

# Stella

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## Laura Dern

The long reign  
of a child star turned  
leading lady

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Photograph by **Amanda Friedman**

After 40 years on our screens, the actress Laura Dern still enjoys a challenge. Her latest roles? As the mother of a girl dying of cancer, and a victim of the same disease. She tells *Helena de Bertodano* about growing up on film – and falling out of love with marriage

# All's said and Dern

It has been a challenging year for the actress Laura Dern. Last September she finalised her divorce from the musician Ben Harper, the father of her two children. And as if that weren't emotionally gruelling enough, she also spent every working moment shooting not one, but two "devastating" films about cancer.

Not that you would ever guess it from her manner. "It's a pa-a-arty now," she sings out, as she walks into the room where we meet to talk about *The Fault in Our Stars*, in which she plays the mother of a teenage girl who is dying of cancer. She is positively, exuberantly friendly. "Let's get as close as possible,"

she says as we choose chairs around a large table in a Los Angeles hotel.

She orders a cup of green tea with honey and submits me to a charm offensive, going out of her way to set up a rapport. We quickly establish that we have children of similar ages. "Wow, we're exactly the same," she says.

Well, not exactly. Dern, 47, is an Oscar-nominated actress (for *Rambling Rose*) with four Golden Globes to her name. Born into a Hollywood acting family (her parents are the actors Bruce Dern and Diane Ladd), she has a 40-year career of considerable range under her belt. "By the time I was 25, I was the sexual siren [in *Wild at Heart*],



I was the good girl [in *Mask*] and I was the dinosaur lady [in *Jurassic Park*].”

Dern is tall with an angular, expressive face and long, thin hands which don't lie still for a second. She wears skinny jeans, teamed with Rag & Bone boots and a cream-coloured Isabel Marant jacket.

Over the years she has dated several high-profile actors, including Nicolas Cage and Billy Bob Thornton – to whom she was engaged until he famously left her for Angelina Jolie. “I left our home to work on a movie,” she once said, “and while I was away, my boyfriend got married, and I've never heard from him again.”

She went on to marry Harper with whom she has a son, Ellery, aged 12, and a daughter, Jaya, nine. After breaking up in 2010 and reuniting, they finally divorced last year. “It just is what it is,” says Dern cheerfully. “Sadly, half of marriages end in divorce. Half of my girl friends and male friends have been through one, and their kids are doing great. There's no shame around it – unless you want to project that on to yourself – but certainly there's no longer cultural shame. Everyone is walking through it.”

She says her children have taken it in their stride: “My kids are doing great. And in a way their living situation is not shockingly different – in that their father is a touring musician so they were used to the comings and goings a bit – not to say there aren't a lot of other things. But, like me, they never really knew a mom and dad sitting down at the table for dinner every night. So I think that creates an easier transition.”

Dern's own parents divorced when she was two and, in effect, her grandmother brought her up. “She raised me and is my everything. I was so lucky to have her.” She spent many weekends in Malibu with her father, who famously “shot dead” John Wayne in *The Cowboys* (1972), and describes her childhood as happy – “although I was like any other kid who missed their mom because she had to work, but that was my only real negative.”

Aged seven, she was an extra on a Martin Scorsese film that her mother

was shooting, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, eating an ice-cream cone in a scene at a diner. The scene was shot 19 times and afterwards Scorsese said to her mother: “If she can eat an ice-cream cone 19 times, she's got to be an actress.”

Knowing that the job can entail repeated knockbacks, her parents tried to discourage their daughter, but Dern



From top Dern in *Wild at Heart*, 1990; in *Jurassic Park* (1993) with Jeff Goldblum and Bob Peck; and in her new film *The Fault in Our Stars* with Shailene Woodley

was smitten. “I was raised on movie sets and I decided for myself at a very young age that it was what I wanted to do.”

She started acting classes at the age of nine but had to cycle to them as her parents wouldn't drive her. Her commitment paid off and, at 11, she won a role opposite Jodie Foster in the teen film *Foxes* (1980).

Her classmates at school were not impressed. “It wasn't popular to be a child actor, unless you were on a television series. I was doing weird stuff that they



‘I was raised on movie sets and I decided for myself at a very young age that it was what I wanted to do’

would probably never see because it was adult. I know now, as a parent, why my mom wanted to discourage me.”

Dern ended up suing her mother for emancipation so that she could work on adult film sets – but she says that it was not a big deal. “A lot is made of nothing, to be honest.” In her last years of high school she spent a lot of time working on films, but had to be emancipated to be able to do it. “People ask: ‘What was traumatic in your childhood that you needed to do that?’ Nothing. Let's be clear: my mom was just as overprotective after the emancipation as she was before.”

Ladd and Dern have even acted together on several occasions and were both nominated for Oscars for *Rambling*

Rose (1991). Although close to her mother, Dern says she is more like her father in character. “We have the same sense of humour and the same level of irreverence. And we are similar as actors. My dad was always interested in characters he didn’t understand – he was such a great bad guy in movies. And that is really the thing that calls me to the material often: something I struggle to understand in human behaviour.”

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, based on the bestselling novel by John Green, Dern plays a “progressive hippie mother” struggling with the knowledge that her daughter Hazel, played by Shailene Woodley, is dying of cancer. “In a way, the movie is less about cancer and more about how to celebrate the time that we have and how to love deeply in the most honest way possible.”

‘The only regret I’ve had is how much time I’ve wasted regretting. I used to regret not having a full college experience’

Dern and Woodley became very close. “Before I met her,” Dern says, “Alexander Payne [who had directed both women in different films] had said to me, ‘You guys really remind me of each other – you use your limbs the same way, you have a very similar spirit.’ Then the studio asked me to play [her mother]. We are the best of buddies now. We have a very similar outlook on life.”

After wrapping the film, Dern went straight into shooting *Wild*, due out in December, based on the bestselling book by Cheryl Strayed, in which she plays a mother dying of lung cancer. “Both films explore what it is to prepare to lose someone you love,” she says. And, despite the recent turmoil in her own life, Dern says she hasn’t given up on relationships: “Love means a lot to me, and I love loving and I love boys.” But she is not with anyone at the moment. “No one to speak of. I’m really enjoying my life right now.”

She says she no longer really believes in the fairytale of marriage. “I don’t think

kids expect the fairytale anymore, either. Most couples don’t hide that they fight from their children, whereas in our parents’ generation you hid everything. A therapist would now tell you that it’s good to fight in front of them as long as they can see the resolution. This is being human – you get angry, you get hurt, you yell and say things you don’t mean – and then you circle back and you’re accountable. Otherwise kids hit adulthood and they don’t know how to deal with conflict.”

She says that she does not look for anything particular in a man: “Maybe I should get a checklist – I’ve never had



From top With Ben Harper and their children in 2009; with her mother, Diane Ladd, in the 1980s



one. But love always redefines itself, doesn’t it? What really changes is that the priority in a relationship becomes fierce honesty and comfort with oneself. That becomes really sexy. As opposed to, ‘I’m going to put this mask on and pretend I’m this person.’”

Recently she bumped into a friend who had been married for 40 years. “He has a very beautiful marriage to his amazing wife, and I said, ‘How did you guys do it?’ And he said, ‘The key is we never wanted a divorce on the same day.’ That is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.” At first I think she is joking but she is not. “It gives room to the truth,” she says.

Dern regrets none of the choices she has made in her life, either personal or professional: “I guess the only regret I’ve had is how much time I’ve wasted regretting.” She has made sacrifices, such as giving up her degree in journalism and psychology before she graduated. “I used to regret not having a full college experience, but I don’t grieve it. I had to quit college to make *Blue Velvet*, *Mask* and *Wild at Heart*. But they were huge years in my career, working with incredible film-makers, so I would never give those back. They were my college.”

Other brave choices followed, and not without consequence. The only fallow period in Dern’s career came after she’d played the lesbian who coaxes Ellen DeGeneres out of the closet in *Ellen* in 1997. “People were uncomfortable. I’d done *Citizen Ruth* as well [a comedy drama about the abortion debate], which was pretty racy, then *Ellen* – so there was a period of time afterwards when it was like, ‘What do we do with her?’”

But her career picked up again, and she now has more than 50 film credits to her name. In the past few years she has received a Golden Globe for her role

as a politician in the television film *Recount* (2008) and another in 2012 for the HBO series *Enlightened*, in which she plays a self-destructive woman who has a spiritual awakening.

“I think at this

point I’m known as an actor, so I get cast as an actor, I don’t get cast as a type. I think if you have a label – like ‘America’s sweetheart’ – that’s a tough label for a woman.”

She’s happy to put a label on herself, though. Asked what word would best describe her, she offers one immediately: “Bitch,” then roars with laughter. “Actually, that’s one thing I’ve never been called by any man I’ve ever been with.”

Her publicist, Annett, who has walked in to the room, is shaking her head in despair. “Sorry, Annett,” chuckles Dern. “*The Fault in Our Stars*” is out on Thursday