

LAURA VENNING

# GRETA GERWIG

ICONS OF CINEMA

UNOFFICIAL AND UNAUTHORISED



## A New American Auteur

Once she stepped behind the camera to write and direct *Lady Bird* (2017), she announced herself as an extraordinary new filmmaking talent and a chronicler of the last years of girlhood. Audiences fell head over heels in love with Saoirse Ronan's sharp-tongued, painfully real heroine. From then on, Gerwig's films would become touchstones for young women searching for themselves and for their experiences to be taken seriously. "I know what it is to want things," says young heroine Tracy (Lola Kirke) in *Mistress America* (2015), one of the films she co-wrote with Baumbach – a sentiment that's a through line in all her work.



From *Lady Bird* to *Little Women* (2019) to *Barbie* (2023) and now *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Gerwig has embraced her ambitions and crafted women's stories of longing and self-realisation on even bigger canvases. From a childhood spellbound by Technicolor Hollywood musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) to orchestrating 'I'm Just Ken' in *Barbie*, Gerwig has brought her creative dreams to life – dreams that are still grounded in totally real emotion. In doing so, she has won admiration from directors as renowned as Steven Spielberg, Barry Jenkins, James Cameron and Jane Campion. She is the only director whose first three films have all been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, and in 2024 she became the first American female director to be Jury President at the Cannes Film Festival.

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OPPOSITE:  
Gerwig as the  
endearingly  
chaotic Frances  
in *Frances Ha*.

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RIGHT MIDDLE:  
Gerwig and  
creative partner  
and husband  
Noah Baumbach  
attend the New  
York premiere of  
*Mistress America*.

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RIGHT BOTTOM:  
Gerwig at  
the closing  
ceremony of  
the Cannes Film  
Festival 2024.

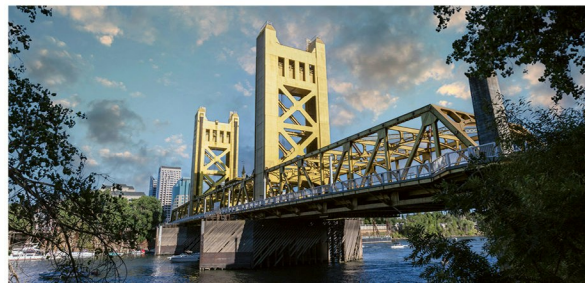


## Sacramento

Greta Celeste Gerwig was born on Thursday, 4 August, 1983, not among the intelligentsia of New York City, nor in the dream factory of Los Angeles, but in the decidedly more humdrum Sacramento, California's state capital. Gerwig was one of three children and her mother Christine worked as a nurse while her father Gordon worked for a credit union offering small business loans.

But both parents maintained an artistic sensibility: Gordon would keep a record of his dreams, played jazz music and introduced his daughter to Monty Python, while Christine had an eye for repurposing secondhand clothing. They didn't approve of television or, funnily enough, of Barbie dolls. Gerwig has described herself as an energetic, enthusiastic child, a self-confessed bossy boots who in kindergarten tried to direct her own playmates in a production of Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Starlight Express*. She adored reading, and would've gone to ballet lessons all day every day if her mother had let her. Christine became worried about the cult-like intensity of her daughter's ballet teacher, so enrolled her in hip-hop dance classes instead.

Gerwig's biography will sound familiar to you if you've seen *Lady Bird* – she wove many of her early experiences into the script, from spending her teenage years in a post-9/11



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OPPOSITE BOTTOM  
LEFT: Tower Bridge  
in Sacramento,  
California.

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LEFT TOP: Gerwig  
teaching ballet  
as Frances in  
*Frances Ha*.



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LEFT BOTTOM:  
Saoirse Ronan and  
Laurie Metcalf in  
*Lady Bird*.

Sacramento, the idiosyncrasies of her Catholic high school, to her desire to escape the West Coast for college. She even revealed that she had her first kiss with a boy who eventually came out as gay – an experience *Lady Bird* has with Danny (Lucas Hedges).

But Gerwig is adamant that *Lady Bird* is not at all like herself at that age. Though she did have scorching rows with her mother, Gerwig was much more of a rule-follower at school, and she's admitted that *Lady Bird* is a braver alter ego, a girl who was more wildly herself than Gerwig ever was.



LEFT: Poster for *The Muppets Take Manhattan*.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Judy Garland as Esther Smith in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Gene Kelly as Don Lockwood in *Singin' in the Rain*.

## Gotta Dance!

Some of Gerwig's earliest and most meaningful experiences with film involved musicals. As a very small child she was taken to a rerelease of *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984) where she ran to the front of the cinema and tried to climb into the screen – she has said she's been trying to immerse herself in these fictional worlds ever since.

Her favourite film to this day is *Singin' in the Rain* – the genuinely iconic Technicolor spectacular released in 1952

which Gerwig first saw at the age of five. Growing up, her biggest celebrity crush was star Gene Kelly, which somewhat set her apart from her friends, though like every 90s girl she also loved Leonardo DiCaprio.

Her imagination was sparked, and she discovered other classic Hollywood musicals like *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Oklahoma!* (1955) and the films of tap-dancing screen legend Fred Astaire.

Rather than developing a passion for film, she initially aspired to be a ballet dancer or musical theatre performer. This was probably also thanks to occasionally accompanying her father on business trips to New York and London and being taken to Andrew Lloyd Weber's stage musicals. And yet the Hollywood musical would also come to be an enormous influence on her later film work, most especially the dreamworld of *Barbie*.





## “I wanna go where culture is!”

Like Lady Bird, Gerwig dreamed of attending college on the East Coast and wanted to study musical theatre. But she quickly stalled: she was rejected from every acting college course she applied for, and her parents weren't wild about her pursuing something so impractical for such high tuition fees.



She eventually graduated from Barnard College at Columbia University in New York City with a degree in English and philosophy, but didn't abandon her love of the stage. She performed in an improv comedy group with future comedian, actress and *Saturday Night Live* cast member Kate McKinnon. Twenty years later, Gerwig would offer McKinnon the role of Weird Barbie, remembering the madcap musicals the pair devised together in college. It was also during her college years that she first discovered film as an art form.

Having graduated, Gerwig's plan was to gain a master's degree in playwriting, but again she was rejected from all the programs she applied for. Though she was dismissed by the academic side of the arts, she didn't give up. Like many of her heroines, she would follow her path in her own way, with tenacity and sheer force of talent.



OPPOSITE: Barnard College, New York City.

ABOVE: Gerwig and Kate McKinnon promoting *Barbie*.