

## Interview: Greta Gerwig of 'Damsels in Distress' on Girls, Writing & Fencing

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CHICAGO – It takes a special kind of talent to appear wholly natural on-camera. Delivering dialogue with dramatic inflection is easy. But the ability to say scripted words as if they are emanating from your soul is profoundly tricky, especially when the words are written by an instantly recognizable stylist the likes of Woody Allen or Whit Stillman.

In 2012, audiences will have the opportunity to watch 28-year-old actress Greta Gerwig effortlessly inhabit the realms of various iconic filmmakers, as well as craft her own personal cinematic landscape. Gerwig's revelatory work in Joe Swanberg's Chicago-set indies "Hannah Takes the Stairs" and "Nights and Weekends" led to her breakout role in Noah Baumbach's acclaimed comedy, "Greenberg." Since then, Gerwig has become one of the most in-demand actresses of her generation, appearing in a variety of mainstream and art house pictures. This year, the actress will be seen acting opposite Jesse Eisenberg, Ellen Page and Alec Baldwin in Woody Allen's star-studded "To Rome with Love," as well as headlining her own comedy vehicle, "Lola Versus," from the producers of "(500) Days of Summer." Later this year, Gerwig is reportedly due to unveil a top secret project that she wrote and shot last fall.

Aside from the DVD release of Alison Bagnall's indie gem, "The Dish & The Spoon," Gerwig's first major picture of the year is "Damsels in Distress," which marks the first film in thirteen years directed by satirist Whit Stillman ("Metropolitan," "The Last Days of Disco"). Gerwig stars as Violet, a dreamy-eyed heroine who leads a group of girls on a mission to bring cleanliness, hope and dancing to their East Coast college after it goes co-ed. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Gerwig about her own work as a writer, the experience of blazing her own trail in male-dominated Hollywood, and how her background in fencing enhanced her approach to acting.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Were you a Stillman fan prior to shooting?

**Greta Gerwig:** Yes, I loved Whit's work. I was a big film nerd in college and his films are so quotable. Everyone quoted them and imitated them and so when I met him, he was very iconic in my mind.



Greta Gerwig stars in Whit Stillman's Damsels in Distress.

Photo credit: Kerry Brown, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Noah Baumbach has often cited Stillman as an influence. Did you note any similarities in their approach to filmmaking?

**Gerwig:** Yeah, they're both very quiet filmmakers. So is Woody Allen. They're not shouters. They're very composed and they don't rush. They don't become panicked, which is sometimes frustrating to other people around them. Other people want them to panic and they just get calmer. They all know exactly what they want. They're very precise filmmakers. There's nothing sloppy about them, and they [don't say], "Let's just see what happens." [laughs] They don't want to see what just happens. They want it the way they want it. But I like working with people like that because you know that they will never move on until they have it just the way they want it. One of the great things about working with perfectionists is that they can be crazy for you. If you're working with someone who's not a perfectionist, you start becoming the person who's going, "Oh my god, I don't know if we have it," and you start getting worried.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This is a bit of a high-wire performance for you. How did you approach the task of delivering Stillman's dialogue?

**Gerwig:** When I read the script, I knew I was going to love it, so it wasn't a surprise that I was into it. But I had this spark with Violet. I had the beginnings of an idea of how she was and how she talked and what she sounded like and how she ran and what she looked like. It was this whole thing that started to emerge, and I remember being really scared when we started filming. It's not something that has been in my wheelhouse, and it's always scary because you think, "This could be the one that everyone will [point to] and be like, 'This is where she went off the deep end and she didn't come back. This is a totally crazy performance.'" It's always scary to do something like that. But if you don't go all the way, you're sunk. So you have to go all the way. Whit and I developed a shorthand for working together. It was a low budget movie and it was such long hours, but we didn't have that many shooting days. You get so close so quickly and there's this sort of mind-meld that happens between the actor and the director. You kind of become a conduit for [the filmmaker's] worldview.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you have a different experience on "No Strings Attached" or "Arthur"?

**Gerwig:** I didn't become a conduit for Ivan Reitman's worldview. [laughs] With "No Strings Attached," the woman who wrote it, Elizabeth Meriwether, is a good friend of mine and I love her writing. It was totally different [from Stillman], but it did have a similar quality in that it was a singular author. I really felt like I understood how to [deliver] her writing. It's harder for me on something like "Arthur," where there's multiple authors and multiple writers and multiple people who are pitching jokes because then I become confused by the tone. You're playing this joke this way but then you have to keep the character consistent. It's a lot harder actually. I find that if I have one voice, it's much easier for me to sync my voice with their rhythm. If there's a lot of different things going on, then you have a lot more work to do to establish a base because it doesn't get invented along with it.



Greta Gerwig and Analeigh Tipton star in Whit Stillman's *Damsels in Distress*.

Photo credit: Kerry Brown, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you've written your own plays and contributed to the dialogue in your films for Joe Swanberg, do you harbor any interest in writing your own future material?

**Gerwig:** I did write a film that I shot over the fall and someone else directed it. I'm in it and it's my writing. You'll get to see it within the next year. I've been trying to keep it under the radar because I want there to be the possibility that you can still be surprised by my movie. I think things get written about so much prior to them actually existing that it cuts down on the surprise. I love being a writer, but writing for yourself

feels so self-centered as an actor. [laughs] It really does because then you'll give yourself good lines and it feels so self-serving, and of course it is self-serving. It totally eliminates that kind of sexy behind-the-scenes thing if you're in front of the camera as well. I'd like to write [work] that I don't act in. The truth is that, for this film, I knew how I wanted it done and that I'd do it the right way. The greatest pleasure for me was having my other actors bring totally different things to it than I had seen and make it their own and do great work with it. There's nothing more gratifying than someone taking words you've written and doing something awesome with them. It makes you feel like you're an amazing writer.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was this film tightly scripted or did you allow for improvisation?

**Gerwig:** It's really specifically worded. It's not like ["Damsels in Distress"], but it is highly scripted and it's very word-perfect. The amazing thing about Swanberg's stuff and working with him was that I almost got to write out loud because I was improvising the whole time. So instead of sitting down and writing it and saying the lines, I would just be saying it and acting it as it was happening. It felt like I got to really be a creator.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Do you find a correlation between your character's efforts to carve out a place for herself in a co-ed college and your own career in male-dominated Hollywood?

**Gerwig:** I've never made that connection before. I think it's really interesting that although there's a lot of progressive thinking in the arts and a lot of forward thinkers and people who are socially liberal and progressive, it's one of the most sexist fields. If you ask anyone, they're totally for women in business. They're for it but it doesn't wind up happening that much. I think there are certainly more visible women in science and business at this point—Hillary Clinton or the CFO of Facebook. You see people like that who are really taking charge [in other fields]. There is a group of girls that are coming up [in the industry] and we're figuring it out. I think we're at a moment of change for women in the film industry—changes in the kind of parts they play and that are available to them. We'll also be getting more female writers and directors.

One of my very good friends, Lena Dunham, has "Girls" coming out [on HBO]. We shared a studio together in New York four years ago, and I'm so pleased that that's happening, as well as "Bridesmaids." Meryl Streep is on the cover of "Vogue" in her 60s, and that's the first time she has ever been on the cover of "Vogue." So I think that there is this thing that's changing, and it is very much like the path forged by the girls in this all-boys school that's become co-ed. The funny thing is, I went to an all-girls college, so I had the 'women empowerment,' all-girls experience. I went to one of the Seven Sisters, so it was very much this old tradition of an all-women's college. It's truly extraordinary. In my mother's generation, every woman went to Radcliffe, Wellesley, Barnard, Sarah Lawrence—they all went there because that was where the great women were bred.



Greta Gerwig and Ryan Metcalf star in Whit Stillman's *Damsels in Distress*.

*Photo credit: Kerry Brown, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have a background in ballet, theatre and fencing. How have those experiences assisted you in your film work?

**Gerwig:** I'm a kinetic learner. I remember when I was a kid, they gave you a test to find out what kind of learner you were. I'm a product of a very dark period in the California public school system. [laughs] Every year they changed the curriculum and decided, "Oh no, we're not going to teach phonetic spelling. Oh wait, we are." It's such a hodgepodge of stuff. I was an auditory kinetic learner and for me, as an athlete and a dancer, if I don't understand a character, if it doesn't sit in my body right, if I don't feel like I understand it in my body, it's not there. I can't remember my lines if it's not there. I remember in high school and college doing plays and I never remember working on memorizing my lines. As soon as I had blocking, I would know them instantly. As soon as I had movement associated with things, I would be fine. That's why auditions were so hard for me when I started acting. You'd be sitting in a chair and having to look at someone and say the lines, but you would be a talking head. I always needed to get up and move around and do things because otherwise it just felt like I was acting and not just

having a conversation. So I always needed to have some kind of physical reality to what I was doing.

I also think sports are really great for anyone who’s an actor because in sports you don’t have to do anything that you don’t have to do. The whole goal is to win so it teaches you a lot about economy of movement and economy of goal-directed activity. That’s a good way to think about acting. Instead of being like, “I have to cry here,” it’s more like, “I’m doing this thing and the crying is secondary.” When I’d fence, I’d scream a lot. They knew me on the circuit as “the girl who screams,” but I didn’t choose to scream. It just came out of this very natural place. And I think for most people, sweating, screaming, crying—those are all secondary to the activity. So it helps me to think of acting like that.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your character in “Damsels in Distress” talks of being in a tailspin. Can you relate?

**Gerwig:** I went into a tailspin after I shot “Greenberg,” but before anyone saw it. I had just finished shooting it and I didn’t work until it came out, except for one small movie that I made with a friend of mine. I think those tailspin moments are really good for you because they make you more humble. I just did this amazing movie and I was in LA and all of a sudden I was back in New York and broke and unemployable. I was like, “I was just with a movie star, what happened?” And then it’s back to reality, but I think it was so valuable to me in the long term because it made me so grateful when I started working again. If I had gone straight to work on another movie, I wouldn’t have appreciated it nearly as much. I knew that success is so fleeting. There’s an episode of “Louis” where Louis C.K. says, “I’m quitting, I’m not going to play the little room because they won’t let me make these jokes,” and Joan Rivers yells at him and says, “You can’t do that! You don’t know when you’re lucky.” I think I felt that. You’ve got to know when you’re lucky.

*‘Damsels in Distress’ stars Greta Gerwig, Analeigh Tipton, Megalyn Echikunwoke, Carrie MacLemore, Hugo Becker, Billy Magnussen, Ryan Metcalf and Adam Brody. It was written and directed by Whit Stillman. It opens April 13 at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated PG-13.*



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