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FILM

## Casting Herself as the Director

By MARGY ROCHLIN

LOS ANGELES

**I**N 1973, Risa Bramon Garcia turned her first nobody into a star. His name was Martin, and she didn't care that he had no acting experience. Ms. Garcia's instincts told her that he could play the kind of guy you'd want to wash right out of your hair. "It's not just that he had presence," said Ms. Garcia, who was then 16 and directing a high school production of "South Pacific." "He had a beautiful singing voice. I knew that because he used to sit behind me in history class and hum."

Now 42, Ms. Garcia still has ears and eyes for talent. Over the past 15 years she has become a top casting director in Hollywood, where it is part of her legend that she persuaded the director John Hughes to give Macaulay Culkin his first job in "Uncle Buck" and nagged Jan De Bont until he let Sandra Bullock drive the bus in "Speed."

With "200 Cigarettes," which opens on Friday, Ms. Garcia had only herself to Hector. The 94-minute romantic comedy marks her debut as a feature film director, a career consolidation that, for her, is long overdue.

"I always thought of casting as my wait-

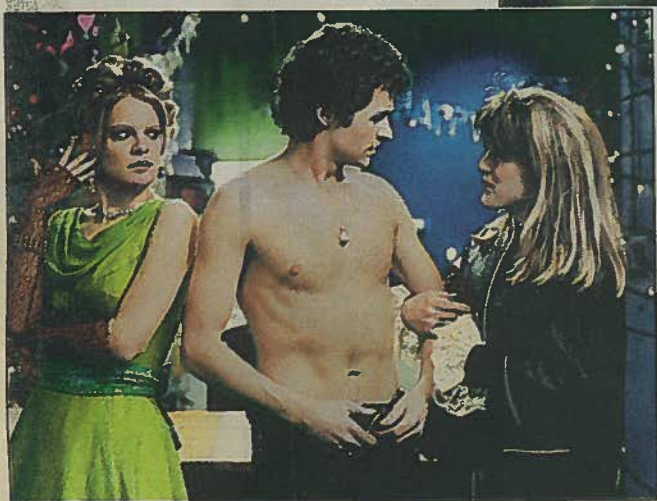
**Risa Bramon Garcia built a career finding parts for actors. Then she found her dream job, directing a film, '200 Cigarettes.'**

ressing job," said Ms. Garcia "I spent years discovering people so that everyone else could make money and become successful while I got to go home and wonder, 'How do I fulfill myself creatively?' Maybe that sounds horrifyingly selfish or self-serving, but it's really not the case. I got tired of it."

Written by Shana Larsen, "200 Cigarettes" is a comedy about young partygoers variously making their way to a downtown loft to celebrate New Year's Eve, 1981. The film opens with a couple squabbling in the back seat of a garishly decorated taxi as it whizzes by their destination. Even with eyes closed, any self-respecting teen-ager will know that the rasping voice of one passenger belongs to the rock star Courtney Love, who is following up her knowingly raunchy turn in "The People vs. Larry Flynt" by



David Lee/Paramount Pictures, left; Monica Almeida/The New York Times



Risa Bramon Garcia at home in Los Angeles. Starring in her first feature film, "200 Cigarettes," are, at left, from left, Martha Plimpton, Brian McCordie and Catherine Kellner.

playing a talkative coquette who hollers to the cabbie: "Hey! You missed St. Marks!"

Members of the video-clip generation, though, will no doubt become aware that Ms. Love appears in "200 Cigarettes" weeks

Margy Rochlin's most recent article for Arts and Leisure was about the actress Jane Horrocks.

before they pay their \$8.50. "200 Cigarettes" was produced not just by Dogstar Films and Lakeshore Entertainment but also by MTV Films, a division of MTV: Music Television, which is a unit of Viacom (the parent company of Paramount Pictures, which co-financed the project with Lakeshore Entertainment). In other words, Ms. Garcia's movie was made and will be promoted in a manner that is straight out of the vertical

integration handbook.

Formed in 1995, MTV Films develops projects that tap into the tastes of 15- to 25-year-olds. Be it a mega-hit like "Beavis and Butt-head Do America" or a blink-and-you'll-miss-it flop like "Dead Man on Campus," everything on MTV Films' slate is given the blitzkrieg promotional treatment on the MTV channel. By the time the half-hour special for the "200 Cigarettes" red-carpet premiere is shown on both MTV and its older-skewing cousin, VH-1, regular viewers will have no doubt become familiar with a pair of "200 Cigarettes" signature rock videos (by Debbie Harry and the band Harvey Danger) and committed to memory the series of 30-second "200 Cigarettes" spots combining interviews and behind-the-scenes footage.

That will help them sort out the 16 principal "200 Cigarettes" players, including Ms. Love, the teen crush-magnet Ben Affleck

and his brother, Casey, the indie favorite Christina Ricci and her real-life best friend Gaby Hoffman, Janeane Garofalo, Martha Plimpton, Paul Rudd and Goldie Hawn's 19-year-old daughter, Kate Hudson.

Few movies made in 33 wintry evenings for a paltry \$6.5 million can flaunt so much hipster star wattage. But Ms. Garcia's ability to fill up the movie theater marquee, after all, was one of MTV Films' prime incentives in agreeing to take a chance on the fledgling filmmaker.

"Risa's passion for the material attracted us to her," said Van Toffler, MTV Films' executive vice president. "The other thing was her relationship to the talent. She's given a lot of people their first jobs. And through her relationships she could just call them up and say, 'Hey, I need you for a couple of days on '200 Cigarettes.'" On a side note, Mr. Toffler admitted to doing

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some casting of his own, talking the singer Elvis Costello into putting in a cameo appearance in "200 Cigarettes" and serving as musical consultant. "I think it's called begging," Mr. Toffler said.

With so much riding on her connections, Ms. Garcia went about structuring a star-seducing production schedule that kept no performer from more lucrative commitments for more than two and a half weeks. ("A revolving door of actors, coming in and doing their bit and leaving," is how she described it.) But all the preparation in the world couldn't guarantee that things would go smoothly. "Brutal," Ms. Garcia said about the reception she received to her first official offer: she had wanted Jenna Elfman, of the sitcom "Dharma and Greg," to be Cindy, the chaste sweetheart of "200 Cigarettes." "Her manager said, 'She only wants to work with A-list directors and do leads in movies now,'" Ms. Garcia said.

But most of Ms. Garcia's favor calls paid off, and last March she and her husband of 10 years, the film executive René Garcia, packed up their two children, Sam, then 20 months, and Gracie, who was barely 10 months old, and moved from their sprawling home in the hills of the San Fernando Valley to a two-story brownstone on the Upper West Side. The next thing she knew, Ms. Garcia was on location at the Ace Bar on East Fifth Street in the wee hours of the morning, standing behind the camera, cajoling Ben Affleck into improvising self-mocking soliloquies for scale wages.

"With every take, Ben would say: 'Risa! Please! Say 'cut' already! I'm making such a fool of myself,'" Ms. Garcia said, laughing. To directors like Jan De Bont, it is no news that Ms. Garcia got Mr. Affleck to throw himself into his part as an oafish bartender. Having often employed her during her casting-director days, Mr. De Bont knew what Ms. Garcia could do with even an unknown quaking before her at an open cattle call audition.

"She'd pull things out of them that they'd never do for me; she has this uncanny way of playing with actors, getting them to open up," said Mr. De Bont, who recalled how Ms. Garcia would spend her down time hanging around the sets of his action thrillers, quizzing everyone on the crew about the technical end of making movies.

Of course, everyone on the block where Ms. Garcia grew up in Montreal could tell you that she behaved like a hot-ticket director from a very early age. The daughter of a print shop owner, George Bramon, and his wife, Sarah, Ms. Garcia was known for staging plays in her garage, and

charging admission. "My mother would get these calls from other mothers saying, 'Risa is taking all of our kids' money,'" said Ms. Garcia, who added that she was "never interested in being in the one in the limelight." "It has always made sense for this to be my job."

At age 21, after graduating from York University in Toronto with a degree in drama, Ms. Garcia moved to Weehawken, N.J. She held every labor-of-love position at Manhattan's Ensemble Studio Theater — including answering the phones. From the early to mid-80's she produced the company's annual marathon of one-act plays and worked with writers like David Mamet, Christopher Durang and John Patrick Shanley. But it didn't pay the rent. In 1983 she decided to quit waiting tables to make ends meet and figured out another way to subsidize her love for directing.

"We already knew all the actors," Ms. Garcia reasoned when she and Billy Hopkins, another Ensemble

## Finding herself

### cajoling Ben Affleck

#### at the Ace Bar.

Studio member, resolved to give the casting business a try. "People were always telling us, 'You can make a living at this.' And I thought, 'You know what? They're right.'" Their maiden assignment was Susan Seidelman's 1984 comedy, "Desperately Seeking Susan," the coup of which was picking a New York club diva named Madonna to expertly play, well, herself.

Early on in "200 Cigarettes," a young blond ingenue makes her entrance wearing a demure all-pink outfit and an expression of guileless uncertainty. For a few moments, she simply darts between her apartment building doorway and a taxi idling curbside and then back again. The actress, Kate Hudson, isn't as instantly identifiable as Ms. Garcia's first choice for the part, Ms. Elfman (or, for that matter, most of her "200 Cigarettes" co-stars). But there is something winning about how Ms. Hudson sails through this bit of daffy business, managing to evoke her mother, Goldie Hawn, yet also seem nothing like her at all.

"Kate's getting discovered from this movie — and I love that," said Ms. Garcia, who can recall every detail about Ms. Hudson's audition. "I swear to God, after she said three words, I knew she was exactly right." Can she explain what it felt like to know that she was the director who would benefit from precision casting?

"Delicious," Ms. Garcia replied. □