with “a well-structured concept” of the Supergirl and Linda Lee characters.<sup>4</sup> What ideas did you conceive for the dual role?*

I remember I brought in a copy of *Moby Dick*, picking up a clue in the audition scene for the Linda Lee character, who was a student. I was fresh out of acting school, so I was always thinking in terms of: What are the clothes of the character? What's the intention in the scene? Even though it's not Shakespeare or Chekhov or Strindberg, we were taught to treat television or film auditions with that same kind of respect. I remember bringing in props to the audition. I wore a handmade costume; my mom helped me sew a cape. I just had that fearless thing that happens when you're young; you just sort of throw yourself into it. I didn't really care what anybody thought too much. I think I *was* self-conscious about being dressed as Supergirl – that just seemed so ludicrous. (Laughs.) But as far as the two roles go, for me, Linda Lee was much more introverted and more kind of shut down. And Supergirl had much more of that open innocence.



Fig. 14. Supergirl apprehends arch-nemesis Selena (Faye Dunaway, center) and her sidekick Bianca (Brenda Vaccaro, left).

*Supergirl's nemesis, Selena, is played by Faye Dunaway, who was at an interesting juncture in her career. She'd had a remarkable run from Bonnie and Clyde (1967) through Network (1976)...*

At that time, I hadn't seen *Network* or *Bonnie and Clyde*. I didn't know her work at that point. I was a little too young to have seen her movies when they first came out. But I did watch them after she got hired on *Supergirl*. Yeah, she was incredible.

*She'd recently played Joan Crawford in Mommie Dearest (1981), the first real debacle in her career. And she'd gained a reputation for being difficult after Chinatown (1974). What was your experience of working with her?*

It's funny, just hearing you talk, it's making me appreciate as an ageing actress just how vulnerable women are. I don't think they're afforded the same opportunities as men, and there might be a little more judgement or criticism of women – being labelled “difficult” or “challenging,” whereas it might be a case of just asking for what you want, or having a certain standard of how you want to be working. I don't really know what was driving Faye Dunaway at that time. I didn't have scenes with her, really – just one or two scenes that we were in together. But she was very professional and I did learn from her. I clocked that she was very particular about how the lighting was and how she was being framed. When you're eighteen or nineteen you don't think about that for yourself. But as I've gotten older I've become more aware of how I am being lit...and now I'm kind of on the other side of that where I just don't care again. (Laughs.)

*This was the early 1980s. Did you perceive Supergirl in relation to second-wave feminism?*

Second-wave feminism wasn't on my radar at the time, and I wish I had been a little more schooled on that. I would have really appreciated that. That was a kind of blind spot for me, not having gone to college and working straight out of high school instead. I think *Supergirl* was *not* in keeping with the Second Wave of feminism. I think the character was fashioned in a man's image. She was written with the approach of: What would Superman be like if he was a girl? As opposed to: What really are the feminine qualities that can inhabit a character like that? Even though I think that still comes through, just because you have a live human being playing it. But it would have been really interesting to have a woman writer put her ideas into the ring, even though some of the greatest women written in literature have been written by men. I'm aware that not only in the MeToo movement but also in the George Floyd movement, you have to sometimes work to become anti-racist or anti-misogynist. It might not have been right there at the Salkinds' fingertips, but they could have said, "We don't have the female characterization right; what would it look like if we tried to put more of a female voice into the writing?"

*Speaking of Supergirl's producers, what kind of person was Alexander Salkind? One doesn't find much written about him.*

I only met him once or twice, to be honest. I'm Jewish, he was Jewish. I think he may have had a little bit of a hiccup about that, when he found out I was Jewish. There was a moment where he didn't know if I was right for the part. This was *after* I was cast. I think there was an article in the *Daily Mail* that came out when I had gotten cast, and it mentioned that I was Jewish. And, it might be conflated in my brain, but I do think that maybe the two things were related – the meeting with Alexander Salkind and that article coming out. And I remember having a very intimate talk with him and fighting for the role. I was raised with no anti-Semitism or anything like that. I was raised in New York, so I was in a soup: I was in a public school with blacks and Puerto Ricans and Jews and gays. And I wasn't identified as Jewish; I just was an actress in the school. But there was a moment where Alexander Salkind had some doubt that maybe the casting wasn't quite right. So that's my memory of him. I was very emotional and sort of advocated for myself, and then it kind of went away. He went along with it. This happened before shooting started, I remember. You know, I was there for four months before we started shooting, working out, gaining weight, working with Alf Joint, who was Chris Reeve's trainer on *Superman*.

*Were you conscious of the Supergirl script's basis in classical mythology, fairy tale archetypes, and Campbell's monomyth?*

No. It's funny – I wish I had put a little more of that applied myth quality into the character, because I loved fairy tales and folk tales, and I composed music in high school for musicals based on them. But I didn't connect the two at the time. Supergirl comes out of the water, like the divine feminine that lives in the unconscious. From patriarchy, the feminine has had to be shuttled downward into the unconscious; it's not treated in the same way as the masculine, but it seeps out anyway. And in the Supergirl myth, Supergirl comes from the waters and kind of embodies this. In psychological or Jungian terms, she's almost like an anima figure, a feminine part that's not necessarily gender assigned, but feminine, meaning watery, receptive, fluid. It might be interesting to trace the Supergirl myth back to some sort of Arthurian legend or, even earlier than that, to the Irish holy wells. You know, a lot of times there were sacred fish in the water and these fish might be a Sophia figure or, in Judaism, the Shekhinah. It would have been so much fun to make that connection back then. But I really thought of *Supergirl* as separate from myths and fairy tales.

*It must have been a heady experience viewing the film, replete with special effects and Jerry Goldsmith's lustrous music score, for the first time. Do you recall this first screening and your initial reaction to the completed film?*

Being overwhelmed was probably the singular feeling I had. I was aware that this was a symbol of such a shift in my life, where I was playing a superhero – I mean, the whole thing was so nonsensical in a way. (Laughs.) I had loved the *Superman* movies so much and I'd loved the George Reeves *Superman* TV shows when I was little. So I did have a personal connection to the material. And I had a deep connection to flying dreams, and so that part of the film was so very precious. To be in a film where I am flying, which was such a big part of what I loved as a kid. I don't know if you've ever had a flying dream. There's just nothing like it!



Fig. 15. Taking flight in *Supergirl*.

*Was the practical experience of being up on the wires anything like the dream experience?*

No. (Laughs.) It was very technical and very scary. I trusted the crew totally, but...

*How high up were you suspended?*

It varied. There were two ways they made Supergirl fly. One way was with a long construction crane, where I was strapped into a leather harness. The harness was connected to two piano wires that went up to the top of the construction crane, and there would be two guys pulling on a rope – that’s what lifts you up – and then another guy turning a wheel that moves the track across the construction crane to make it look like you’re flying forward and across. I would be close to eighty feet above the ground. And then the other way was in front of a blue screen. And for those shots, I’d be thirty or forty feet up. I had to go up a big scaffolding, and there was a pole-arm that stuck out of the blue screen. And they had a body mold, a cast of my body, and I lay down in that, and then they put the costume on over me. And I’m flying with a projected image behind me.

*Supergirl attracted considerable media attention from preproduction through to the theatrical release. Did you find sudden fame difficult or, being so young, did you take it in stride?*

In some ways I felt very shy about that part of the equation, and found myself hiding and wanting to not be so much in the spotlight. Whereas you would think that actors are extroverts and would *love* the attention, I kind of had a little bit of a mixed feeling about it. I don’t really know anybody that *enjoys* it, even though it seems from the outside like it’s a fun



thing. And I never had fame to the level of some of my friends, but even on my level there was an invasive quality. I guess that could be fun to a certain degree, but then you do feel a little bit like you're under a microscope. It's an odd, odd thing. But really, I felt gratitude because I was making a living, you know. Let's not forget that part. Just to make a living was huge. I was really always aware of that. My parents didn't have a lot of money. To be able to be independent financially was a big boost, and I just thought: let's keep going, let's keep trying to get work.

*You've spoken in previous interviews about the disappointment of Supergirl not being as successful as expected, critically and commercially. In general, how much do you invest in the process as opposed to the product?*

For me, on *Supergirl*, I was 100% in. It was the biggest opportunity that ever happened to me, and the process of making the film was very nourishing. I think that's a really good point – sometimes the process is almost more what it's about than what the final thing is. And I would say that was true for me on *Supergirl*. So much in my life changed during the making of that film: living in England for a year and being out of my comfort zone, which I think is such a key thing when you're developing – to be able to have that ability to be uncomfortable and try new things. We get less that way as we get older, so it's good to have memories that we did it when we were younger.

*Did your family travel to England with you?*

No. I was by myself. But my stunt double, Tracey Eddon, became one of my dearest, closest friends, and she had a bunch of friends that I also became close friends with. So I did have this instant social circle that made me feel at home.



Fig. 16. As the eponymous Billie Jean in a film that has attained cult status.

*You followed Supergirl with another definitive role in The Legend of Billie Jean, a film distinguished by an impressive cast including Christian Slater, Dean Stockwell, Keith Gordon, Yeadley Smith, Peter Coyote, and Richard Bradford. Did being a part of an ensemble ease the burden of responsibility on you, as opposed to being the primary star in Supergirl with all the pressure that brings?*

Well, in *Legend of Billie Jean* the other actors were my age too. I really loved that experience of being with a lot of other actors every single day that were around my age. I think it's so healthy for the psyche to have that camaraderie. And I do think that in *Supergirl* it was more of an isolating experience, just because of the pressure that came with it, whereas *Legend of Billie Jean* was much more of a shared social experience. Sometimes the situation of sharing the experience kind of relieves you of the feeling of pressure. But you're making me think of something: As I've gotten older and played "the mother" in TV series like *Smallville*, *Supergirl*, and *The Lying Game*, that's been way more isolating, because everybody is twenty years younger than me. Socially you are definitely more isolated, and I think that makes you less in love with the process. You're not as invested, in a way, because you're not really in an ensemble anymore.



Fig. 17. Not related in real life, Helen Slater and Christian Slater play underprivileged siblings in *The Legend of Billie Jean*.

*You and Christian Slater make for convincing siblings. How did you cultivate the appropriate sense of familiarity and intimacy?*

He's so great in that movie; he's so scrappy and just miserable. (Laughs.) I think there are actors that make sure they rehearse beforehand and do a lot of rehearsal, but Christian and I didn't really do that. I saw his audition and thought he was incredible. I remember talking to the director and saying, "He's just amazing." I was there for his call-back too. He was just so talented, so real, so *not* in a perfect mold. He did things that were unexpected, which was wonderful. And I think that the chemistry was just there, you know? It was just kind of there.

*The Legend of Billie Jean seems to be one of those films that has endured.*

Yes. I've done a few Comic Cons, and what's wild is that *that* movie almost more than *Supergirl* is what people want to talk about. You know, they will come up and say, "I shaved my head." Joseph Campbell would be pleased with the structure of *The Legend of Billie Jean*, I think. This thing of being in a certain circumstance where you're called to adventure. In this case Billie Jean would never wish to be a vigilante or to be fighting for this justice issue, but from that experience she grows into a heroic role. On the conscious level, it's just fun to see young scrappy people getting justice. But on the unconscious level I think it taps into the notion that you get bigger because the circumstance asks you to get bigger, and you do

something that you didn't think you could do. The circumstance hits something in you that you didn't even know was there until it got tapped on. Just because you are from a trailer park, or because you look a certain way, men think they can prey on you – the film tapped into these things. And watching a young woman say, "I don't think so. It's going to go differently this time," and then shaving her head – that was very unusual even in the 80s, to see someone go from an ingenue image to, well, they say in the film "a modern Joan of Arc," but really it was neither feminine nor masculine. It was something else, something androgynous.

*You rose to stardom in a decade when an exciting crop of young actors and actresses was breaking into the Hollywood industry. Who were your friends among the 1980s generation of actors?*

One of my closest friends is Helen Hunt, who I first met back then. We met on a filmmakers' exchange, where they took American actors to Russia before the wall dropped, and I think Russia had actors come over to the United States too. It was a way to have a place of peace between the two countries. Anyway, she's been a really close sister-friend for going on close to thirty-five years now. We're godmothers to each other's daughters, and she introduced me to my husband.

*And with whom did you compete for roles during this period?*

There was a bunch of us that was in the same age group: Daphne Zuniga, Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon. I don't remember us all being in audition rooms together, but you would hear things like, "Meg Ryan got that part" or "Cynthia Nixon got this part." Meg Ryan is actually in that ABC Afterschool special I was in, *Amy & the Angel*, with Matthew Modine and James Earl Jones, and she and I chit-chatted and we're friends now. We were only sixteen or seventeen years old back then.



Fig. 18. *The Secret of My Success* cast Slater and Michael J. Fox as junior executives navigating a complex web of romantic entanglements.

*The Secret of My Success was directed by Herbert Ross, a director with a strong track record of eliciting strong performances from actors. What was his approach to working with you and the other cast members? Would it be accurate to describe him as an “actor’s director”?*

Well, he came out of being a choreographer, I think, for the New York City ballet. And he had choreographed in *Funny Girl* that whole “Don’t Rain On My Parade” sequence. So I think his superpower was his vision of the stage picture, even though we were doing an office romantic comedy. I think he really had a feel for that. And in that way, the actors feel free to play. You feel like you’re in safe hands. I wouldn’t really call him an actor’s director, but maybe other people would. I mean, everyone has their own skill set and it engages you one way or the other. I think he was someone for whom you wanted to do your best work, because he’s holding the whole thing in his head. So you show up with a ready-to-go-to-work type of feeling.



Fig. 19. Slater's young businesswoman is wined and dined by her adulterous boss, played by Richard Jordan, in *The Secret of My Success*.

*What kind of working relationship did you forge with Michael J. Fox? Did you both have a similar way of working?*

I don't know that we ever talked about our approach to the work. Even back then I would hire an acting coach, just to make sure each scene works well. You're scared, you want to be good in the film. But I don't know that I talked acting technique with Michael J. Fox. There was an actor on the film, Richard Jordan, who played the head of the company, and he was very well trained and a real theatre guy, and it was fun talking literature and acting with him. Same thing with Peter O'Toole on *Supergirl*. That's what I remember – it would be fun to get nourished in that more profound way while working.

*Is the Method approach meaningful to you?*

Sure.

*Are you more emotional and instinctual or more cerebral in your approach to acting? Or do you not make such distinctions?*

The acting coaches I had, like Barry Primus, Larry Moss, and Catlin Adams, worked very much from being emotionally invested. And they helped me think in terms of substitutions: Where is the character's experience in your own life? Can you relate to it? They stressed the importance of coming up with a backstory, and asking: What are the intentions of the

characters? So you infuse it with that personal, for lack of a better word, method, or Stanislavski approach to characterization.

*Do you find it difficult to shed the role at the end of a take or a shooting day?*

I don't think that was my thing as much. I never played a role that I think was that taxing. But sometimes you get really invested and it's hard to just turn that off. Especially in an emotional scene. That can be hard to let go of.

*Would you watch the dailies? Were they helpful to you?*

I never did that. I don't think I was invited to do that back then.

*I'd like to ask you about voice, which I know you have studied, and you've done voice work in animated series. As Supergirl your diction is very precise and clipped, whereas in Sticky Fingers your enunciation is much more casual...*

Yeah, New York.

*How do you approach the vocal aspect of the performance?*

It's a really good question. The way I was trained at Performing Arts High School, we learned to look at the region the character comes from, and where the story takes place – that obviously informs how the character speaks. With *Supergirl* I was working with a dialogue coach, Jenny, who was from the RSC. We would do vocal warmups and read some text, and I think the director just wanted Supergirl's voice to be sort of neutral, so that you don't quite know where she's from.

*Do you, or did you ever, read critics' reviews? Have you learned anything useful from a good or bad review?*

I *have* read reviews. But I don't think it's helpful. Any time you're giving your self-worth to somebody else on the outside, you are in tricky territory. It's so hard already for any kind of artist or writer or poet or teacher to trust what's happening interior-wise, to really trust and nourish that inner voice, to "make a hat," like in Stephen Sondheim's song "Finishing the Hat" from *Sunday in the Park with George*, my favorite musical of all time. And we want feedback from other people in that creative process, for sure, but at some point I *don't* think it's helpful to take that in.



Fig. 20. Slater and Patrick Dempsey sport retro fashions in the highly nostalgic *Happy Together*.

*Happy Together must have been a wardrobe designer's dream project. Were you hands-on when designing your character's dress and appearance?*

Yes. You have to feel comfortable in what you're wearing. I've had a few jobs where the costume department just doesn't know what they're doing – or maybe we're just not on the same page – and it can feel frustrating. And sometimes I've just had to let it go, and it never really feels great, I have to say. It's better if you can hang in there and get it right.





Fig. 21. Slater, Bette Midler, and Judge Reinhold plot against Danny DeVito's wily businessman in the popular comedy *Ruthless People*.

*Your characters in Sticky Fingers and Ruthless People go through quite drastic makeovers. Are you an actor who likes to work from the outside in?*

I think so much can happen that way. I'm a big student of clown, and I worked with Mary Conway, who I met at Shakespeare and Company [a New York-based theatre troupe]. The "outside-in" idea is also the Stella Adler approach in her school of acting – if you put on the shoes, you're going to feel a different way. So I'm a big proponent of the idea that you will feel something if you wear different kinds of clothing, for sure.



Fig. 22. A moment of tranquillity in the western adventure *City Slickers*.

*City Slickers assembled a diverse ensemble cast. What are your abiding memories of working with actors like Jack Palance and Billy Crystal?*

That was just such a fun excursion into Americana, on a horse in Santa Fe in Colorado. The whole thing was like a dream sequence. Billy Crystal is just so deeply funny. And Bruno Kirby too, who was such a good friend of my husband's and mine. An interesting thing looking back after so many years – this is something people don't talk about much – is that everybody is really bringing their own way of working to the table. Jack Palance and Billy and Bruno – it's so key to let people work the way that they want to work. So if you're someone who is a Method actor but you have somebody else for whom that approach does not work at all, you have to find that balance, so that you can have both approaches in the room without somebody feeling like they're getting their toes stepped on. How you treat your fellow actors is almost as much of an acting technique as how you're prepping for a part. There are instances where people come to set and don't have their lines memorized. And then there are other people that have worked really diligently so that they are ready to go, because they know that time is such a precious commodity, especially in television. So you have to really work to keep a warm working environment with someone who isn't really showing up ready or somebody who's impatient with another actor's approach.

*What specific challenges arise from shooting exclusively in an actual location such as Colorado in City Slickers and Texas in The Legend of Billie Jean, compared to a film that is largely or wholly set-bound such as Nowhere in Sight?*

In general, I have found there is an up side and a down side to being on location. The down side is the isolation, and that's a real thing. I used to bring a friend with me who worked as an assistant, just because if it's a three month shoot and you're there for that long a time, just having someone to go to dinner with helps assuage the loneliness. But I would say that the up side of location shooting is that it creates more of a vacuum, more of an insular experience with the cast and the crew, so you're all in this almost unrealistic, virtual community. As soon as it ends everybody leaves and you don't really see anybody again, for the most part. You have to have a strong skin. You come to feel almost nomadic. You just put your wares on your back and you go on to the next job. There's no actual settling down.

*Did the commercial and critical success of City Slickers change things for you? Did it open up any career opportunities?*

I don't think so. I don't think it led to anything.

*Why do you suppose that was?*

It's a good question. I think maybe I was "the girl" in the movie, because it really was about those three friends and their kind of Joseph Campbell myth of awakening. So yeah, I think maybe I wasn't remembered for that. But I enjoyed filming it. It was a great experience.



Fig. 23. As a vulnerable heroine in the home-invasion thriller *Nowhere in Sight* (2001).

*Nowhere in Sight*, in which you play a recently blinded woman, presented you with a demanding role, I imagine. How do you approach a role like that? Do you rely on imagination, intuition, and the “text,” or do you research the character’s physical condition and spend time with sightless people?

I went to a school in Los Angeles for blind children. I worked with somebody there, and observed the children. And I also had to take cello lessons, because at some point I play cello in that film. I had to learn how to fake it. (Laughs.) I worked with an acting coach on that film too. Just having that sense of play is probably the single most important thing as an actor. You want to have gone and observed the blind children, you want to have practiced the cello, but that sense of play and improvisation and throwing yourself in and working off the other actor is so key. Being open and available to things that come up in a scene that haven’t been rigidly pre-planned – as I get older I appreciate that so much more, although I think I *always* had that feeling, even with the coaching and the preparation, that once you’re on set

you really want to make it be spontaneous. You really can't teach that. The same goes for charisma. I've had three theatre companies and worked in live theatre in Los Angeles, and I really believe that, in terms of the give-and-take between actors, you cannot teach spontaneity.



Fig. 24. Slater displayed her comedic prowess once again in *Seeing Other People* (2003).

*You've worked extensively in television as well as in film and theatre. Does your experience with the fast shooting schedules of television help when it comes to acting in independent films such as Model Minority and Seeing Other People, in which time and money is at a premium?*

I think that's really true. In the last twenty-five years, the work happens so fast, as opposed to in my very early career where you really felt like everybody would give a lot of time to each scene. The time in the television world is like Nascar driving. I did a soap opera four years ago, and that was just crazy – there was no rehearsal even. The fastest genre is the television world. Even on the independent films I've made, the filmmaker is usually so invested in getting their "baby" off the ground that they *will* have rehearsal and they will try to take their time. But in the TV world you might have rehearsal, but it's really going crazy, crazy fast.



Fig. 25. A hero's journey: Slater's film career spans four decades to date.

*Supergirl marks its fortieth anniversary next year.*

Is that crazy? Oh my god!

*Over the years you must have run the whole gamut of emotions in terms of your feelings about the film. What is your perspective on Supergirl today?*

Honestly, I really say this from my heart, I have such gratitude toward it. It was not only like a door opening but like the whole front of the house coming down; it was like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was literally such a blast of Technicolor in my life. Living in New York City and going to Performing Arts High School was such a wild, joyful time of my life too, so it's not like I didn't have that kind of excitement before *Supergirl*. If anything, *Supergirl* was Technicolor, but it was actually also quite confining because I was training for four months and gaining 20 lbs and isolating, because I was far away from everybody I knew back home. But in terms of the opportunity it gave me, and just feeling like I could pursue acting professionally – it just changed my life so utterly. So, gratitude, I would say, looking back.

*And the film itself?*

I haven't seen it in a very long, long time. My memory of it is that it's not a great film, but I do love hearing you say that you see the Joseph Campbell monomyth in there.



Fig. 26. Slater (left) undergoes another drastic physical metamorphosis in the eccentric comedy *Sticky Fingers* (1986), co-starring Melanie Mayron.

*What are the films or performances from your career that mean the most to you personally?*

I'm very good friends with Melanie Mayron, who I starred with in *Sticky Fingers* – she wrote that film. And Catlin Adams directed it, who has coached me through movies. And I would say that *Sticky Fingers* probably stands out for me in some way, because it was the first time – I was only twenty-three – that I felt I could be myself. I was from New York like my character in the film, there was a clown quality to her, a playful quality, it was a woman's story...so that film stands out. And I did an improvised movie called *Chantilly Lace* [1993], and then *Parallel Lives* [1994], with Lyndsay Crouse, Talia Shire, Jill Eikenberry, Ally Sheedy, and Martha Plimpton. Those improvised films directed by this incredible director, Linda Yellen, gave me the same thing of feeling authentic and being able to contribute in a way that's personal – the same with *Sticky Fingers*. So those two hold a special place in my heart.

*What is on your agenda for the future?*

I went back to school and I'm doing a PhD in Mythology. I'm currently in the dissertation writing process, which is completely all-consuming. At this point it just *has* me, and I hope that when that part is finished there will either be another lane, or something else will open up acting-wise. I would love that.

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This interview took place via Zoom on 20 January 2023. Many thanks to Christopher Black for assistance.

**Gary Bettinson** is a senior lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University (UK) and author of *Superman: The Movie – The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interviews* (Intellect Press, 2018).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Joseph (2008) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato, California: New World Library.

<sup>3</sup> Hoberman, J. (1987). "What's Stranger Than Paradise?" *The Village Voice* (June 30). (Online version: October 18, 2005.) <https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/10/18/whats-stranger-than-paradise/> (Accessed 6 February 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Pirani, Adam (1985). "Jeannot Szwarc: Filming the Fantasy of *Supergirl*." *Starlog* no. 90 (January), pp.36-41.