

Interview: Director Rebecca Miller Executes ‘Maggie’s Plan’

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CHICAGO – Quirky Greta Gerwig is at it again (being quirky), and this time she’s looking for solutions in “Maggie’s Plan.” The made-in-New-York-City film has overtures of Woody Allen, combined with “Crossing Delancey.” Director Rebecca Miller (“Personal Velocity”) produces a valentine to all her influences and settings.

Maggie (Gerwig) is a single woman with a “plan.” She will use in-vitro fertilization in order to have a child, given that her track record with relationships is not good. Through her academic work, she meets John (Ethan Hawke), a professor whose shaky marriage to Georgette (Julianne Moore, adopting a Meryl Streep-like accent) is distracting his plans to finish his novel. John and Maggie hook up, and John leaves his marriage to be with her, and their newborn daughter. Maggie now has executed her plan, but was it the right one?



Director Rebecca Miller (center) with Greta Gerwig and Bill Hader on the Set of ‘Maggie’s Plan’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Director Rebecca Miller – who is joined in this interview by producer Damon Cardasis – is a veteran filmmaker, actress and novelist. Her father is iconic playwright Arthur Miller, whose relationship with photographer Inge Morath (Miller’s mother) was right after his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. After graduating from Yale University in the 1980s, she pursued sculpture at first, but added nonverbal films to her exhibits. At the same time, she acted in a number of notable films, including “Regarding Henry.” Her first movie as filmmaker was “Angela” (1995), and she

adapted her own collections of stories, “Personal Velocity,” into a feature film seven years later. “Maggie’s Plan” is her sixth feature.

HollywoodChicago.com: This film feels like an homage to both Woody Allen and the film ‘Crossing Delancey.’ As you were building the adaptation of Karen’s story, what kind of fingerprint did you want to put upon it as a director?

Rebecca Miller: The pickle guy came from a friend of mine from college who became a pickle entrepreneur. I was interested in adapting in a couple ways. My main interest was in the movies of the 1940s, the type of screwball comedies that were also romantic – like ‘Philadelphia’ and ‘His Girl Friday’ – films within the theme of ‘re-marriage.’ I thought it would be interesting to make a contemporary film in that great American form.

HollywoodChicago.com: Damon, what is the state of filming in New York City? Is it prohibitive to independent films, because of the parameters, or is the film office willing to be accommodating based on the budget level of your film?

Damon Cardasis: I think they are very accommodating. They encourage filming in New York, and they try to make it as easy as possible. The one struggle might be logistics, because of the congestion, and of course New Yorkers are used to having their way, so if they want to walk through a shot, they do it. [laughs] For the most part, the city is amazing, and I think New Yorkers love the fact that the city is filmed frequently. Also, there are a lot of films shooting in New York City currently, so there is a scramble for crews.

HollywoodChicago.com: Maggie, since Maggie’s voice was so strong and unique, as you were writing the screenplay, did you picture a particular actress as Maggie, and was it Greta Gerwig?

Miller: No, and I don’t tend to do that, because it is really hard when the actor you pictured can’t do the film. In a way, a lot of my work is in the re-writing once it is cast, as I adapt to the rhythms of how the roles are played out by the actors.



Ethan Hawke and Greta Gerwig in ‘Maggie’s Plan’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: Damon, you have acted, directed and produced. How did all those variations of show business help you most on the ‘Maggie’s Plan’ set?

Cardasis: All the worlds bleed together in a sense, in a producer’s role. I’m perfectly willing to be a sounding board for Rebecca on any type of subject regarding the film. Bringing those elements together is part of what I like to do as a producer, in the role as ‘CEO’ of the film set. I take a lot of pride in helping Rebecca execute her vision, and love doing that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Everyone has their own acting style, and you had an amazing cast, with actors who are polished and precise about characterizations. How do you approach an Ethan, Julianne or Greta if they are just not getting a particular scene with their character, and how did you make the relatable adjustments for them. based on their acting style?

Miller: It’s hard to describe something like that. You work with each individual actor as you perceive their needs to be. It’s something that you’ve figured out in the weeks of pre-production. In a way, after you’re done directing there is a sense of amnesia that washes over you, you can’t exactly remember how you did things. It’s a zone, just like an athlete, when they can’t remember what they did, but somehow got it done.

At best, I think of a director as a magnet. You get all the metal fillings in all the individual actors and crew, and get those filings moving toward

your magnetic direction. There is a magic thing called ‘tone’ in a film, that the director must master and maintain. The script is the musical score, and everyone has to play off that score. Even I have to interpret it. The producers are there to eliminate obstacles to that interpretation.

Cardasis: I liken it to a scoring line in hockey. If the center, who is the director, has the puck and they’re going for the goal, the left and right wingers – the producers – are knocking the defenders out of the way so the goal can be achieved. That’s my job, knocking things out the way so Rebecca can attain her vision.

HollywoodChicago.com: Damon, you portrayed the title character of Lysander in ‘Vicky & Lysander,’ a cult YouTube series. What was satisfying about developing a character over a couple seasons, and what was your favorite moment for the character in the series?



Damion Cardasis & Rebecca Miller in Chicago
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Cardasis: This was a sketch I wrote in college that was five minutes long, that turned into a 90 minute storefront performance on the lower east side that ran for three months. The YouTube series came out of that, about an effeminate man and his deluded wife, who is trying to social climb in Manhattan. The character got to evolve a bit, it was absurdist and campy. The most fun I had with it was a car chase, with Lysander, Vicky and their fashion designer friend. In the midst of it, there is a cat fight.

HollywoodChicago.com: What catharsis were you trying to release when you wrote the short story collection ‘Personal Velocity,’ and what the hardest part about adapting it into a film?

Miller: Every work coming from the creator is about getting the demons out, and each character in those stories had a different personal crisis to get through. It was a book of crossroads. I dedicated ‘Maggie’s Plan’ to the late Gary Winnick of Indigent Films, because he got the financing for ‘Personal Velocity’ – and suggested it be a trilogy – and he was one of the first to making lower budget features using digital rather than film.

The challenge was restructuring the stories, breaking them apart and putting them back together visually. There was a connective tissue that went through them, but they don’t actually meet.

HollywoodChicago.com: For both of you, since you are both long time New York City residents, do you agree with the statement, ‘leave New York City before you get too hard’ or is there a way to survive the city with out getting ‘too hard’?

Miller: It’s too late for me. [laughs]

Cardasis: I think there is a way to survive. New York keeps me going because what I love about it is the humanity about it. There are so many stories and so much diversity – just get on the subway. It keeps my feet on the ground, and keeps me alive because I see that diversity every day. I’m constantly learning and constantly wide-eyed about the city.

Miller: I agree with that, it does keep us human. It’s an immersive experience, unlike Los Angeles, where you just go where you’re suppose to be, and you don’t get the people and surprises.

HollywoodChicago.com: Okay, then, staying on that theme. Which scene or moment do you think is most human in ‘Maggie’s Plan’?

Cardasis: I love the moment where Maggie talks to John about her mother. It was very human, very honest, in both writing and portrayal.

Miller: I love that scene, too, but since Damon already picked it...[laughs] There is a scene where Georgette decides to return John’s book, in a creative way. In that scene, I think Ethan and Julianne played it so real and so emotionally there, but at the same time it goes from being furious at each other to another connection between them. Those kind of big twists, I live to direct those moments. That is heaven to me.

“Maggie’s Plan” continues its limited release in Chicago on May 27th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Greta Gerwig, Ethan Hawke, Julianne Moore, Bill Hader, Maya Rudolph and Wallace Shawn. Screenplay adapted and directed by Rebecca Miller. Rated “R”



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