

"Kim Darby's True Grit"

by Wayne Warga

WEST, Los Angeles Times Oct. 5, 1969

Her parents danced her out of her life. She didn't have many friends. Then came security, with a Canyon home, a baby named Heather and Jackie Gleason's old dressing room.

Said a clutch of canny *cognoscenti* after the first Hollywood screening of *True Grit*.

"The kid's great. Adler must have taught her."

"Looks more like the Strasberg technique to me," said another.

"There wasn't one contraction in her speech. Just like in the book. Enough to drive any actress nuts."

It is of special, vast amusement - expressed with a gentle, elfish chuckle - to Kim Darby that she sneaked in one "don't" and one "can't" while dubbing in her otherwise contractionless (272 times by rough count) and impossible role as Mattie Ross, the cast iron girl hell bent for revenge and full of grit, guts and grace.

"When I first saw the script I said 'Oh my God, I can't do this. Who possible could?' So I removed contractions from my everyday speech to make it seem at least slightly normal. Finally, I just stopped thinking. I'd turn around and say the lines, like: 'I do not think much of Texas ponies. They are small and chicken brained.' The urge to say 'I don't' and 'They're' was unbearable. So was the urge to run away and hide forever."

Alas, *cognoscenti* can be provincial people. They assume anyone who can act must have come from New York, dropped onto the screen like a ripe apple from the prolific talent trees of Lee Strasberg or Stella Adler. The where from of Kim Darby, who is just 22, is therefore a bit cultural and ontological shock:

"I'm from North Hollywood. I learned about films at the El Portal theater. My favorite film was *The Miracle Worker*. I was 17 and I thought it was fantastic, that Arthur Penn was a genius. That's when I decided to become an actress. Several years later, I did a television show directed by him. I was scared to death to meet him; I was still a 17-year-old standing awe-struck in the lobby of the El Portal, knowing I had to go home to dinner but wanting to stay and see the whole thing again."

She was Derby Zerby then, a slightly plump kid who didn't have too many friends at Van Nuys High School. So she took her dreams to the Desilu Workshop where Tony Barr was teaching. Twice each week, three hours a session until she got out of high school, she went to class. She also purloined the name Kim from the most popular girl at school and put an 'a' in place of the 'e' in Derby. Then she shed all excess weight.

"Now I wouldn't go to an acting class for anything. To sit in front of a bunch of actors talking about who got what role, who's doing what, is something I absolutely will not do. I like being with one or two people at a time. I cannot function at a big sit-down dinner. They scare the hell out of me. I want to hell H-E-L-P."

And she does just that, sitting out front under a big tree by her new home in Coldwater Canyon. One loud yell, so uncharacteristic of this gentle, soft-spoken young woman, that suddenly Bimbo, a poulie-poodle mix, rushes aggressively out of the house, barking to her rescue. Next comes Mimi, her red-haired "nanny, planter, cook, Mother earth," who is carrying Heather, Kim's one-year-old daughter. Kim calms everyone then settles back under the tree. She is delicate, admittedly strong, pretty without make-up and casual in cords and a T-shirt.

"It's all happened so fast that I want to go sit under a tree somewhere and sort it all out. I have to do things that really need me. It's all very scary, very psychological. It isn't even a year ago that I did *True Grit*, then *Generation*. Now, *Norwood*. Before *Grit*, I'd just had my baby, gone through a divorce. Now I've got to get a perspective. I would like to go to England and buy a farm to always have. I do like it here, this is my home, but I want more land and I like the weather in England."

"Before *Grit* I must have done 30 guest spots on television. I sometimes still want to do one - take a tiny role because it's good. If I were in England I would; but here, no. Maybe it has to do with the town and the people. Here,

if you take the small part you might end up with it permanently. I'm not secure enough right now to do that."

"I've turned down a few pictures. I've really got to be careful now. Careful who directs me, what part I play. Build up my security supply."

Security is a word that pops out of Kim Darby's mouth as easily as it pops into her mind. It is something that worries all actors. Something to be achieved, it is often something which never existed for them in the first place.

Kim's parents were dancers and almost always on the road. She lived with her paternal grandparents. When she was 2, her parents divorced and Kim remained with the senior Zerbys. "Gramps was the best. He passed away a month before *Grit* was complete and I wanted so much for him to see it. Boy, he loved me. I didn't know my mom until I was 17. She is a soft lady and I look a bit like her. My father teaches dancing at Every woman's Village now. I think I'm a bit of a mystery to him. He often looks at me as if he was trying to understand me better. I didn't get to know him until I was 9, and by that time I was an individual, shaped mostly by my grandparents."

Much of the furniture in her small, rustic home comes from her grandparents' house and on the buffet in the dining room are they tiny cowboy boots her grandfather gave her when she was 3.

"After high school I decided to strike out on my own. It was amazing, but I succeeded. Boy, did I make mistakes along the way. I went through six apartments in six months. My values and feelings were changing so fast I just kept moving into new places, each one the 'new' me, but not for long. I consider myself a changeling. I used to think people meant 'you're a lonely child' when they asked if I was an only child. Consequently I was a little lonely."

The security then reappears: "There is so much impermanence in this business. It got so a seven-day television show engrossed me so that it became permanent to me emotionally. I function when I'm needed, when I'm working. I put people off because I tend to be quiet. I'm not really quiet at all, I can be very zany. I'd like to do a comedy some time. But I do observe people; that's part of being an actress.

"I think much of my silence was because I was a very sheltered child. When I was little and we'd go to Hollywood, I would say 'Let's go home, right now!' I felt - and still feel - unsafe away from home."

"Traveling is one anxiety attack after another. On *Grit* I was working and

busy. I was in the mountains, which I like. Deserts frighten me."

"I've been in this house for six months. It is a root, one of my first. But it is tentative. I guess because of my baby. We're going to have to move to where there are sidewalks and other children."

"I can't believe this child of mine. She's so big and so gregarious. I was always small and quiet. She has a good life. She sees sunshine, eats good food and goes swimming. She has many people to love her. How good her life is."

And how un-photographed. She will not permit pictures to be taken of her child, and only reluctantly - and with strict rules - will she discuss her seven-month marriage to television actor Jim Stacy.

"The divorce isn't final until February. He played a tremendous part in my life. I'm grateful. I'm also very sensitive about my personal life."

As a result of the turbulence which preceded her marriage and also because of her divorce, she has been in analysis on and off for the last two years.

"I've found some unbelievably helpful things about myself and other people. I couldn't argue or make a relationship honest. Now I don't worry if a driver at Paramount doesn't like me. Somebody told me the other day one of the drivers didn't like me. At one time this would make me malfunction for a week, plus another to recover. Now I can say "Oh, he doesn't like me; too bad,' and instead of feeling sorry for myself, I feel sorry for him."

Shortly after she finished *Grit*, Avco-Embassy hired her to play the nine-month pregnant bride in *Generation*, a quasi-success on Broadway a few years ago and not yet released on film.

"It's a lovely, more serious film than the play. My husband and I drive a truck and of course I have a conservative father. Naturally, I choose natural childbirth which is how I found myself spending three days with my feet in the stirrups acting labor. I'll say one thing, having Heather was easier."

In *Generation* she also found a new man. He is actor Peter Duel, about whom she will say only: "I like him lots. He played my husband in *Generation* and I say that with a grin." An enigmatic grin, to say the least. He is working in Europe just now and she is laboring at Paramount on *Norwood* based on a novel by Charles Portis, the author of *Grit*.

She co-stars once again with Glen Campbell and judging from their attitude in the last weeks of shooting, neither is especially delighted to be in

the picture. Kim considers it a "very special thank you to Hal Wallis against my agent's advice. I play a Southern dumb-dumb." Campbell implies he would rather be out raking in concert money or taking a vacation.

"I like Glen very much. He sang for me an hour and a half the other day and ---" a pause as she turns dewy eyed --- "when he sings it's unbelievable. I can't take my eyes off him."

When it came time to do the mandatory bedroom scene one recent day, Campbell's wife was an unexpected visitor on the set. Campbell was nervous and Kim more so.

"I mean no offense, but it makes Glen nervous and then I get nervous. There are pressures enough already."

Things weren't helped much by a crew, mostly *Grit* veterans who were anxious to wrap it up because it was Friday. As the lights dimmed and Kim prepared - by loudly clearing her throat - to announce to her would-be seducer that she was pregnant by another man, a technician shouted: "It's Friday night at Disneyland honey, we gotta hurray. Don't want to miss the fireworks." Just then a light blew out, the stars smiled gamely and retired to their dressing rooms.

Kim inherited Jackie Gleason's old portable room, decorated in flocked bordello red and she couldn't stand it. Because of the unpredictable shooting schedule of the film, she has her own ironic commentary propped up on her dressing table, a small child's cartoon to God ripped from the newspaper: "If you would tell me every day what is going to happen tomorrow that would be cool." It is signed Kim, and this Kim also thinks a little bit of order would be cool indeed.

"I second guess. I'm the quixotic kid. I didn't really want to do *Grit* and then I didn't particularly like myself in it. I wish the relationship between the characters had been as well developed as it was in the book."

"The thing that clicked was with John Wayne. I liked Duke. We never really talked except when we were working. He was what he was in the film to me and I guess I was the same to him. It sort of worked out without our working on it."

Generation I wanted to do. *Norwood*, I didn't. But who knows? I'm beginning to think an actress is not the only to judge what roles are best for her."

"The first couple of days on a picture I usually can't sleep. Then I finally

get into the early-to-bed early-to-rise schedule. I try to exercise, take a dance class or swim. I also eat bland food when I'm working."

"For exercise I used to go to The Sanctuary in Hollywood, but now it's become chi-chi. Now I go to a friend's and swim, or take a dance class."

If the weather is good, she will hop into her Mercedes convertible and - if the milkman, mailman or someone at the studio is around - she'll get the top down for a windy ride. "I simply cannot get the damn thing down. I'm thinking of getting a VW bus. Heather is now becoming more than a little baby; she's a whole lot of toys and plastic bags."

What comes next after Norwood? For one thing, the usual concern: "I don't know. This may be the end of it all. I constantly worry about making a living. We shot part of Generation in New York and I almost decided to give up acting. I hate New York. There is no joy, just misery. You have to look to find something pretty. I hate the noise. I hate noise so much that most of my career has been spent looking over to the sound man as he says 'Bring it up a little Kim, we can't hear you ... again.'"

But people are hearing, and they're listening. There is an elfin quality about this pretty, naturally sexy little girl (Campbell calls her "home grown sexy, the kind of girl I'd like my son to marry"), which transfers and grows considerably from Kim to film. She may seem vulnerable, but she has a well-hidden grit and undisguised discipline.

"My root is inside me. I don't need to put it down anywhere. I feel a need to be with somebody, to be dedicated. I feel incomplete without it. You wouldn't understand, it's a woman's feelings."

She hops up from under the tree and bounds into the house to play Nashville Skyline by Bob Dylan. First she makes sure Heather is napping. "Dylan gives off love, understanding and happiness. Too many hippies are giving off hate now. The whole thing has gone wrong."

A gurgle-giggle from the bedroom mixes into the Dylan and Kim scurries off after her daughter. "Gotta go, it's play time."