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Laura Dern's Big Career of Complicated, Flawed Women

In Greta Gerwig's "Little Women," Dern again forgoes typecasting in favor of championing the real and the raw.

By Madeleine Deliee DEC 23, 2019



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Sometime around the time Laura Dern was earning both industry attention and accolades for her work as a young, fiery actress in films like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* and Martha Coolidge's *Rambling Rose* (which earned Dern her first Oscar nomination), her father, actor Bruce Dern, gave her some, perhaps, unsolicited advice.

"We were going on a road trip to ghost towns and penitentiaries — which is very Bruce, I feel like," recalls Dern, "and, on our way to Yosemite, he said, 'You know, I think you're going to be very frustrated as an ingenue.' I said, why? And he said, 'I

think you've fallen in love, like your mom and I, with playing complicated, flawed protagonists.'"

Indeed, this was the 1980s, when the complex, rich roles for women from the '70s — Diana Christensen in *Network,* Ripley in *Alien,* Annie Hall — had started to give way to the sometimes more doped-down, sexed-up women of the slapstick comedies and macho action films that dominated the decade.

And given Dern had already established a career of playing young women with depth and desires and defects, Bruce had no choice but to be honest with his daughter: she might not really come into her own until she reached her 40s or 50s.

Now, at 52, and coming off of not only a hit HBO show — *Big Little Lies*, in which Dern absolutely shreds scenes as the powerful, demanding tech CEO Renata Klein — and an energetic film career that's seen her take on plum roles like General Holdo (who single-handedly took down a fleet of Imperial battleships with the punch of a hyperdrive) in *Star Wars: Episode VIII — The Last Jedi*, one could argue that her father, well, may have been right.

Indeed, Dern has reached a time when she's seemingly reaping the rewards of more populist work. But over the long haul, as she built relationships with auteur directors like David Lynch, Peter Bogdanovich, and Robert Altman, she's become known as — and cherishes being — an actor more interested in complexity than celebrity.

Laura Dern as Lula Fortune in David Lynch's "Wild at Heart"
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"I love *Citizen Ruth* and I loved playing a homeless huff addict as much as I loved playing Renata Klein," says Dern, who first gained international recognition in Stephen Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and later went on to get her second Oscar nomination for *Wild*, opposite her *Big Little Lies* co-star Reese Witherspoon. "All characters are gorgeous gifts to me. I have no judgement about what their life looks like. I do think there's a wealth of diversity in the kind of roles women can play."

Dern's gravitation to that diversity is exemplified by a resume filled with flawed, human roles. As the star and co-creator of the short-lived HBO dramedy *Enlightened*, Dern set out to embrace the comedy found in the raw truth of a woman falling apart and starting over, winning a Golden Globe in the process. More recently, she's drawn attention and praise for her role in *Marriage Story*, about the dissolution of a marriage portrayed by Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver. Dern describes her divorce attorney character as "a bully," but her consistent complexity makes the role far more. It's a clear demonstration that rich, diverse characters allow actors of all descriptions to thrive.

Helping ensure such diversity in a slowly-changing industry — one that, while vocal in its support for more inclusion for women in front of and behind the camera, still struggles to approach parity — is Greta Gerwig. A period film might seem like an

unusual follow-up for the Oscar-nominated director of *Lady Bird*, but it's less unusual when it's a reimagining of Louisa May Alcott's seminal coming-of-age novel, *Little Women,* that sees Dern in the role of Marmee March. Dern calls Gerwig her friend, but is also quick to point out her respect and admiration for Gerwig's talent, as well as her appreciation for the nuance Gerwig gives what's often been a flat role in the *Little Women* narrative.

Marmee is head of the March household and the loving mother who seeks to guide her four daughters into becoming young women, in a time when they were expected to become young ladies. It's a "mom role" on paper, but, in Gerwig's *Little Women,* Marmee is far from a dusty cliche.

Top to bottom: Laura Dern, Saiorse Ronan, Eliza Scanlen, Emma Watson, and Florence Pugh.
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“Marmee became my hero, not because she was this saintly maternal figure, but because she was real,” says Dern, who first encountered the book in childhood when her own mother, actor Diane Ladd, was a single parent. That real-life relationship reinforced her understanding of the connection between Jo and Marmee. Returning to the book as a parent, Dern identified even more deeply.

“She’s raw and relatable,” says Dern of Marmee. “She’s a mother who admits being flawed and overwhelmed and not knowing how to do it. She just wants to see her children become their deepest selves, as opposed to being ‘a good girl’ or whatever those labels are.”

Dern continues, “It is amazing that, even though it was written in 1868, it feels as incredibly modern and, frankly, asks the same questions for people, and for women,

and for artists, as Louisa was exploring then."

In order to properly mine Alcott's source material, the film's team became deeply immersed in Alcott's environment, as well as her message. They worked closely with historians, of course, but then went on to actually surround themselves in her physical world. Dern, for her part, moved her family to Concord, Massachusetts — Alcott's home — for about four months, embarking on a journey into the author's life and experience.

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Dern's daughter, Jaya, attended an alternative school there, which Dern describes as "literally Walden Pond." On set, watching Gerwig direct and bond with the cast, Dern developed deep friendships with the women who became her onscreen daughters: Eliza Scanlen, Florence Pugh, Emma Watson, and Saiorse Ronan, who "calls Jaya as her little sister," says Dern. "It's very sweet." It's also a connection that is particularly poignant within a project so entrenched in female relationships.

Ultimately, Dern's exuberance for this film — and what's served as a bellwether for her career — grows out of that insistence on the complexity of human truth.

"These characters presented with drive, with ambition, with longing, with ferocity between sisters, with true love," she says. "With all that it is to be human and to be finding yourself."

Laura Dern as Marmee March in "Little Women"
SONY/WILSON WEBB

It's a journey Dern knows all too well — and one that only intensifies for women seeking artistic expression. "Greta really focused on not just the struggle to become an artist, but the circle and the experience of women in art… as well as the story of women and money, and women and independence."

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But, while the intersections of those ideas are potent, Dern thinks *Little Women* is about being alive, not just about being female. And, with that, she's quick to insist that the time of "women's movies" has passed.

"Every variety of human wants to go to the movies," Dern says. "Women cannot wait to see *Little Women*, just like so many young men I know cannot wait to see *Little Women*. Just like women have waited in line to see *The Godfather*, men are waiting in line to see Greta Gerwig's next movie."

Projects that transcend those labels could (and should) be the way of the future — because, as Dern says, at the end of the day, we all want to watch good movies and

stories told with passion. For her part, Dern believes that, even if she weren't in *Little Women*, she'd still champion its place as part of that hopeful surge forward.

Perhaps that message is even more impactful today as gender politics move to the forefront, casting a brighter light on long male-dominated industries, such as filmmaking. Dern credits women "like Shonda Rhimes, who I'm blessed to know through Time's Up" with advancing the agenda and expanding opportunities for women, people of color, and nonbinary individuals.

"I played women who were trying to find strength while in positions of weakness, or victimization because there were no women in power roles," she says. "Twenty years ago, there was no CEO to play. Women didn't have that gig. The parts are changing because women are getting more opportunities. It's exciting to be at a moment, at this age, where I'm not *just* the girlfriend or the mother."

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.

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