

'Bombshell' almost died; How Theron helped saved it

By Lindsey Bahr

It was two weeks before cameras were to start rolling on a film about the sexual misconduct scandals at Fox News that ended the reign of Roger Ailes and things were rolling along smoothly.

The subject matter couldn't have been timelier. The leads, including Charlize Theron as Megyn Kelly, Nicole Kidman as Gretchen Carlson, and John Lithgow as Ailes, were top notch. Even the supporting cast was full of known names like Allison Janney, Kate McKinnon and Connie Britton.

Then, Theron, who was producing, and director Jay Roach got some unwelcome news: Their studio had pulled out. "Bombshell" was effectively dead.

"It felt like getting sucked out of an airplane at high altitude and just falling," Roach said, shaking his head. "Has any film ever come back together two weeks out?"

There was a lot on the line and schedules for people like Theron, Kidman, and Margot Robbie were not exactly flexible. If it didn't happen then, it might never happen.

But within 24 hours, Theron had found a lifeline in Bron Studios, a company that had earlier just been a small partner. Within 72 hours, Lionsgate was on board too. Not only did "Bombshell" (playing in limited release starting Friday; wide on Dec 20) hit its original start date.

They wrapped on time and under budget too.

The last-minute panic gave everyone an even greater sense of purpose — not that they really needed it. The story itself was a stunning tipping point in the ongoing movement against sexual harassment in the workplace that happened over a year before the Harvey Weinstein story broke.

In July 2016, Carlson filed a lawsuit alleging Ailes had forced her out of Fox News after she spurned his sexual advances. Soon there were more women with similar stories of alleged harassment by Ailes either against themselves or someone they knew. He firmly denied the allegations, but in just a few weeks he was out. The scandal has also inspired a documentary and a Showtime miniseries.

Appeal "It was part of the appeal to me that it was at Fox," said Roach, who was hand selected for the job by Theron. "It was surprising that an institution like that that is so male-centric, so Roger-cult-of-personality, would be the place that this happened. But sexual harassment is non-partisan."

Theron was even surprised at just how much she related to Megyn Kelly, despite political divides, "as a strong, independent woman who has a real drive and ambition and (who has) had those things turned on me and weaponized."

Kelly makes for a unique protagonist in the story. Her alleged

harassment from Ailes had occurred years earlier and she had since become a star under his mentorship. Kelly also, Theron said, liked him.

"We don't talk enough about that kind of relationship that a victim can have," she said. "I love that this story happened in such a gray zone."

The nuance of "Bombshell" is showing all the different facets of sexual harassment in the workplace. For every famous woman who has resources to survive making a public accusation, there are scores of powerless victims too. In the film, the latter is embodied by Kayla, a composite character played by Robbie. She's an ambitious, young Evangelical millennial who worships Fox News. Kayla gets an impossible meeting with Ailes, but it quickly becomes inappropriate. Although the movie has yet to be released to the public, it has emerged as one of the film's most talked about scenes.

"It's so quietly disturbing and so unquestionably wrong. And yet if she walked out of that room and tried to explain what happened I think it would be very easy for people to question what had happened and not classify it as sexual harassment," Robbie said. "And it's not until you really live in that moment with her that you can truly, without hesitation, say that is not OK ... I think that the most powerful and potent thing about it is letting men, particularly, have a moment to share that experience with her." (AP)

Film

Variety



This image released by Sony Pictures shows, (from left), Florence Pugh, Saoirse Ronan and Emma Watson in a scene from 'Little Women.' (AP)

Film

A kindhearted tale of generosity

'Little Women', lively retelling by Gerwig

By Peter Debruge

If there's one thing I know about real-world little women, it's that they will read "Little Women" no matter the era. That's the timeless quality of certain literary classics, and Louisa May Alcott's Civil War tale of four close-knit sisters continues to delight, feeling every bit as alive today as it must have 150 years ago. In that span, the novel has never gone out of print, and its popularity seems unlikely to fade in the centuries to come.

Movies, however, are another matter. Young people seem far less interested in watching films made before their birth, and for that reason, there will always be good reason to remake "Little Women." After all, every generation deserves its own version. It's been 25 years since Winona Ryder played Jo March, and 61 more since Katharine Hepburn tackled the role for George Cukor (the previous screen versions had been silent). Now, director Greta Gerwig has identified that it's as good a time as any to dust off Alcott's novel for a fresh interpretation while paying no mind to the fact that both Masterpiece Theatre and actor Clare Niederpruem saw fit to do the same in the two years since "Lady Bird's" release.

As one might hope, Gerwig's interpretation does right by the material, sticking to the original period and setting and assembling a dream cast to play the March siblings — Emma Watson as eldest sister Meg, the teacher; Saoirse Ronan as Jo, the writer and Alcott's clear counterpart; Eliza Scanlan as Beth, the musical one; and Florence Pugh as Amy, impulsive and the artist of the family — and, in Timothy Chalamet, the perfect actor to embody the book's curly-headed boy next door, Laurie.

The irony of "Little Women" — in light of the title, which is how Mr March (Bob Odenkirk), who's gone off to war and left his wife and kids to fend for themselves, fondly refers to his daughters — is that it's not necessarily for little audiences.

Yes, the book was written at the pressure of Alcott's publisher for young female readers, but Gerwig's version doesn't talk down in the slightest and may in fact play better with adults, especially those who find mainstream movies too salacious and immoral. "Little Women" is just the opposite: a wholesome, kindhearted tale of generosity and good manners, where malicious acts occasionally occur (as when Amy destroys Jo's novel) but not nearly as often as acts of charity.

Rather than telling the story straight through, the way Alcott and her other adapters have, Gerwig opts to shuffle the scenes, telling "Little Women" almost entirely out of order, except for the Christmas letter from Father that opens the tale and the kiss that ends it. As in "Lady Bird," she and editor Nick Houy keep things moving at a quick clip, though skipping around in time is a mistake, making a plot Gerwig must have considered too episodic, or else too melodramatic for her taste, even more so on both counts — as evidenced by the way that, in hindsight, it's the emotional episodes we return to in our memories, rather than the overall arc of what happened to the March family.

Characters

Call me corny, but "Little Women" hooks me every time, in part because Alcott created such lively characters but also on account of the way she approached the institution of marriage. Alcott imagined the March sisters as independent-minded young ladies, despite their lack of wealth, free to pursue their own happiness in a world where women of their station often relied on either their fiancés' fortunes or a generous inheritance to provide for their futures.

Early in her own adaptation, Gerwig zeroes in on the practical function matrimony plays in the story — calculated more for audiences than for the characters' benefit — putting the explanation into the mouth of Jo's editor, Mr Dashwood: "If the main character's a girl, make sure she's married by the end. Or

dead, either way."

Despite these emotional ups and downs, Gerwig's script is far more comical than any previously committed to film. This she achieves by emphasizing the humor inherent in the source material, embellished slightly by Meryl Streep as the wealthy Aunt March, who plans to invite one of the daughters to accompany her in Europe, while pressing all four to marry well. But while Aunt March represents the already old-fashioned notion of a young woman's place in society, Marmee encourages her girls to choose their own paths. For Jo, that means turning the family history into a book, which makes for two original sequences in which the assertive protagonist becomes a stand-in for Alcott herself: Gerwig dramatizes a scene in which Jo negotiates the terms for publishing "Little Women" with Dashwood, and follows her manuscript through the printing process — a loving homage to an endangered art form.

A long way from her days as Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter movies, Watson portrays Meg as the sister who most knows what she wants, which makes the character's choice feel like less of a compromise. Pugh has the tricky part, since so many find Amy's personality off-putting, whereas she makes it possible to understand the difficulties of living in her sister's shadow.

In terms of sheer logistics, "Little Women" marks a huge step forward for Gerwig, who shows an aptitude for future studio projects without sacrificing her distinctive directorial voice. Cinematographer Yorick Le Saux sustains the Currier and Ives-like look of Gillian Armstrong's 1994 film while plunging us further into the characters' midst than any of the earlier adaptations. In the end, this latest version doesn't have to hold up for 60 years. It's enough that it plays well today, and a plus if young people are still watching it whenever someone decides to remake it for the next generation of little women. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Wong Kar-wai is producing "One For The Road," a new film that reunites the director and star of 2017 Thai hit "Bad Genius." Production in New York and Thailand will begin by the end of the year.

The film is a buddy drama and a road movie that sees two old friends who have been separated for years embark on final road trip when they discover that one of them has terminal cancer. But there is also another agenda behind the trip.

Directed by **Nattawut (Baz) Poonpiriya**, the picture will be produced by celebrated Hong Kong-based auteur Wong through his Jet Tone Films. International sales are to be handled by the related company Block 2 Distribution.

The screenplay is written by **Poonpiriya, Nottapon (Kai) Boonprakob** and **Puangsoi Aksornasawang**. Director of photography is **Phaklao Jiraungkoonkun**. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Jesse Eisenberg is starring in and executive producing the independent thriller "Wild Indian," Variety has learned exclusively.

"Wild Indian," written and directed by **Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr.**, also stars **Michael Greaney**, **Chaske Spencer**, **Kate Bosworth** and **Scott Haze** ("Venom"). The film, shooting in **Oklahoma City**, was developed as part of the Sundance Institute Writers and Directors Lab as well as Sundance Catalist.

The story follows two Anishinaabe men who are inextricably bound together after covering up the savage murder of a schoolmate. After years of separation following wildly divergent paths, they must finally confront how their traumatic secret has irrevocably shaped their lives. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Jason Bateman is in talks to direct and produce New Line's thriller "Shut It."

Bateman recently won the 2019 Emmy for Outstanding Directing for "Ozark," in which he also stars. "Shut It" led this year's BloodList, the annual industry list of the best unproduced, dark-genre screenplays.

New Line acquired it earlier this year from first time screenwriter **Melanie Toast**.

The story is centered on a single mother is held captive by her violent ex. Her two small children are left alone in a dangerous situation and she must do everything to protect them and survive.

Bateman made his feature



Reeves



Eisenberg

directorial debut in 2013's "Bad Words," in which he starred and produced. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Warner Bros. has dated the fourth "The Matrix" movie and "The Flash" for summer openings in 2021 and 2022, respectively, and pulled "Akira" off the schedule.

The studio announced Wednesday that "The Flash" would be released on July 1, 2022, while the untitled "Matrix" would open on May 21, 2021. "The Flash" will star Ezra Miller, who debuted as The Flash in **Zack Snyder's "Batman vs Superman"** with roles in "Suicide Squad" and "Justice League."

Original stars **Keanu Reeves** and **Carrie-Anne Moss** are returning for the fourth "Matrix" along with co-creator **Lana Wachowski II**, **Jessica Henwick**, and **Neil Patrick Harris** will also star.

The Matrix movie is taking over the slot for "Akira," which now has no release date. (RTRS)