



Down Memory Lane: Hurt and Schrader perusing a family album.

From the Midwest to Broadway, Hollywood and Chappaqua

*Mary Beth Hurt and Paul Schrader
Make New Castle Home*

BY LISA ST. JOHN PHOTOS BY LYNDA SHENKMAN CURTIS

Their historic 1896 landmark house “doesn’t have a straight line in it,” and was a haven during World War II for returning soldiers who needed shelter. A whimsical life-size plastic snowman in the yard welcomes guests to a front porch with an old-

fashioned swing. Sunlight streams across the airy, remodeled plant-filled kitchen, complete with a kitchen table purchased from an Indiana state prison. Puzzle pieces cover the family room’s copper-topped coffee table. Almost 20 years

after an accidental drive brought them here, Mary Beth Hurt and Paul Schrader choose to live an unassuming life in Chappaqua.

In 1986, the couple, who had met and married in 1983, went in search of a summer home within a 75-mile radius of Manhattan, driving “until it didn’t look totally suburban” and ending up in Chappaqua. “It was fortuitous,” Hurt said, “because we had no idea that the schools here were first rate.” In 1997 their summer residence became a permanent one. “There were too many buildings” in New York, Hurt said, “and we wanted to open the back door and let the kids run free.”

When Schrader, a multifaceted artist known for the risks he has taken as a writer, director and producer, is not on location, he travels daily to his Manhattan office like many Chappaqua residents. And when Hurt is not working on a film, television or theater project, she devotes her energies to the couple’s two children, Molly (20) and Sam (16), and volunteers with the Chappaqua Ambulance Corps. They

enjoy Chappaqua's "striking distance" from New York, its fine local restaurants and the beauty of the landscape despite what they call the "boutiquization" of Westchester.

While their careers have taken them all over the world, this powerhouse duo has managed to balance the joys of suburbia with the demands of their crafts.

Hurt's Journey: From Fields to Stage and Screen

Both Schrader and Hurt hail from the Midwest but had very different childhoods. Hurt, born in Marshalltown, Iowa, rode her bicycle over rolling hills, alongside railroad tracks and past streams and quarries, recalling that all that space allowed "a freedom of thought and imagination because there was not as much input." A quiet child with a vivid imagination, Hurt organized and put on plays for the neighborhood. "I had an innate interest in acting," she said, and by age 14 had realized that performing was her chosen path. Despite her two sisters' regularly making fun of her dream, she often pretended to be deaf or blind or walk with a limp. She worked in summer stock productions for \$10 a week, "thrilled to be doing something I was good at, and the applause was better than money."

Hurt graduated from the University of Iowa in 1968 with a degree in secondary education, speech and theater. Despite her family's concerns about her chosen career and living in "notorious" New York City, her mother and sister accompanied Hurt to Chicago where she auditioned (with a thousand other hopefuls) for 22 theater/drama spots at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She was accepted, and in her third year received a full scholarship. "I knew I was good," she said. After college she married the then-unknown actor William Hurt, and they briefly lived in London.

Upon returning to New York, Hurt worked as a saleswoman while combing "Backstage" for open auditions. She was cast in "More Than You Deserve" at the Public Theater as an elderly Vietnamese man. In summer 1974 she appeared in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in Central Park and then *Crimes of The Heart* on Broadway, for which she

won an Obie Award. She was nominated for a Tony Award for her 1976 work in the New York Shakespeare Festival's *Trelawney of the Wells*, which also featured Meryl Streep, John Lithgow, Michael Tucker and Mandy Patinkin. She also acted in more than two dozen films, including *Interiors*, *The World According to Garp*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Affliction*, *Bringing out the Dead*, *Autumn in New York*, *Family Man* and *Red Dragon*, and has made numerous television appearances.

"The best parts about acting are the rehearsals," she said, "because of the camaraderie, creativity, and being a team player." Recalling the joys of the collaborative process, she said that "you can lean on anyone."

Similar Beginnings, Different Path

Schrader would also eventually land in New York City, but only after attending a Christian college in his hometown and then heading west. Born in 1946 to devoutly religious Dutch and German parents, Schrader grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and was forbidden from movies, dancing and even frivolous play. "As a kid I went preaching" and sold flowers door to door, Schrader said, describing early creative outlets. As a seminary major at Calvin

College in Grand Rapids, Schrader was co-editor of the college newspaper and created the Calvin Film Council, for which he convinced professors to speak before and after screenings to like-minded students. In his autobiography *Schrader on Schrader*, he writes that "advocating movies was a way to be simultaneously an artist and a rebel."

Schrader recalled that the impulse for written expression was ignited and stoked by passion for film. European cinema of the 1960s captured Schrader's imagination; his book *Transcendental Style in Film*, still influential among students of cinema, paid tribute to European directors like Ozu, Bresson and Dryer, who were among his earliest and most important influences.

With his perspective on religion shifting, and amid the 1960s counterculture movement, Schrader's career objective transitioned from minister to lawyer to journalist, all amenable to his admitted penchant for soapbox preaching. "Everything grew out of an urge—a need, really—to make contact and communicate," he said. Schrader travelled to New York in the summer of 1967 to take an introductory film history class at Columbia University. A fortuitous conversation in a bar led to an introduction to the film critic Pauline Kael, with whom he devel-



oped a profound, lifelong relationship and who became an influential mentor. Kael told him, "You don't want to become a minister; you want to become a film critic."

After graduating from college, Schrader attended the well-regarded graduate film program at UCLA, the American Film Institute and freelanced at the magazine *Cinema*. Kael then helped him become a film critic at the *Los Angeles Times*.

During a "very rough patch" in 1972 when Schrader's first marriage and health fell apart, he also sold his first screenplay, a Japanese thriller titled *The Yakuza* co-written with his brother Leonard. The two also co-wrote the screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, which Martin Scorsese would direct to critical acclaim in 1975 in the first of their four collaborations. Of *Taxi Driver*, Schrader said, "I created a fantasy to relieve myself of pressures and take away the pain so I didn't become the character Travis Bickle." Schrader and his brother earned the then-record sum of \$325,000 for *Taxi Driver*, launching his career as one of Hollywood's top screenwriters and leading to his direction of films like *Cat People* and *Blind Date*.

Schrader went on to write and/or direct films such as *Blue Collar*, *Hardcore*, *Old Boyfriends*, *American Gigolo* and *Raging Bull*. Schrader's other notable films include *Light of Day*, *Patty Hearst*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *Light Sleeper*, *Witch Hunt*, *City Hall*, *Touch*, *Affliction*, *Auto Focus* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The rigid sensibilities of his religious upbringing come through in many of his films, in which lost and downtrodden characters face cruel situations and suffer brutal breakdowns.

Schrader won the Writers Guild of America Laurel Award of Achievement in 1999, given to the member who has "advanced the literature of the motion picture through the years and who has made outstanding contributions to the profession of the screen writer."

A Fortuitous Business Meeting

In 1983, after Hurt's marriage had ended, a publicist with whom she had worked asked Hurt if she would discuss her childhood with a director—Schrader—who was new in

town and was writing a film about a Midwestern girl. While suspicious of meeting at a restaurant rather than at an office, Hurt was swayed when Schrader called her directly and gave her his number, which no director had ever done.

At that initial meeting, Hurt recalls starting to "talk shop" and discuss her career and Schrader seeming "non-interested" in business. Rather, they scheduled a "real" date for Halloween to see the play *Greater Than Tuna*, and found that they were laughing at the same moments.

Hurt and Schrader married later that year. Their daughter Molly was born in 1984 in Tokyo, where Schrader was directing *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, co-written with his brother. In 1988, the couple adopted Samuel (coincidentally born in the Midwest, with his new parents and sister in the room), and the family returned to Manhattan.

It was not a bad time to start a family, Hurt recalls, as she was in the "dead zone" for an actress when there are fewer roles available. At 37, with a four-year-old and a newborn, Hurt mothered more and worked less and resolved never to be away from her kids for more than two weeks at a time or to leave them without at least one parent at home. Their subsequent move to

Chappaqua, with its proximity to New York City, enabled Hurt and Schrader to achieve that goal.

Maintaining Balance/ Respecting Choices

Going forward, Hurt wants to maintain their balance of work and family. Hurt calls her spouse "brilliant;" he, in turn, says he loves "smart, independent actresses like my wife, who play smart characters." They refrain from critiquing each other's work; if either of them feels drawn to an idea, part or project, the other does not have the right to interfere.

In addition to her already-impressive body of work, Hurt will be appearing in *Lady in The Water*, a soon-to-be-released fantasy from M. Night Shyamalan. And Schrader's reputation as "fearless" landed him the job of directing "Adam Resurrected," filming this fall, based on a novel written by Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk about a mental institution for concentration camp survivors.

Schrader remains intrigued by characters that others do not care about. Hurt says that he doesn't hear the word "no;" "I still get invigorated when something doesn't seem possible," Schrader said.

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