



In her new film,
HELEN HUNT plays a
sex surrogate who
transforms a paralysed
man's life. As she tells
Elaine Lipworth, she
overcame her
inhibitions because she
wanted to be part of
such a beautiful story

Photographs JEFF LIPSKY

‘BEING

IT could only happen in Los Angeles. Actress Helen Hunt orders a hamburger and chips at the Pacific Palisades restaurant where we're having lunch and the waiter delivers the burger minus the bun, assuming that the svelte Oscar-winning star adheres to the rigid, carb-free diet that the majority of her Californian contemporaries follow. Helen looks at her plate in mock disappointment. 'Do I get a bun? I really want the bun – and the fries please,' she says to the waiter, then turns to me and laughs. 'They probably saw me walk through the door and thought, "She's an actress," and threw the bun in the bin,' she says, ordering a glass of sauvignon blanc and breaking another sacred Hollywood rule: no drinking at lunchtime.

Helen isn't in the least bit actressy and has rushed to our interview after a morning volunteering in her eight-year-old daughter Makena Lei's classroom. She is wearing jeans, a brown jumper and flip-flops. Her straight blonde hair is long and loose. Halfway through lunch, she peels off her jumper to reveal a grey tank top and well-toned arms. 'If you ran into me 360 days a year, you would be writing the same thing about what I'm wearing,' she smiles. At 49, Helen is naturally beautiful, which sets her apart from the frozen-faced ladies who lunch in this affluent neighbourhood. Her unmade-up face is mobile; her eyes crinkle when she smiles. In short, this is a woman at ease with herself.

But no matter how self-possessed, Helen had to steel herself to take on her role in *The Sessions*. Set during the 1980s in Berkeley, California, the film is based on the true story of journalist and poet Mark O'Brien who was paralysed with polio, and confined for hours every day to an iron lung. Aged

38, Mark (played by John Hawkes) decided he wanted to experience sex for the first time (he'd lost mobility but not sensation) and hired a sex surrogate, Cheryl Cohen Greene (played by Helen), to help him lose his virginity.

The actress spends much of her screen time 'utterly naked. My jaw dropped at the prospect,' she says. 'But then I thought, "Do I care about what people think of my body or do I care about being part of a story that is beautiful?" At the end of the day I cared more about that.'

Did she cut out the hamburger buns after landing the role? 'I got the part two weeks before we started filming, which luckily took off the table some pathetic attempt at changing my 49-year-old body,' she laughs. 'I knew that dieting was not going to be my answer anyway because this is the body of someone who has had children, the body God gave me, so to do some horrible punishing regimen... NO,' says Helen.

Helen's partner – and Makena Lei's father – is writer/producer Matthew Carnahan (who created the new TV series *House of Lies*). What was his reaction when he saw her in the film? 'He thought I was beautiful, so that was all I needed to hear.'

Directed by filmmaker Ben Lewin, who himself suffered from polio as a child, the film is immensely touching, but there are also hilarious moments. Mark consults his Roman Catholic priest before embarking on the sessions. 'I know in my heart that God will give you a free pass on this one – go for it,' reassures the open-minded Father Brendan, played by William H Macy. As Helen says, 'Everybody thinks the film is going to be like some kind of good medicine, but the truth is it's a pleasurable ride and very funny.'

Preparing for the role, Helen spent time with Cheryl. 'She has a frank way of talking about everything, whether it is an orgasm or what

she is making for dinner. There are none of the self-conscious jokes that we all make about sex: the giggles and euphemisms.' The difference between a surrogate and a prostitute? 'Cheryl, who is still working (and married) said a prostitute is hoping you will want to see her again and again, and a sex surrogate says you actually can't. They limit the sessions so that the goal is about the client's future.' After his sessions, Mark went on to have a fulfilling relationship with writer Susan Fernbach until his death in 1999 aged 49.

Helen's performance has been described by US critics as her best so far. Raised in New York by her director father Gordon and mother Jane, a photographer, the family moved to Los Angeles when Helen was nine. Appearing on television shows such as *The Bionic Woman*, it wasn't until the 90s that she landed her breakthrough role in the hit US sitcom *Mad About You*. She proceeded to carve out a solid screen career and proved to be more than a match for Jack Nicholson in *As Good As It Gets* in 1997, which led to her Best Actress Oscar. In 2000 she starred opposite Mel Gibson in *What Women Want* and in *Cast Away* with Tom Hanks.

Following a brief marriage to actor Hank Azaria (they split up in 2000), Helen has been with Matthew for over a decade, and is stepmother to his teenage son Emmett. Since Makena Lei's birth in 2004, she has spent more time at home with the family than on film sets, other than a handful of roles including *Bobby*, about the assassination of Robert F Kennedy.

In 2007 Helen co-wrote, directed and starred in the well-reviewed drama *Then She Found Me* and she has just written another screenplay she describes as 'an empty-nest story about an unhinged woman who follows her 20-year-old ➤

BEING NAKED WAS NERVE-RACKING

◀ son when he is about to leave home and break away. I've got a long time to go before I have to deal with that, but I can't imagine my daughter leaving home. I just have to stay healthy for her because I had her later in life. I want to be around for her!

Being naked is nerve-racking because you can always think of some way in which your body should be different. But *The Sessions* is a story about vulnerability. My job [as Cheryl] is to let Mark see that I'm totally OK with his disabilities. When people watch the film they think: 'Oh, we're going to see Helen Hunt naked.' Well, by the time I come on screen, they're terrified I'm going to get undressed, they're not titillated, because they know that this woman is going to make a move on this man who is so courageous. They are thinking how Mark has taken such a big risk, rather than, 'Oh, there are two actors with their private parts showing.'

There is nothing erotic about the sex scenes.

It is just me trying to get John's shirt off because his character couldn't move his arm which was stiff [from the polio]. I'm thinking, 'Am I going to be able to do this physically? What if I can't get the shirt off?' I can't tell you how challenging it was. Just like real sex, it very quickly came down to the not-so-sexy nuts and bolts of how do you get two bodies close to each other, especially if only one of them can move? The crew went out of their way to give us our privacy. We only had five or six people in the room and they were doing most of their work looking away.

The Sessions is a movie about sex. I don't think it is a movie about love. That's what makes it so unique. Mark says to Cheryl, 'I feel like I'm behind a pane of glass and everyone on the other side is getting to eat at a banquet that I will never taste.' That's how he felt, so sex was important to him. In this movie, two people come together to serve the needs of one of them. I have not seen that in a movie before.

Sex seems like it's a pretty fundamental part of life. Some people as they get older choose not to play any more and I don't really know about that because I'm not at that moment in my life. I guess it is important. We all talk about it a lot.

In the 80s I had a moment of thinking, 'Ugh, should I be thinner? How do I look in these trousers?' There were times I thought, 'To hell with trying on the bathing suit,' when I and all the other 20-year-old actresses were auditioning for everything. But that's a dangerous neighbourhood to get into and one day I just resigned from it. I said,



Helen with co-star John Hawkes in *The Sessions*

'I don't care what size I'm going to be.' Your life could be devoted to some version of hell and I was not willing to live in hell, so I just bailed out of exercising for the sake of exercising – and out of any kind of dieting. I only do exercise that I love [yoga] and eat food that I love. I'm afraid to even talk about it in case it all crashes in on me and I start worrying about it again.

I don't have time to get dressed up and I don't care. I get up at 5.45 in the morning. I feed the dog, feed the cat, make breakfast, make lunch for my daughter and then we do half an hour of piano practice together and half an hour of reading. I drop her off at school, write a little bit, have a meeting and go to yoga. So when would I have the time to put on a skirt and a matching blouse? That's just not happening.

Part of me wishes that I'd started having children earlier and had four of them. But that's not the reality. I had to fight like a wild animal to get pregnant with my daughter; I went through a lot of rigorous fertility stuff. I think I have more appreciation of motherhood having had my daughter later. But the upside is that I'm a better person now than I was when I was 20-something. I'm not perfectly patient all the time, but I don't say, 'Ugh, I've got to pick up my kid at three o'clock.' The fact that I get to pick up my daughter is great – it's rare that I roll my eyes.

I feel lucky to have a beautiful family. I love all those simple Sunday trips going to a farmers' market, getting burritos and sitting on the grass eating. I love Sunday dinners with my father and his wife. These things are not really that exciting, but they have a lot of meaning for me, and I'm assuming they mean a lot to our children too.

Being a stepmum is kind of calculus parenting, as in more complicated parenting. With my daughter I do my best to figure out what's right for her. With my stepson I like to think of myself in some fairy-godmother position; I'm just

hovering around, wishing him and everyone in the family well and chiming in when I'm asked. He's very lucky that he has four great parents.

I had a pretty normal upbringing. I wasn't on a TV series that took me out of school; I would just leave for a month here and there. It was fun and it wasn't completely insane because I went to a regular school and had normal friends. I grew up in an artistic community in New York, so we often went to museums and to the theatre. I went to an acting class because my aunt was in one and I enjoyed it; the next thing you know I had an agent.

I was bitten by acting. I put in 20,000 hours of acting classes and improvisation, Shakespeare workshops and productions of obscure plays as a kid because I loved theatre. And it worked out well for me. But there are brilliant actors, including John Hawkes, who never had any formal acting training. Some people don't need to put in all that time.

The Oscar does not make it easier to get good roles as a woman. Great parts don't grow on trees. When you find a film like *The Sessions* you have to grab it. I have some resistance to saying it's hard for women in Hollywood, because that's depressing, but also because there aren't a lot of great soulful parts written for men either. But things are supposed to wax and wane, that's how life works. I had a daughter and I found it incredibly compelling to be some version of a stay-at-home mother. It's not as simple as saying that I've turned down brilliant parts for her. If I'd got the best part in the world that meant shooting for four months in Prague, I'm not sure what I would have done. I never felt like one of those mums you hear about who throw their children on the plane with them and off they go.

My 22-year-old goddaughter [her friend's daughter] is sort of my third kid. I have made her my Executive In Charge of Twitter. I like to tweet and I secretly get a little help from her. I would not say I'm a dynamic tweeter; I was not on the ground in Egypt covering the changing regime, for example – I do it for fun. I tweet about travelling and I had a pro-Obama tweet before the election.

I'm looking forward to being 50 and a day and seeing that the world didn't fall apart. That'll be nice. I don't know what it's going to be like, but life's really good and I've got this beautiful movie so I feel hopeful in terms of my creative future. I would love it if nobody knew how old I am, but those days are gone. Plastic surgery? I'm not going to say never, but I don't think so. I think I may have had enough needles poking me when I had my fertility treatment to last a lifetime. But you never know. **Y**
The Sessions will be in cinemas on 18 January