

Greta Gerwig Lights Up the Life of ‘Frances Ha’

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CHICAGO – Greta Gerwig is a gift to the type of film acting that dominates the screen. This beautiful, versatile actor gives poignant energy to her latest title character, “Frances Ha,” a collaboration with indie director Noah Baumbach (“Greenberg”).

Frances is a lovable live wire as an artist, lover and loyal friend. She is somewhat a victim of that liveliness, but has a tenacity that keeps her adventure going. Gerwig creates a character that is always vulnerable, but asserts that on-the-sleeve emotionalism as a strength. The film is a black-and-white tribute to the late 1970s/early ‘80s period of maestro Woody Allen, but maintains its own identity with modern takes on post millennial relationships and friends. “Frances Ha” is a celebration, whether you relate to her life in the moment or have an enjoyable revelation of ‘remember when.’

Frances (Gerwig) is a modern dance apprentice in a medium size company, barely scraping by in the hot environs of New York City, in the borough of Brooklyn. Her boyfriend proposes living together, and she responds by breaking up with him. It’s up to her best friend Sophie (Mickey Sumner) to help her find sanity and share an apartment. But life has a way of changing its mind.



Dance the Life Away: Frances (Greta Gerwig) in ‘Frances Ha’
Photo credit: IFC Films

Sophie surprises her by moving to Manhattan, which she cannot afford. Suddenly without a roommate or prospects, she hooks up with Lev and Benji (Adam Driver and Michael Zegen), two trust fund babies who are rooming together and gives her shelter. She loses a major dance gig in the company, and must spend the Christmas holidays with her parents back in Sacramento, California. Facing New York City again will require a major transition, but Frances will get by, if only to connect to Sophie again.

Yes, that’s it. A slice in the life of another make-it-there-make-it-anywhere hopeful artist in New York City, with a survival instinct that never says die. The film is so alive and natural, jumping off the screen in glorious black and white, with Frances/Greta leading the way. She is a motor-mouth, especially when her back is against the wall, as if she can talk her way out of the dilemma. She’s not a hero, just another

hopeful soul.

The Woody Allen tribute begins early, as a montage shows Sophie and Frances sharing some NYC fun, as the soundtrack blares an Allen-esque song cycle (director Baumbach helps us out by similarly framing the shots). It's refreshing to see this direct Woody homage, because so many of the most powerful directors today owe their sensibility to the endless loops of Allen films through the VCR. Even if they use his vision indirectly, it acknowledges Allen's status as the "King of New York City Movies."

Greta Gerwig is making her way into the treasure zone. Her Frances (she co-wrote the screenplay) has to play as a twin to her own soul, she so closely aligns with the character. Whether doing a dance move that allows her to stay in an apartment, signaling a dude that she won't be putting out or nervously over-analyzing herself at a dinner party, she inhabits a memorable creature. There is a trip to Paris sequence that is a reminder about timing, and the ticking away of opportunity that is both surprising and heartbreaking. Gerwig is simply great.



BFFs: Sophie (Mickey Sumner) and the Title Character in 'Frances Ha'
Photo credit: IFC Films

Baumbach also fills the movie with a supporting cast that feels perfect. Although the character of Sophie makes some bad life decisions, the actor Mickey Sumner knows the balancing act required to portray her, and she's the ultimate BFF for Frances. Driver and Zegen make perfect do-nothing roommates, living off the dime of someone else in the greatest city in the world. Life is both fair and unfair, which "Frances Ha" and her pals illustrate perfectly.

Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig hook into that particular time of adult life, where everything seems possible, yet that light at the end of the decision tunnel could also be an oncoming train. Ah, to be young, and in New York City.

"Frances Ha" continues its limited release in Chicago on May 24th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Greta Gerwig, Mickey Sumner, Adam Driver, Michael Zegen and Michael Esper. Screenplay by Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig. Directed by Noah Baumbach. Rated "R"



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