

Before you even ask: yes, she still has those eyes and the smile. They're often on view in the new film by Alexander Janko, *A Year by the Sea*, in which Karen Allen plays a woman of a certain age on a journey of self-recovery. It's a hejira that suddenly, but by choice, puts this long-married, well-to-do mother of two, alone, in a beach house on Cape Cod where she can observe the tides, the sea lions, and her own reawakening as a person.

With gorgeous location cinematography that belies the film's low budget, *A Year by the Sea*, based on the memoir by Joan Anderson, is not so much a chick flick as a wake-up call to all people who are stuck in a rut and think that, at a certain point, life holds no more adventures. For the film's Joan, those include pumping her own water, making new friends, and the need to row herself to and from her cottage. "I think I have rowed a boat over the years," says Allen, "but I certainly wouldn't consider myself good at it. Also, I have a rotator cuff injury, so I was worried about those scenes. But it worked very well for the character because in the beginning part of the film, she's not really good at it, either." The actress does confess that in some of the long shots later on, the person rowing is actually one of the movie's producers. "We didn't have a big stunt-person budget," Allen chuckles.

As someone who may be most famous for a scene in which she's dangling over a pit of snakes—Steven Spielberg even dropped a dead python on her head to bolster her screams—Allen had an understandably better time consorting with seals. "Not that I have anything against snakes, but the day we spent on



Karen Allen

Living in a World of "Yes"

Photo: Lisa Levart © 2017

Monamoy Island on the cape where there were all these seals was enchanting! They're very shy, so no matter how gently I moved towards them—even if they had their backs to me—they could almost sense my approach. Which was fine with me, because as beautiful as they are, they're very powerful creatures. I did probably get within 20 feet of them on land before they high-tailed it into the water."

That said, the film is more about human relationships than aquatic ones, and the now-single actress found parallels between her own life choices and those of her character. "When I accepted this role," Allen notes, "I had not been married for about 18 years. I'm very good friends with my ex-husband and with the father of my son. I have a fantastic relationship with them; we're just no longer married and don't live together, but we hang out together and do things all the time. So I didn't have the same dilemma in my life as Joan.

"But in her case," Allen continues, "she felt as though she had lost her own voice, her own sense of productivity and forward motion. She

began to reassess her marriage, which I think happens to a lot of people. I've been through it with a lot of my friends. At the end of the child-raising phase and having those shared responsibilities and concerns, people really can find themselves looking at each other and feeling, 'And you are . . . who? We're still together . . . why?' At that moment, people either—and often do—leave relationships that have meant the world to them. Or they really dig down and find a way to renegotiate, renegotiate the relationship with the idea that they can

discover things about themselves, and it won't put the relationship in jeopardy."

Most inspiring about the *Year by the Sea* story, says Allen, is Joan's willingness to adjust. "I don't think we get to see that in films very often," the actress notes. "We see men leaving their wives for younger women or women leaving their husbands for younger men. Those sorts of shenanigans! But we don't see mature people who really care about each other trying to figure out what they have to change and grow in order to deserve their relationship."

Currently single, the actress has been trying to simplify her life. She closed the textile company she founded in 2003, Karen Allen Fiber Arts, because she found herself "juggling way too many things," and has been concentrating on directing. Her short film, *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*, based on a story by a young Carson McCullers, is making the festival rounds. "I've been directing plays for about 10 years," says Allen, "but I hadn't put my foot in the water of directing a film, which is a much bigger deal. With plays, I work under the auspices of a theater, so I step in as the director, cast the play and work with a designer, but I don't have to raise money and pull together a crew myself. It's a big commitment. In fact, it took two-and-a-half years just to get to our world premiere."

Despite the labor-intensive nature of money-making, Allen says she looks forward to her next project, a feature. She says, "I think I turned to directing because I didn't want to work just to work. During fallow periods when I wasn't finding a project I wanted to do, I felt I should be able to open up a much broader world of material. There doesn't have to be a role in it for me in order for me to have a lot of interest in it."

Allen's wider angle on the arts goes back to her early 20s, when a friend brought her to a performance by Jerzy Grotowski's legendary experimental theater troupe. Before then, she had "literally zero interest in the theater and acting. I was a film lover just in my life, but film was something at a great distance. I never had met an actor growing up. I couldn't wrap my mind around that being a job anyone could imagine themselves doing." However, post-Grotowski, Allen immersed herself in training: "reading plays, performing in plays, even producing and directing plays back then. One of the first I ever did was by the wonderful writer, John Hawkes. It was called *The Innocent Party*, and it was very interesting and surreal. I also did a play that Sylvia Plath had written as a radio play, called *Three Women*. And I did *The Player Queen* by William Butler Yeats.

"I was waiting for the right film to come along that wasn't trying to capitalize on *Raiders of the Lost Ark's* success. Maybe that was the wrong way to have a career—I think you're supposed to capitalize on success!"

"Back then," continues Allen, "I directed more out of necessity than choice. We had an experimental theater company, and we'd develop our own projects both within and outside of it. So we did our own sets, found our own costumes. We all did a bit of everything."

But then came *Animal House* and a little film called *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the boho, Illinois-born actress became everyone's girl-next-door crush with a powerhouse punch. Asked if appearing in two pop-culture classics kept her from being taken more seriously as an artist, Allen replies, "I don't really know. I think the film industry has a certain desire to put people in a box or create a stereotype.

I know that after I did *Raiders*, a lot of the film offers that came towards me were very similar in nature. And that didn't interest me. I mean, I also did *The Wanderers*, based on Richard Price's novel—and that was right after *Animal House*. I did a more serious film called *A Small Circle of Friends* about students at Harvard during the late 60s. But before *Starman*, I also went back to the theater for a year and a half and did two plays (*Extremities* and *Monday after the Miracle*) that challenged the living daylights out of me. I was waiting for the right film to come along that wasn't trying to capitalize

on *Raiders'* success." Allen stops for a moment, then laughs, "Maybe that was the wrong way to have a career—I think you're supposed to capitalize on success!"

Now at 65, Allen appreciates her level of fame but has also experienced the challenges facing performers who've moved past the girlfriend/glamour roles. *A Year by the Sea* features many close-ups of the actress that are compelling but not always flattering, which leads to the question of whether she, like far too many Hollywood cohorts, ever considered going under the knife. "I am such a wuss," she answers, "that the idea of letting anybody sticking a needle in my face, for any reason short of being in a car accident or if somebody cut my face, is beyond my wildest dreams.

"To me, it's a personal choice whether people wanna have plastic surgery or not," she continues. "I often feel a kind of sadness or horror when I see it too much. With Botox and those things, sometimes the real character and human quality of the face is lessened.

I like the way an aging face looks. It's not great for one's vanity when you blow it up onto a screen, especially with these very unforgiving digital cameras that we have these days. You notice

MISC-ALLEN-EOUS

Do you have a diet/exercise regimen?

I wish I could say I do! If I had my druthers, I'd do vigorous yoga every day and try to eat healthy and organic. I do love raw foods: vegetables and salads, though I'm not a vegetarian right now. So the reality of my regime and what I aspire to...there's a little distance between them.

Favorite meal?

My son Nicholas (Nick Browne) is an extraordinary, French-trained chef. In fact, he just won on *Chopped*. He'll make a fresh tomato sauce on pasta that's better than anything I've ever tasted in my life. He makes a Jerusalem artichoke soup that I love. But you know what? Every recipe, if you wonder where the turning point is...it always comes down to butter.

Favorite vacation spot

A place with beautiful, clean, clear, salt water. I have a little fixation on the west coast of Jamaica in the West Indies because I went there when I was 18.

Read any good books lately?

Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, which I thought was breathtaking. I've been reading and re-reading a lot of Carson McCullers and early Donna Tartt books. I also read a lot of books on Buddhist thought because it inspires me.

What have you been listening to?

I love the band Dawes, and I'm a huge Van Morrison fan. Also, David Gray, the blues, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Tom Petty, Joni Mitchell, and on and on and on. There's a whole world of 60s-70s music that just sits in my soul from growing up during that period. And I know the words to every Beatles song ever written.

If you could go back and give your 20-year-old self a message, what would it be?

Don't get so stressed out about things. Relax and enjoy the ride a little more. We have to take a deep breath and allow the space in ourselves to accept things, to let go of the anxiety that sits in us and prevents us from enjoying the moment as much as we should.

every little sag. But you just have to take a deep breath and say, 'yeah, I'm not gonna look the way I did when I was 35.' I know there's a lot of pressure on actors and people in many professions to look younger, but for myself, I really do question the value that we seem to have within our culture."

On the personal side, although certainly open to another serious relationship at some point, Allen puts no pressure on herself to find a partner. "I'm waiting for the right person to come into my life," she says, "but I'm not somebody who is uncomfortable being alone. There are pros and cons to being on your own, but I don't feel the need to be in search of a relationship because I have difficulty being a singular person in my life. On the other hand, I would be delighted to meet somebody for the next phase. It just hasn't happened; I don't know why."

Though she still keeps an apartment in Manhattan, Allen makes her home on 28 acres in the small town of Monterey, Massachusetts. She explains that New York City, especially after Sept. 11, 2001, became too challenging a place to live full time. "My son's 11th birthday was a few days after 9/11," she recalls. "We worked our way through it as a city and as a community, but it had a terrible impact on the film and theater world for quite awhile afterwards. And

simultaneously with that, I was discovering that trying to raise a child while working would be all-consuming. My husband and I had separated, and I wanted to be a more present parent in my son's life. I had been working fairly consistently with a great deal of interest and joy for a good 20 years, so it just felt like a good time to take my son out of the city and move to the countryside."

The actress adds, "For my son—when he was little and we would be in the country—it was the world of 'yes.' He would be outside, running—he could pick up an insect from the grass. Everything was 'yes!' Then we get to New York City

when he was four or five years old, and I'd be constantly running after him going 'NOOOOO!' and grabbing, like, a crack vial from the playground: 'Oh my God, put that down!' So do I want to live in a world of 'yes,' or do I want to live in a world of 'no?' I kept coming back to the feeling that 'yes' was the better choice. ▲

For more info visit yearbythesea.com.

David Lefkowitz hosts *Dave's Gone By* (davesgoneby.com) weekly on UNC Radio. He's also an adjunct professor of English at the University of Northern Colorado and co-publishes *Performing Arts Insider* theater journal (TotalTheater.com). David's Long Island Woman interview with Lily Tomlin won a 2016 Media Award from the Press Club of Long Island.



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