



TURTLENECK SWEATER: NO. 6; DRESS: KAREN WALKER; POLYESTER/WOOL SHEARLING COAT: TOPSHOP; WHITE BRONZE RING WITH DALMATIAN JASPER: QUARRY

GRETA THE GREAT

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STRIPED LONG-SLEEVED TURTLENECK IN TIKKA; JOOS TRICOT; JEANS: RACHEL COMEY; WOOL BLAZER: NO. 21; BRASS LAUTNER EARRINGS: QUARRY

An indie-movie queen with festival hits like *Frances Ha*, *Mistress America*, and *Greenberg* to her credit, Greta Gerwig made the leap to big screen writer/director in November with the unapologetically woman-focused *Lady Bird*. Here, she talks candidly about the female gaze, the New York dream, and writing scripts where “the central story is not a question of whether a woman will or will not end up with some dude”

WHEN GRETA GERWIG sits down to breakfast at Café Cluny in N.Y.C.’s West Village, she is friendly and warm despite our masochistically early 8 a.m. meeting time. It seems impossible but entirely too tempting to believe her when she says she remembers me from previous interviews I’ve done with her over many years as a freelance film writer. That’s because, based on her screen persona, she seems like the ultimate ride-or-die best friend every woman wants—no, *needs*. An hour-long conversation with Gerwig is culturally nourishing; we veer from the joys of Virginia Woolf and nighttime walks to the unmasking of Elena Ferrante and even her love of passports.

“You gotta wander around,” she says of her regular constitutionals. “It definitely helps the quality of thought. Actually, if I’m stuck, I always try to go walk, because usually it solves something. Even if it just solves my bad attitude.” She then adds, “I actually have trouble thinking or talking when I’m sitting. Sorry.” There’s nothing to forgive, of course. Gerwig, 34, is endlessly charming and fun to chat with, sitting or not.

“I love getting passports, because when you get a passport, it expires in 10 years, and you have this physical object, and you think, ‘What are the next 10 years going to hold?’” she muses. “I got my passport renewed right after I graduated from college, and I had to get it renewed again last year. I remembered holding my passport right after I graduated from college and I thought, ‘What am I going to be like at 32? And what are these 10 years going to be?’ Then when I got it again, I thought, ‘What’s 42?’ I don’t know. The persistence of objects over time never ceases to amaze me.”

These anecdotes may make her sound as whimsical as some of her onscreen characters, like her breakthrough role in 2012’s *Frances Ha*—in which she plays an aspiring dancer whose life is upended when she’s ditched by her best friend—yet Gerwig is anything but.

Greta Gerwig has known she’s wanted to direct since she was in kindergarten. Although her childhood desire

to lead her classmates in a theatrical production of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Starlight Express* was never realized, the multi-hyphenate made her filmmaking dreams come true this past November with the release of her directorial debut, *Lady Bird*, a film she also wrote. Boasting powerhouse performances by Saoirse Ronan and Laurie Metcalf, *Lady Bird* is a mother/daughter story bursting with heart and humor that established Gerwig as a filmmaking force to be reckoned with.

But before she reached this career milestone, Gerwig made her name acting—first in micro-indies like *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007) and *Baghead* (2008), and then in festival darlings including *Greenberg* (2010) and the aforementioned *Frances Ha*.

Now claiming her place among the current vanguard of female auteurs taking charge of their careers and the movie industry—a group that includes Kathryn Bigelow, Sofia Coppola, Ava DuVernay, Jane Campion, and Patty Jenkins—Gerwig is veering off the leading lady track and opting to go behind the camera. “What scared me most was the fact that I knew there was a perfectly good lane in which I never did this,” Gerwig explains when I ask about her decision to break into directing. “If I had never directed [*Lady Bird*], if I’d never written this, I would have been fine. I would have figured it out. I would have done things. But... if I wanted to carve out another path, no one was ever going to come to me. I would have to beat it out myself.”

That path included a short stint in ballet before being told her body “wasn’t right”—“99.9 percent of bodies are not right for ballet,” she points out—and then a long stretch exploring other types of performance. Like her character in *Frances Ha*, “I kept dancing,” she says, “I still love dancing.” But she also took up theater in high school in California, including stints in community theater, which her parents encouraged. “I don’t think people think of Sacramento necessarily as a place where you can see a lot of theater, but there is a lot of great community theater there. I was seeing one or two plays a week, every week, for my entire childhood.” Eventually, she went to Barnard for

undergrad, and during that time she continued to act while studying English and philosophy, subjects that would help her later as a screenwriter directing her own work.

“My desire to direct and my determination to direct was a feeling of, ‘I’ve been given all these gifts, and I know all those women, and I know all those professors and all the women who came before me,’” Gerwig says. “And it’s not good enough if I don’t do it. I’m letting them down and I’m letting the next generation of those women down because—I felt like there was a sense of the gauntlet being thrown down to all of us.”

Gerwig has picked up that gauntlet with record speed, starting with a co-writing credit on 2012’s *Frances Ha*, which she penned with her partner, writer/director Noah Baumbach. Gerwig currently lives in Manhattan with Baumbach, whom she initially met when he cast her in his 2010 film *Greenberg*, a veritable pageant of discomfort co-starring Ben Stiller. Baumbach split with his then-partner Jennifer Jason Leigh after making that film, and he and Gerwig started dating in 2011. She and Baumbach also co-wrote 2015’s *Mistress America*, in which she plays a hipster hustler who becomes friends with her stepsister-to-be, played by Lola Kirke. And in addition to writing, she continued to kill it on the acting front with memorable roles in Mike Mills’ *20th Century Women*, Rebecca Miller’s *Maggie’s Plan*, and Pablo Larraín’s *Jackie*, among others.

Gerwig’s early work on so-called “mumblecore” indies (a subgenre of low-budget films characterized by natu-

(Timothée Chalamet), a too-cool-for-school jerk whom Lady Bird longs to impress. She also struggles with embarrassment over her family’s finances; they’ve never been as well off as her peers, but things become even more fraught after her father, played by the legendary playwright Tracy Letts, loses his job. Still, Lady Bird has her sights set on life in the big city, and she’s determined to make it happen.

Like Gerwig, Lady Bird grows up in Sacramento; also like Gerwig, she dreams of college in New York City where she can pursue her artistic dreams. However, that’s where the similarities ends. “I’m in every character in it, because they all came from a part of me or a part of other people who touched me,” Gerwig says. Relationships between women in *Lady Bird* are the connective tissue. Although the lead character dallies with boys, her relationships with her best friend and mother carry the narrative. “The idea of who women are when we’re not looked at by a man, that’s fascinating to me,” Gerwig says. “And to be a female filmmaker, what does it mean—is there a female gaze? What does that mean? How is it operative? What am I looking for on a screen that’s different than what a man in my position would be looking for?”

“Maybe it’s not gender,” she continues. “Maybe it’s something else. Maybe it just has to do with personality. And I don’t ever want to reduce the accomplishments of female directors by putting them in the category of ‘female directors.’ But...how does gender play in art-making? It’s fascinating, and I think we’re just starting to dismantle it.”

“I like writing about women in relation to other women—mothers and daughters, friends, sisters, mentors, employees and employers, *et cetera*—because men don’t know what women do when they aren’t there.”

realistic dialogue and production) required her to learn everything from how to hold a boom to editing and finding costumes—all skills that served her well as a director. She also soaked up everything she could while working on larger film sets. Between this sort of on-the-fly film training and a rapturous love for movies—you can find Gerwig and Baumbach haunting N.Y.C.’s art house theaters all the time, and our conversation is peppered with references to the Chantal Akerman film *Jeanne Dielman*, and French writer/directors Claire Denis and Leos Carax—Gerwig realized she was ready to take her script for *Lady Bird* and fly.

Lady Bird is a classic in the making, a quintessential coming-of-age story that’s usually the purview of male filmmakers and their boyhood stand-ins. Saoirse Ronan sparks as Christine, aka Lady Bird, a wild-haired teen who is prone to dramatics like throwing herself out of a moving car during a fight with her mother, the harried and excellent Laurie Metcalf.

Lady Bird’s senior year is rife with discoveries, from her newfound love of theater to her interest in boys like Danny (Lucas Hedges), her sweet onstage co-star, and Kyle

Gerwig’s scripts for *Frances Ha*, *Mistress America*, and *Lady Bird* all pass the Bechdel test with flying colors: each one features lots of female characters, these characters interact with one another, and the dialogue features women talking to each other about plenty of things other than men. “I’ve consciously tried to write female characters where their central story is not a question of whether she will or will not end up with some dude,” she says, adding, “I love those movies, I really do, and I’ll probably make one someday. But if you force yourself to find another plot, you’ll find there are endless narratives that don’t include it. I like writing about women in relation to other women—mothers and daughters, friends, sisters, mentors, employees and employers, *et cetera*—because men don’t know what women do when they aren’t there. These are powerful, complicated, rich relationships that deserve their own place in the collection of stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be human.”

The complex humanity of women is at the forefront of Gerwig’s work at all times, no matter who’s behind

SOLID PEACH LONG-SLEEVED TURTLENECK IN HONEY GOLD; JOOS TRICOT; MULTI SILK PLAID WIDE-LEG TROUSERS; NIKKI CHASIN; MORETTI BELTED ROBE JACKET IN EMERALD; NIKKI CHASIN; BRASS HEMATITE EARRINGS; QUARRY





STRIPED LONG-SLEEVED CREWNECK: JOOS TRICOT; MIXED METAL AND ACRYLIC EARRINGS: RACHEL COMEY



STRIPED SHORT-SLEEVED CREWNECK: JOOS TRICOT; JACQUARD PRINTED SKIRT: CARVEN; SILVER DISC HOOP EARRINGS: ERIN CONSIDINE; WHITE BRONZE CUFF WITH DALMATIAN JASPER: QUARRY

the camera. And that's no accident for the self-professed feminist. "I think about feminism and what it means all the time, and I'm always trying to figure out how to push it forward," she says. "I wonder about what I'm still holding back, and how much of that gets internalized—that you stop yourself because it's fucking hard for women to do what we're not really supposed to do."

When she's not on set, Gerwig eschews social media and cool events in favor of living a low-key life with Baumbach in N.Y.C., where she can enjoy an anonymity unavailable in the Hollywood bubble. "I get so much joy out of slipping by unnoticed. That's a big part of how I feel I get ideas, and move through the world," she explains. "What I will say is, having a partner who knows what it is that I do, and the odd requirements of the job, is very helpful, because there's a deep understanding of what it asks of you and what it doesn't ask of you, and how you ride these waves of certain things working and other things not working. It's kind of an all-or-nothing job. You're either working for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or there's nothing. Which is an odd combination, and

to be able to share that is good."

As we speak, it's unclear whether anyone at the café notices or cares that an actor/writer/director on the rise is in their midst or if they're doing the cool "ignore a famous person" thing New Yorkers are famous for. Either way, we're left in peace except for the stellar waitress who keeps bringing us endless utensils to replace the ones we both keep dropping as we gesticulate.

"I think I've always felt that getting to live in New York was living the dream," Gerwig muses. "For me, just being here always has a quality of fulfillment. It's wonderful that I have been able to act and write and produce and direct. But in a way, the enjoyment of being in New York has always been separate from that. I would want to be here no matter what."

As we wrap up our interview, Greta Gerwig takes out her wallet and tries to split the bill with me. "Here, let me throw some stuff down," she says, relenting only when I point out that I can write off the breakfast as a work expense. Then she slips out the door into the sunshine, unnoticed, just the way she likes it. **B**