

Interview: Damien Chazelle & Rosemarie DeWitt of 'La La Land'

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CHICAGO – Bringing the musical movie genre back requires a bit of nostalgia, a nod to modernity and always old fashioned star power. Writer/director Damien Chazelle (“Whiplash”) combined all three to produce “La La Land,” with Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling as star-crossed lovers. Rosemarie DeWitt also has a featured role.

Set in the mythical land of Los Angeles, the story features actress Mia (Emma Stone) and jazz pianist Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) as artists who are trying to reach their own peaks in their respective professions. The tale feeds off the time-honored musical tradition of lovers trying to connect, often through song and dance, and the film embraces its soaring music and touchingly romantic choreography.



Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling in 'La La Land'

Photo credit: Lionsgate

Damien Chazelle exploded onto the film scene in 2014 with his feature debut “Whiplash,” the intense and searing drama about a jazz drummer. From Rhode Island, the filmmaker began as a scriptwriter in Los Angeles, before scoring at the Sundance Film Festival with a short film version of “Whiplash,” which secured its financing for the feature. Based on that film’s success, Chazelle was able to begin his dream project of “La La Land,” a story that he had envisioned years before.

Rosemarie DeWitt is a familiar character actress, and portrays the Ryan Gosling character’s sister in the film. She has been in several high profile projects, including TV’s “United States of Tara” and “Mad Men,” and films as diverse as “Rachel Getting Married” (2008), “The Odd Life of Timothy Green” (2012) and “Digging for Fire” (2015). She is married to actor Ron Livingston.

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed the two creative participants from "La La Land," on bringing back the musical to its lofty form.

HollywoodChicago.com: Damien, what single scene in your own history with musicals is most deeply moving to you, in the combination of song and emotion? And how did you use that inspiration in constructing your film scenes?

Damien Chazelle: There are a lot of options...

Rosemarie DeWitt: Do you want me to whisper in your ear? [She does]

Chazelle: Yes. That seems to be a repeat though. It's the movie musical 'Top Hat,' where Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance 'Cheek to Cheek.' The music is romantic and heartbreaking, and they're beautiful together, but mostly it's about that kind of fluffy and silly plot mechanics that allow for incredible moments of emotion. Right when the musical number ends, Ginger Rogers – who I believe carries the burden of this – shows the emotion on her face. She allows to be swept up, but realizes at the end of the number that real life begins again.

It's that idea of the give and take between real life and dreams. When the musical fantasy ends, the real life returns. If 'La La Land' is about one thing, it's about that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Rosemarie, besides the brilliant opening sequence, what element of living in Los Angeles is most prevalent in the film for you, that wouldn't necessarily ring true for a non-native?

DeWitt: There are so many little things that are so Los Angeles, but for me there is overarching thing that goes beyond the cynicism of the business there, people do go there hoping against hope that their dreams will come true. I've been an actor in both New York City and Los Angeles, equally in both right now. In New York, it's all about the base hit, then getting another base hit...just keep going. In L.A., it's about the dream and realization of the home run. It's a very different thing, and people feel differently about it there.

On the other hand, we're snarky and mad about it. It's never nice to us, and it's a push-pull. For Damien to encapsulate something so big for all of us was a major achievement. Even the chiropractors there have screenplays...no one is in Los Angeles without dreams.

HollywoodChicago.com: The musical, as a genre, has had so many ebbs and flows since the studio system ended in the late 1950s. What musical post that era do you think is influential not only in that genre but as a film on its own, and how does its tone resonant in your film?

Chazelle: Certainly the language of how to do a musical on screen changed after the studio era, but I would say that the form that is translated in modern musicals are the misbegotten children of Bob Fosse, and his 'Cabaret' was the first to define that form. The language and the editing – and using the editing to set a musical scene as much as the choreography – created a musical like a filmmaker.

You can draw a direct line from that moment to today, where a song and dance number is set up with 16 cameras rolling, and then you chop it up into tiny little bits, which is a chore – that is not what Fosse did at all. Fosse was part of a musical tradition, because he began as a choreographer, and a brilliant director. He knew how to use the editing to help the dance and the overall musical numbers. With 'Whiplash,' I looked at Fosse films, with 'La La Land,' we looked at the classic studio musicals. There is more 'All That Jazz' in 'Whiplash' than 'La La Land.'



Rosemarie DeWitt and Damien Chazelle at the Chicago International Film Festival
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Rosemarie, you've done a number of character roles. Where do you think the transition occurred in your career that had you move beyond simply a character, to someone who had to carry a project over the goal line and why?

DeWitt: I don't know if I've done that, because I think about all films as an ensemble, because it's so hard to make a film. Everybody's contribution is so important...for example, the scene in 'La La Land' where the camera physically goes in the pool, all that set up had to be right. The costumes could have sunk the film, they had to be right. So I don't ever think about my 'role' being over or above anything, I just like to be part of the ensemble.

HollywoodChicago.com: So much happened with 'Whiplash,' including a Best Picture nomination and wins for Editing, Sound Mixing and J.K. During the period of success that the film had, what element of that time really stands out for you, apart from the award recognition, that really was most satisfying?

Chazelle: I think really it's about meeting people, and having people you respect actually see the film. One thing fed into another, like meeting Patricia Kelly [Gene Kelly's third wife]. She manages his estate and legacy now, and invited Ryan [Gosling] and I to 'rummage around the drawers' of his career. We saw the original 'Singing in the Rain' script, for example. That's the great thing that came out of 'Whiplash,' at the core is the connections.

DeWitt: At heart, performers and directors are storytellers, so to get an opportunity to sit with someone that you admire and hear there stories is one of the real job perks.

Chazelle: I got to sit with Shirley MacLaine and talk to her about working with Bob Fosse, which was entirely special. That's when I was really pinching myself, as a movie junkie, to make sure it wasn't just a dream.

"La La Land" opens everywhere on December 16th. Featuring Emma Stone, Ryan Gosling, J.K. Simmons, John Legend and Rosemarie DeWitt. Written and directed by Damien Chazelle. Rated "PG-13"



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