

# Mum's the

When Hannah Davis asked her mother, Jean Boht, to appear in her debut film, she didn't realise it would all end in tears. Interview by Andrew Wilson

**H**annah Davis, the daughter of composer Carl Davis and actress Jean Boht, was 11 when Richard Gere walked into the sitting room of her home in Barnes, southwest London. 'Me and my friend Leo were dancing in front of the telly to *Top of the Pops* and suddenly he came into the room,' says Davis, now 33. 'I was so madly in love with him at the time and I couldn't believe it. He came over to discuss the music for the film *King David* with Dad. He said to us, "You're really cute," and I just melted into a puddle.'

She remembers Paul McCartney and Mike Leigh popping around for tea with her father, while the breakfast table seemed to consist of the entire cast of *Bread*, the Eighties' TV sitcom starring her mother as the dominating matriarch Nellie Boswell. 'They all treated my mother like their real mum and, at times, with us all sitting around that table, it did seem like the real-life *Bread*,' she says. 'Talk about living the characters—it was hilarious.'

What with her family's starry connections and her first-rate training—she studied method acting at the famous Neighborhood Playhouse in New York—Davis assumed that it was only a matter of time before she too would be blessed with success. But after small parts in Mike Leigh's *Secret and Lies* and ITV's *The Bill*, she watched her career falter before her eyes.

'You sit there and wait for the phone to ring and in the meantime you do a variety of jobs,' says Davis. 'I took parts in murder mysteries for corporate functions in hotels, sold sandwiches and dresses, and did waitressing and bar work. Finally, about three years ago, I thought either I'm going to sit around and wait for the next yoghurt commercial or I can do something about it.'

What Davis did next could be interpreted as either ridiculously foolhardy or astonishingly brave. Together with her husband, actor David Connolly, 36, she wrote a film script. *Mothers and Daughters* is the story of two sets of sisters and their relationships with their mothers, and after completing the script the couple then proceeded to produce and direct the film. The black comedy—in



# word...



One minute it's fire and brimstone, the next it's love. That's just the way it is with mothers and daughters

which Davis, Connolly and Jean Boht also star—hit the headlines at the Cannes Film Festival last year when they revealed they financed the film by borrowing £6,000 on two of their credit cards. 'The cost of someone's wig in Hollywood,' quips Davis.

'I didn't want to pursue funding because I knew it would take years to get the money together by which point the spark would have gone,' she says. 'I thought, even if it's nothing more than the sum of my two credit cards I am going to do this. Of course we had no money, but in a way it didn't matter. I was just so determined to do it. The actors weren't

Family drama: Hannah Davis, (top) with her mother, Jean Boht, who stars in Davis's film, *Mothers and Daughters*

getting paid, so the cast kept disappearing off when they had to do paying work. Dave and I carried on doing ludicrous jobs, flogging sandwiches or whatever, just to earn money to buy a little more film stock.'

As there was no budget for locations, Davis used her own flat in west London for the dinner-party scenes, while her parents' house doubled as a swanky office. She borrowed camera equipment from Patrick Turley, the husband of Nerys Hughes, and their son Ben. Hughes also makes a brief appearance in the film with her daughter, Mari-Claire.

The initial edit was done in the front room of Ben's house, while Carl Davis—famous for his music for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Pride and Prejudice*—wrote the score for the film. Does she not think this smacks too much of nepotism?

'Too right,' she jokes. 'But I've worked my backside off for this film. I can tell you that if I had any kind of lazy bone in my body I would have been saying, "Forget it, I want to go home." Even with my splendid connections I didn't get a penny [from any funding body]. I really did put it all on two credit cards.'

The hardest moments for Davis were the scenes in which she had to direct her mother as Mary, a woman with Alzheimer's. Mary is, by turns, confused, angry, childlike and cruel, and Boht gives a powerful performance, one which is at times almost too painful to watch.

'She gave us something so special,' says Davis. 'Of course, we set up the environment for her performance, but she was phenomenal. By the end of the final scene, which we did in one take, I was blubbing. It was really upsetting, but mum was like, "Oh, darling, it's only acting, don't be so ridiculous." I had to keep saying to myself, that's not my mum, she's only acting, because she was just so convincing.'

The experience of *Mothers and Daughters* has, inevitably, made her think about her own attitude towards parenthood. Her sister, Jessie, 30, has two children, but Davis wants to delay motherhood for a few years.

'In some ways *Mothers and Daughters* was like our child, because it was all-consuming,' she says. 'Now we're at this stage where we're looking after this child that Dave and I have created.'

'The film does force you to think about the complex relationships between mothers and their daughters. One critic said that every man should see the film as it will show them just what's going on. One minute it's fire and brimstone—the next it's love.'

'That's just the way it is.' ■  
*'Mothers and Daughters' will be released in the UK and the US later this year.*

# Carry on camping for the Cannes cast on a family budget

Debut British director relies on relatives, reports Hugh Davies

A YEAR after Helen Mirren and Julie Walters ran through the surf on the palm-lined Croisette at Cannes to start the buzz that turned *Calendar Girls* into a worldwide hit, Hannah Davis frolicked on the same stretch of sand with her family yesterday.

The dream of the 32-year-old Chelsea girl, trained in New York in The Method style of acting, was that similar magic might happen with the premiere last night of the black comedy *Mothers & Daughters*, her first feature film, which she has written, produced and directed.

With her on the beach were her husband David Connolly, 35, who plays a randy vicar (his father is Canon of Ely, Cambridgeshire), and her father, Carl Davis, the composer.

All eyes, though, were on her mother, Jean Bolt, who gave Hannah's hand an extra tight squeeze, knowing the perils that lie ahead.

Bolt, an actress who started at Liverpool Playhouse with Lynda La Plante – the film's executive producer – earning £1 a week, is best known for her part as Nellie Boswell in the Eighties television series *Brenda*.

She recalled: "Nellie was left by her husband, a dreamer, poet and local hitman, and had to bring up five kids. I dominated, and, you might say, ruined their lives."

"In Hannah's film, my role could be construed as an extension of what may happen to the character, as I act the part of a strong-willed mother who is stricken with Alzheimer's Disease."

"It was hard being directed by my daughter. I was frightened. I didn't want to let her down. I was also the catering manager. But Hannah has that understanding about people, and she made it very comfortable for me."

Hannah and her family had just arrived from the campsite, outside

Cannes where they are renting mobile homes with the cast to save money. Her father noted: "It's a very low budget film!"

Connolly explained that he and his wife had used their credit cards and remortgaged their flat to make the £100,000 film. He said: "We were looking for hotels here, and found that to stay a single night in one was as much as the film's whole budget. So we opted to camp."

Hannah, who acted in *Secrets & Lies*, said the film came about because of her relationship with her mother. "Mum and I had this fraught Christmas. We'd had a good old snipe at each other. It made me

**6 We were looking for hotels and found that to stay a night in one was as much as the film's whole budget 9**

think about motherhood in a certain way, and that everyone's relationship with their mother is different.

"I thought that that theme had actually not been explored properly. There never has been a real mother and daughter film. So I put an ad on the internet, and it went from there."

Hannah wanted her mother in the film, as they had played mother and daughter in a touring version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Hannah said: "About 200 people answered my ad. I was working in the King's Road, selling frocks at the time. I gave that up and sat on my sofa to write a screenplay."

Her husband said: "I was acting

in what they said was the worst play in the West End, so I was available." They put the film together, with a theme of a therapist counselling others about their mothers, but having a strained relationship with her ailing matriarchal mother.

Connolly said: "We had a big wall-chart to work out how to link every actor. We said, 'What if a lesbian character gets off with a vicar's wife, and that will send the vicar mad – and what happens when the vicar meets a supermodel?' We went to Paris and wrote it in a hotel."

Nerys Hughes, who acted in the BBC series *The Liver Birds*, is a friend of Bolt. Hughes said: "My daughter, Mari-Clair, and I do a film scene in the film. My son, Ben, was the cameraman, which was terrific."

Carl Davis, noted for his *World at War* theme and the music for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, wrote the score for Hannah. It was done in less than a week. "Hannah rang me up in a hotel. I was in Holland conducting for the Lon Chaney film of *Phantom of the Opera*."

"She said, 'Dad, we need a score. Can you do one?' There was a bit of a panic as this was in February, just as the film was being given a screening in Los Angeles. I said, 'I've been waiting for this call. When do you need it?' She said, 'Well, tomorrow.' I said, 'What about a week?'"

"I had to finish my gig in Rotterdam, go immediately to Manchester to conduct the Hallé. I wrote the score, played it on the piano to Hannah, and we recorded it in a tiny studio in Maidenhead, with three fabulous string players and principals from all the London orchestras. They dubbed it on the film the Monday night, and it went to LA on the Wednesday."

"It's all been quite astonishing. I dashed in from Prague, yesterday morning, where I've been recording. Now I'm in my first mobile home."



## HANNAH DAVIS

# UK star plays happy families

*GEOFFREY MACNAB discovers how her own famous family helped the debut director get her movie off the ground*

Hannah Davis is well-connected. The British actress and director is the daughter of composer Carl Davis and UK sitcom actress Jean Boht (*Bread*,



pictured); and Lynda LaPlante, one of the UK's most acclaimed TV writers, is a close family friend.

Even so, when she was making her debut feature, *Mothers And Daughters* (on Bill Gavin's Cannes slate), she still had to re-mortgage her house and rack up huge bills on her credit cards.

Davis cast the film in a novel way, posting ads on various internet casting sites and waiting for the response. They were not long in coming. There were over 200 respondents, and she saw them all.

"Tell me about your mother," was Davis' first instruction to the world-be actors. She and her co-writer David Connolly (who is also her husband) would then ask the actors to improvise. Once they'd settled on the characters they wanted to appear in the film, they wrote the script around them.

*Mothers And Daughters* was shot on digital and edited on a home computer; LaPlante's Cougar Films helped with the post-production, and Davis enlisted her father to write a score — in under three days.

The film is set in London. Though it is not directly autobiographical, Davis acknowledges that it reflects her own experiences. "I'm definitely middle class and I've made a middle class film, [exploring the] Fulham dinner party society — the whole nightmare of that society which is so shrouded, where everybody keeps the lid on," she says. "I liked the idea of exploding that and seeing what happens when you take the veneer off."