

## Interview: Character Study With ‘An Education’ Director Lone Scherfig

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CHICAGO – In the new coming-of-age film, “An Education,” director Lone Scherfig creates a different time (the early 1960s) and place (middle class England) to tell the story of a teenage girl’s conflict between her academic life and older man lover.

Jenny (Carey Mulligan) is an English schoolgirl in 1962, right at the edge of the coming revolution. She is working hard to get into Oxford, through the ardent wishes of her father (Alfred Molina). When a chance meeting with a older man (Peter Sarsgaard) begins to derail her advancements, she get an education that can never be taught in books.



Between Girl and Woman: Carey Mulligan as Jenny in ‘An Education’  
Photo credit: Kerry Brown for Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago got the chance to interview the director of An Education, Lone Scherfig. She spoke about film’s theme of the transitional life in teenage girls, the relationship between class and education, plus working as a Scandinavian director within the stricture of Great Britain.

**HollywoodChicago:** When you were developing the story and feel of “An Education,” what thoughts came to mind about your own transition from girl to woman? How did you relate to the main character Jenny?

**Lone Scherfig:** I think related to her and understood her falling for David. I understand living within a family constellation, my parents were similar, and there was something about it that I could identify in her appetite for films, music and books. The age when I was her age, though, was much more liberated, easier and the country I come from has much less of a class system. So she has problems that I’ve never encountered.

**HC:** How did you or an outside consultant prepare Carey Mulligan to be a girl in England in 1962, which seemed on the edge of all breakthroughs to the Swinging 1960s?

**LS:** Carey and I did that, we wouldn’t ask anybody else. The talks about where the actors find the character and where I would try to make the period real for her was something I’d lived through but she hadn’t. It is a way of beginning a conversation that is light, important and packed with information. Then when you come down to shooting there is a based of references, then it is about emotion, not just information.

I made boards for all the main characters with pictures I felt were relevant for each character. The art department, costume department and make-up also had many pictures. We played music, because I wanted the cast members who were too young to have known the period to get to know it, be comfortable in it and be inspired by it.

**HC:** Besides putting on an accent, what kind of native or cultural preparation did Peter Sarsgaard do in preparation for David?

**LS:** Peter has spent time in London before, and in a way getting the accent is getting the character. British actors access material that way. They wouldn’t ask about a character’s childhood or social background, but what the dialect is. From then on they can find the character. It’s one way of working that I don’t see in any other country.

The producers hired Peter and it was one more reason that I really wanted the job, because I think Peter is a phenomenal actor.

I read the story story that the film is based on again recently and the author writes something about her David, the real David, had a phony accent and it is his way of being posh.

Something that was put on and made him a bit of an outsider. She found that deadly attractive. So it works that Peter has a put-on accent.



Peter Sarsgaard as David in ‘An Education’  
Photo credit: Kerry Brown for Sony Pictures Classics

**HC:** The pursuit of Jenny by David highlights the predatory nature that women have to deal with in men of all ages. Was your film an indictment of that kind of age gap, considering the result of the relationship, or was it just part of the circumstance of being an attractive and desired woman?

**LS:** We made an effort to make her responsible for what happened as well. She is not just a victim, she is the one often pushing the gas pedal. She is the one who leans over to kiss him, she is the one that wants to wait for sex until she is 17, which implies she will sleep with him in the very near future.

Technically she is the victim, because he is so much older than she is, but she is seducing him as well. It makes it more complex and layered that he is not sure he wants to see her again. But if you look at the story from him point of view, he is being seduced as well.

**HC:** What kind of spotlight did you want to shine on the class system in England that plays in the background at the time, when you told Jenny’s story?

**LS:** It’s about education, but that in many ways equals class in England. It is a strong class system and because her mother doesn’t have an education she can’t help Jenny, in the way she probably needs it. And because Jenny’s father doesn’t have any education as well, it’s possible for someone like David to come in and steal her.



Also looking at the character of Helen, sort of a dumb blonde in the story, she can lead a fantastic life but she is so dependent on her looks and other people. All of the characters are defined by how much education they have, and means it defines their place in the class system, it still does. More than in the U.S. and definitely more than my native Denmark.

**HC:** Despite the film being set over 40 years ago, what issues do you feel are still apparent for women as they try to navigate the social, economic and sexual issues of transitioning into adulthood?

**LS:** The film is a bit of a time machine, and I say thank God some of it is not relevant anymore. What attracted me to the film is not about this is an important story to tell today. But I do think it is nuanced. And I do think the discussion of values that is in all Nick Hornby's [the screenwriter] work and about the way that the love for these characters are shared with the audience, that is a moral act. That gives the film a certain value, but if I wanted to make a film about how it is to be a young girl today, I should have picked a different story.

I think it does compete, though, with whatever is out there in the film market for my daughter, sister or mother, they would recognize themselves in this film than an ordinary romantic comedy.

**HC:** Even though the character of Helen plays rather dim in contrast to Jenny, I detected a note of sympathy for her. What do you like about Helen and where do you think she'll end up?

**LS:** We talked about that, Rosamund [Pike, who played Helen] and I. These are real people. We don't know where the real Helen is today. We know where Danny [her boyfriend] is, we know where David and Jenny are, but Helen we don't know. So we made up a back story for her and what will happen to her.

We are entering this little moment in her life where she is at her most beautiful and she has the best place to live. We care a lot for her. We wanted to give her taste and style. I think it's really cool that she looks sophisticated and intelligent, but then when she starts talking you think 'oh my God.'

She is warm and erotic, we wanted that because we wanted Jenny to look at her and Danny, and realize that someone in this group of characters has a proper sex life. That was Helen and Danny.

In some ways she is a role model, but she is fragile because she doesn't have an education. Probably today she is sorting out those things, those dresses she had from an earlier era.



Director Lone Scherfig in Chicago, October 13, 2009.  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HC:** Despite being very young, Jenny seems to have a sexual sophistication older than her years – in fact displaying more maturity regarding losing her virginity than David. What did you want to reveal about a girl's relationship to her own sexuality in that scenario era and interplay?

**LS:** That comes from the original memoir. Lynn [Barber, the author] was like that. There is a photo taken of her a few years after this story, where she is really a femme fatale. Her love for France and her general appetite desire for books, films and men is all in her character.

It suits the film that Carey Mulligan is more poised and sophisticated, that's how we decided to make her. That is a casting thing. And that is how Carey is, I didn't want to push her into a direction where she was more aggressive in her approach to the things that she wants.

**HC:** A girl's relationship to her father is a highly actualized theme in An Education. Do you think the roots of Jenny's willingness to engage with the older David are embedded in her relationship with her father?

**LS:** Yes I do. No one has asked me that question before. I think if you grow up with a man like Jack, someone like Graham, her young beau, would be boring. I think why many young girls are attracted to men older than themselves is that they are more mature and you want to be with someone who knows something that you don't. The love she has for David and the reason she doesn't ask questions, she wants the mystique and worldliness.

She says at the end of the film, with her boyfriends, that they are all boys. She wanted to have someone who reflects how life is seen from the other gender, rather than someone that offers you an entrance into the future that you have been program to go towards. In a way, it's a sense of immaturity that you need someone to take you somewhere. But the world is so appealing, that if you take some detours, you would

want to.

**HC:** The contrast between Jenny’s life with David vs. a potential life like Miss Stubbs – her teacher – was highlighted well. Was it women like Ms. Stubbs, and to a lesser degree the Headmaster character, that kept the hope for different opportunities for women that flowered in the post war era? Did you have a Ms. Stubbs in your life?

**LS:** It could have been. I think Ms. Stubbs is more from Nick Hornby’s life than mine. The good teacher that is important for your life, especially when you come from a home where they can’t help you. My mother was a headmaster, but she not at all like Emma Thompson. So if I needed that type of advice, I’d go home, not to school. And because of that, there was never a doubt in my mind that I wouldn’t have an education.

**HC:** Finally, you are a Scandinavian director guiding a mostly British cast. What are the major differences and similarities between Scandinavian and British cultural sensibilities?

**LS:** The class system, that is the main difference. In England, you take it for granted that you can be world champions, because in many ways you are. We don’t have that in Denmark. It is much more modest. We’re not as polite. I’ve run into conflicts again and again because I am not afraid of the British. The English thing is to avoid conflicts and tackle things with dignity. That is something I have to learn.

But it is a great place for a director because everyone around you sets such high standards for themselves. They are brilliant at their work because they are ambitious and the actors don’t see themselves as stars, they see themselves as serving the writer and the production. Working in a country where people have so much more at stake in what they do, produces better scripts and better actors.

*“An Education” has a limited release October 23rd, 2009. Featuring Carey Mulligan, Peter Saarsgard, Alfred Molina, Rosamund Pike, Emma Thompson and Dominic Cooper, directed by Lone Scherfig Rated “PG-13”*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]

Senior Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [15]

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