



FEEL ALL THE FEELINGS: THE FILMS OF GRETA GERWIG

# Damsels in Distress

## Damsels in Distress

*Directed by:* Whit Stillman

©: Damsels Productions LLC

*Production Companies:* Steeplechase, Analytic

*Filmed with the support of:* The New York State Governor's Office for Motion Picture & Television Development

*Presented by:* Westerly Films

*Produced by:* Whit Stillman, Martin Shafer, Liz Glotzer

*Co-producer:* Charlie Dibe

*Line Producer:* Jacob Jaffke

*Consulting Producers:* Cecilia Kate Roque, Alicia Van Couvering

*Production Supervisor:* Joanna Lara

*Production Co-ordinator:* Stephanie Blackwood

*Locations:* Christopher A. Menges

*Post Supervisor:* Douglas O'Connor

*1st A.D.:* Curtis A. Smith Jr

*2nd A.D.:* Melinda Ziyadat

*Script [Supervisor]:* Dustin Bricker

*CASTING BY:* Kerry Barden, Paul Schnee,

Amy McIntyre Britt, Anya Colloff

*Written by:* Whit Stillman

*Cinematography by:* Doug Emmett

*Edited by:* Andrew Hafitz

*Production Design:* Elizabeth J. Jones

*Art Direction:* Brian Goodwin

*Set Decorator:* Emmanuelle Hoessly

*Costumes:* Ciera Wells

*Special Fashions:* Krista Blomberg

*Wardrobe:* Megan Sanders

*Make-up:* Anouck Sullivan

*Hair:* Satoko Ichinose

*Title Design:* Teddy Blanks, Chips

*Music by:* Mark Suozzo, Adam Schlesinger

*Orchestrations:* Mark Suozzo, Irwin Fisch, Michael Levine

*Music Supervisor:* Annie Pearlman

*Music Produced by:* Adam Schlesinger, Steven M. Gold

*Choreography:* Justin Cerne

*Sound:* Mikhail Sterkin

*Re-recording Mixer:* Tom Paul

*Supervising Sound & Music Editor:* Tom Paul

*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Anthony Vincent

*In grateful memory of Sam Chwat (1953-2011), dialect coach, for his charm, kindness and expertise*

*Cast:*

*The Damsels*

Greta Gerwig (*Violet Wister*)

Analeigh Tipton (*Lily*)

Megalyn Echikunwoke (*Rose*)

Carrie MacLemore (*Heather*)

*Their Distress*

Adam Brody (*'Charlie Walker', Fred Packenstacker*)

Hugo Becker (*Xavier*)

Ryan Metcalf (*Frank*)

Billy Magnussen (*Thor*)

Caitlin Fitzgerald (*Priss*)

Aubrey Plaza (*Depressed Debbie*)

Jermaine Crawford (*Jim Bose, 'Jimbo'*)

Zach Woods (*Rick DeWolfé*)

Alia Shawkat (*Mad Madge*)

Meredith Hagner (*Alice*)

Nick Blaemire (*'Freak' Astaire*)

Aja Naomi King (*Positive Polly*)

Taylor Nichols (*Professor Black*)

Carolyn Farina (*Carolina Antonucci*)

Domenico D'Ippolito (*'Complainer' student*)

Joe Coots (*barman*)

## Whit Stillman on 'Damsels in Distress'

Returning to college to visit friends some time after graduating, everyone was full of stories of an amazing group of girls who had revolutionised campus social life. They dressed up, wore perfume and transformed university socialising which in our day had been grungy and grim.

I never knew the girls or learned any specifics of their escapades but, proposing a college comedy to film companies, I found that analogous groups had emerged at many other colleges in the wake of coeducation. Suddenly I had a film idea more than one company wanted.

Coeducation had swept American university campuses in the very late 1960s and more particularly the early 1970s. But years and decades later some colleges with distinctly male identities still lacked an atmosphere entirely comfortable for women. Our idea was that 'Seven Oaks University' would be such a school – a formerly male bastion where decades after coeducation an atmosphere of male barbarism still prevails.

I was fortunate that the project ended up with Liz Glotzer and Martin Shafer at Castle Rock Entertainment with whom I had had such good experiences making *Barcelona* and *The Last Days of Disco*. Again, the experience of writing a script for them was exhilarating, as such supervision rarely is. In late January 2010, a month after submitting the delivery draft, standing on the deserted and windswept main street of Mark Twain's old haunt – Virginia City, Nevada – I got the call that they wanted to go ahead with a 'polish' with the idea of moving ahead with the film soon after.

For the production the pivotal moment came in the spring when we were discussing how to raise financing – the usual frustrating obstacle course of star casting, foreign presales, equity financing, and searching for a domestic distribution deal loomed. Having seen two good projects become hopelessly stuck in that morass I had been thinking of how it could be avoided. The experience with our first film, *Metropolitan*, had been to go ahead with whatever resources were at hand and that had gone well. The response was that for a film on that scale, or even 10 quite a bit above it, private investment would be immediately available. We were a go but our production had to be compact.

We had already started casting in Los Angeles with the young casting team of Amy Britt and Anya Colloff. Through them we had almost immediately found Analeigh Tipton (part undecided), Aubrey Plaza (part undecided) and Megalyn Echikunwoke for Rose.

I was starting from the usual position of ignorance with the excuse this time that I'd been living abroad. The film style known as 'Mumblecore' I had heard of but not actually witnessed or strained to hear. A meeting with the highly recommended Greta Gerwig was set for a West Village watering hole. As a striking pretty blonde we assumed that it would be to play the 'bombshell' Lily part.

Fortunately Greta had the insight to see herself in the Violet part, and she and her agents did not adhere to the stultifying rule that established actors not audition. After the casting base had shifted to Paul Schnee and Kerry Barden's operation in New York (Kerry had helped cast *The Last Days of Disco*) Greta came in to perform the Violet role in all its aspects, including stellar singing and tap dancing turns.

Cortez Nance (*groundskeeper*)  
Jordanna Drazin (*Emily Tweeter*)  
Madison Cerniglia (*classmate 1*)  
Veronica Mu (*classmate 2*)  
Laila Drew (*young Rose*)  
Shinnerie Jackson (*Sharise*)  
Gerron Atkinson (*sincere highway worker*)  
Jonnie Lewis Brown (*fresh highway worker*)  
Shawn Williams (*campus cop*)  
Doug Yasuda (*Professor Ryan*)  
Todd Bartels (*Charlie's friend 1*)  
Edward J. Martin (*Charlie's friend 2*)  
USA 2011©  
99 mins

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### Hannah Takes the Stairs

Sat 1 Jul 20:40; Fri 14 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by  
Programmer Kimberley Sheehan)

### Damsels in Distress

Wed 5 Jul 20:40; Sat 15 Jul 20:30

### Greenberg

Fri 7 Jul 18:05; Sat 29 Jul 20:50

### 20th Century Women

Sat 8 Jul 20:30; Fri 21 Jul 18:10

### Little Women

Sun 9 Jul 18:10; Tue 25 Jul 20:20; Sun 30 Jul 18:00

### Frances Ha

Mon 10 Jul 20:50; Tue 18 Jul 18:30; Fri 21 Jul 20:45

### Mistress America

Wed 12 Jul 20:50; Sun 30 Jul 12:50

### Lady Bird

Mon 17 Jul 20:45; Tue 25 Jul 18:30;  
Wed 26 Jul 20:30

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At one casting session Amy and Anya brought an actress in to read for Heather who seemed a bit unlikely for that role. It had been a discouraging morning with the script sounding like wood in the mouths of the talented performers who came in and I was in despair. Suddenly the wooden words made great sense in this actress' version. She still seemed a stretch for Heather but – in what I learned was a 'Mumblecore' pattern – the good actress turned out to be good at other film tasks too: in this case, a terrific director. Lena Dunham had just won the top prize with her film *Tiny Furniture* at South by Southwest and was involved in all sorts of promising activities.

This was a key meeting. Lena became a friend to the production, helped at a table reading, agreed to play a funny part in the film until work on her TV show intervened and – most importantly – introduced us to her film's co-producer, Alicia Van Couvering. The line producer Cecilia Roque had advised us on all our films and would help on *Damsels* as well. We had the idea of combining the production approach we had taken on the previous films with the techniques and young crew Mumblecore films such as Lena's used. Alicia would help set the path we'd follow. Through her we found the key young crew who would execute the film: co-producer Charlie Dibe, line producer Jacob Jaffke and cinematographer Doug Emmett. Then at a key moment Cecilia brought in the highly experienced indie Assistant Director Curtis Smith to run the set.

In New York the casting sessions run by Paul and Allison Estrin found a trio of actors who came in with beautifully worked out comic performances: Ryan Metcalfe as Frank ('do you mind if I try a version that's a little broad?'), Billy Magnussen bouncing off the walls as Thor (and later destroying a couple of costly radio mikes in his energetic performance – but worth it), and the very funny when sad Caitlin Fitzgerald as Priss. They would all be united in a colourful D.U. frat house scene.

An authentic Southern belle – from both Mississippi and Alabama – Carrie MacLemore was a knockout for the key Heather part, Jermaine Crawford (known for his work on *The Wire*) would be Jimbo, and Nick Blaemire, a skilled musicals hand, 'Freak' Astaire.

The shoot was a true case in Youth Outreach. Almost no one seemed much older than 25 and the great mass seemed college age or just out. They were joined by collaborators who had worked on nearly all our films such as Cecilia, composer Mark Suozzo and editor Andy Hafitz. Key for our shoots has been finding a central location where much of the work can be achieved. For *Damsels* locations manager Chris Menges found the dream location of all time.

## Violet Wister (Greta Gerwig)

Violet is the indomitable group leader – though later shown somewhat dominated – whose central project is looking for troubled souls to rescue. 'Violet has the element of the child who goes around looking for hurt birds,' says Stillman. 'Her group is a self-designated animal rescue league, looking for "hurt birds" they can assist. Unfortunately they sometimes misidentify a bird that isn't a hurt; sometimes the hurt bird strikes back.' Says Gerwig: 'Violet has such strange convictions, but she stands behind them so firmly and tries to get everybody else to see them too. The more people make fun of her and tell her she's crazy, the more it steels her to the task of improving the world and helping people improve themselves. While she's convinced that she's right about certain things, she's also pathologically open to being wrong. She's a glutton for punishment, which I think is very funny – she almost seeks disapproval so that she can improve herself.'

Production notes

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Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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