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Greta Gerwig Interview The Growing Pains of 'Frances Ha'

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, May 15th, 2013

Frances Ha concerns the metaphoric end of the affair between best-friends Frances (Greta Gerwig) and Sophie (Mickey Sumner), and growing pains as the young adults carve their way in the world at large. Poignant, painful, and by turns hilarious, the film is the result of an auspicious creative partnership between Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach.

Frances Ha might be read as the comic flipside to Baumbach's tragi-comic indie film *Greenberg* (2010, Ben Stiller). Where *Greenberg* tracked a failed and flailing 40-something year old musician and his friends, *Frances Ha* profiles an aspiring and flailing 20-something modern dancer and her roommates. The two stories share similar themes, but are told respectively from "his" and "her" points of view. Both films are directed by Baumbach and feature Gerwig, but Gerwig co-authored *Frances Ha* for a collaboration that both artists describe as "fun and easy." Their film progeny is a work lighter in tone than we have come to expect from Baumbach, with distinct echoes of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* shot in black-and-white. In the recent *New Yorker* feature, Baumbach compared *Frances Ha* to a "three-and-a-half minute pop song." He detailed how they managed to keep it lean and mean with digital camera and bare bones crew, filming on the down-low, obtaining permits under the pseudonym "Untitled Digital Workshop."

Immediately following screenings of their film during the 56th San Francisco International Film Festival, Sophia Stein spoke with Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach in separate hotel suites at the Ritz-Carlton, where they shared their unique perspectives about the making of *Frances Ha*.



With Greta Gerwig

Sophia Stein: You have said that *Frances Ha* is about the death of youth. What do you mean by that?

Greta Gerwig: *Frances Ha* opens with this montage, Frances having this perfect day with her best-friend Sophie. I think the truth is, it's their last perfect day. But [in life] you never know when that final day is; you only know afterwards, when you never experience it again. I'm interested in those moments. They are inherently sad — and happy because they are leading to something new, you don't know what, and that's exciting, but ... *Frances* has a lot of those moments, where you want to freeze something or save something: that moment when you're in the airport with your parents, and you just want to run back and turn back time, and stay with them ... and you can't do it, because it's done. There is nothing to memorialize the passing of youth; I am interested in moments when you just realize that something is gone.

S2: It is one of the most intimate portraits of female friendship that I've ever seen on screen. In the film, you refer to this as "the secret world of ineffable friendship." Can you talk about

the inspiration for Frances' and Sophie's 'the story of us'?

GG: There were six of us who lived together after college and beyond, and we used to build up these narratives of what we were going to be like, how it was going to be, and what we were going to achieve. Talking about how we were going to buy a house together upstate (all of us) and go live there; and that would be our safe-house, if anybody got divorced or something happened; and then I'm going to win a Pulitzer before I'm thirty — we would build up these ideas of what we wanted. We don't do that anymore because it reaches a point where you start having the life that you're having. I was actually nervous about putting 'the story of us' in the screenplay, because I questioned, is that too cheesy? But I think we earned it, and it works.

S2: I remember when I was preparing to leave home for the first time to start college, and a family friend observed: "You realize, it will be many years before you have a permanent home again." There is that period in young adulthood that is marked by transience. When did you get the idea of structuring the story around Frances' different addresses?

GG: Before we had the through-line of the love story between Sophie and Frances, I had started thinking of the screenplay almost as short stories in these different places. When I saw Mike Leigh's *Another Year*, structured over four seasons to ellipse time: this is the day from this season that we are going to look at — I suggested to Noah, let's think of the story in chapters. Noah came up with the idea of the title cards with the addresses on them.

S2: You are a Sacramento native, but today you live in New York City. Did you always dream of building your life there?

GG: When I was young, my dad would travel a lot for work — D.C., New Orleans, Barcelona. And there were several key trips to New York. I have these super-vivid memories of New York City. I remember I was in a cab with my mom (I think I was five — probably 1989, which was a pretty rough time there), and I asked, "Mom, when we get home, can I put on my rock-and-roll outfit?" And the Cabbie said, "I'll wait for you — you're my kind of girl!" I remember being simultaneously scared, and also I loved it! I saw *42nd Street* on Broadway — one-hundred tap dancers on stage, which just kind-of blew my mind permanently! As I got older, I saw Woody Allen movies and really built up a mythology of the place. I just had to get back there. It felt inevitable. I was very lucky to attend Barnard, which changed my life.

S2: Was your choice to shoot in black-and-white inspired by Woody Allen's *Manhattan*?

GG: In a way, because the Gordon Willis' photography looks so beautiful — so warm and soft, even though it was black-and-white; we loved that. We were doing *Frances Ha* in this independent way, and we thought, why not? We *can* do it, why don't we *do it*! If you make a studio movie, you'll never be able to shoot in black-and-white; they'll never finance a black-and-white picture because it limits the financial possibilities. So part of the thrill was having the ability to do it. And I think it really works with the story, because it creates instant nostalgia, and a cinematic grandeur that elevates the story. Frances would never think she was living in a glorious black-and-white world. We thought it would be kind-of-great to tell a story of a twenty-seven year old that wouldn't be scruffy, that would be big.

S2: When did you get the idea of collaborating with Noah on the project?

GG: He actually got the idea — after I had acted in his film *Greenberg*. (I loved that experience, it was the best time I had ever had acting!) Sometime after *Greenberg* was released, Noah emailed me that he was interested in making a movie in this stripped-down way and would I be interested in collaborating on a script with him? Noah knew that I had written things before and done a lot of improv, and I think he sensed from our collaboration on *Greenberg* — the way we would sit and talk about Florence — that we would write well together. I feel so lucky — because I felt like I had gotten, not "side-tracked" by acting, but I was definitely doing a lot more acting than writing at a certain point. It's easier to do [a job] when you're hired to do it, because someone is there saying:

“We want you to act.” “Oh, great!” When you’re writing, nobody is asking you to write, so you have to really self-generate. I had collected all these ideas, and I didn’t have anywhere to put them. I felt lucky when Noah asked me to write with him because it was as if I had been waiting for someone to ask.

S2: What was it like collaborating with a significant other in this way? Was it the best thing ever, or the worst, or both intermittently?

GG: It’s completely natural. There’s nothing hard about it. It’s the easiest thing in the world. I think, even if we weren’t together, we would make films together because it’s just so rare that you find people that you can really communicate with, in a shorthand. There have been brother filmmaking teams who collaborate well, and I think that collaboration is aided by closeness.

S2: So you are going to continue combining the writing and the acting?

GG: I am going to continue doing all manner of (hopefully) writing and acting and directing. This fall, I’m going to make a movie that I wrote by myself, that I’m not acting in, but that I’m going to direct. Noah is making a movie that he wrote by himself, with Ben Stiller acting in it, that I’m not acting in. So we’re going to do separate things a lot. I hope we keep collaborating every few years because it’s just fun. If you find something that is the most fun that you’ve ever had, why wouldn’t you just keep doing it!



Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig at the premiere of FRANCES HA at the 56th San Francisco International Film Festival. Photographed by Pamela Gentile, courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society

With Noah Baumbach

Sophia Stein: *Frances Ha* feels like a love letter to *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*. Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig — you’ve got a Woody Allen and Diane Keaton thing happening here?

Noah Baumbach: I loved those movies. Watching Greta, I feel sort-of how I felt watching Diane Keaton, where I just could see her do anything. Like Diane Keaton, Greta is such a unique presence, so funny, but so authentic at the same time.

S2: You have compared Greta to Carole Lombard —

NB: The stuff Carole Lombard does in *Twentieth Century* with John Barrymore is so physical, and hilarious, and unembarrassed. I think Greta has that. When I first thought about doing this movie (not even knowing what the movie was yet), I thought I would like to do something with Greta at the center, where you could see Greta from head to toe — just all her physical grace, beauty, awkwardness, and humor.

S2: You and Greta co-wrote this screenplay. What was that partnership like?

NB: We discovered early on that we had a lot of the same ideas for the movie. I don’t mean literal ideas — but the tone, the feel, we just both inherently saw it the same way. We didn’t have a ton of time in the same place while we were writing, a lot of it was done over email. We would often write scenes separately, send them, and rewrite each other. I always felt like whatever Greta sent me always worked with whatever I was working on. We always felt — very much of the same voice. It was really easy, and we had a really good time doing it.

S2: What was the kernel of the idea that set things in motion for this project?

NB: Really, I wanted to shoot something in New York again, with Greta, and in black-and-white. Greta had all these ideas and observations about her own life and her friends’ lives, and because it was Greta, her character was going to be twenty-seven. From the first document that we started emailing back and forth, it was very clear to me, even though I still had no idea what the movie was going to be. I felt, o.k., we just have to follow this, and something good is going to come out

of it.

S2: Did it complicate things to direct Greta in something that she co-authored?

NB: There is a kind-of compartmentalization that goes on, selective amnesia when you arrive on set. It's like: O.k., here's the text — yes, all of this thought, all of this work went into getting the script something like this — but once you're there, your job is to interpret it. Greta and I are not into improvisation; it's not how we work. I feel like there's more freedom, more room to play, when you actually have a great textual foundation. And Greta is so present as an actor, it's almost as if she forgot she wrote it.

S2: This movie is about characters who are cash poor, but intellectually rich – which more and more is the state of affairs in the United States and the world at large —

NB: The economics really are “story” for the character of Frances; almost all her decisions have an economic component, certainly money is a big part of her having to move from place to place. One thing that I really liked about *Frances Ha* as we conceived it, was that class and economics were built into the story. Sometimes in movies, characters will acknowledge that they have no money, but then everybody seems to do whatever they want to do anyway. It was important for us that these characters seriously grapple with economic realities.

S2: There are a lot of parallels between themes in Woody Allen's work and your own: neuroses, hypochondria, therapy. In what ways has Woody Allen's filmmaking influenced your storytelling?

NB: When I first started seeing Woody Allen movies or reading his New Yorker stuff as a kid, it was like crack – I couldn't get enough of it. It so spoke to me. I grew up in Brooklyn and went to the same high school that he did – under different circumstances. Both creatively and professionally, as far as I was concerned, he had the perfect film career. He made movies that he wanted to make.

S2: He was able to work around the studio system to a certain degree — with the support of a close network of producers and contributors —

NB: I have worked with the same couple of producers for a few movies now (Scott Rudin). And assuming they're all available, I prefer to work with the same group of people.

S2: So what is next for you?

NB: I'm going to shoot a movie in the fall with Ben Stiller again, and this time in New York.

S2: I am curious, whatever happened with Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*?

NB: That's a book that I adapted, a few years ago now, that I still want to do. Sometime ... I have to figure that out, cause I love that book, and I really think it could make a really great movie.

Where can you see Frances Ha? Find out [here](#).

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