

ANECDOTE: GRETA GERWIG

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Clues that I have always wanted to be an actor/writer/director/annoying:

I.

When I was five, my parents enrolled me in a kiddie tap class. We had a recital, tapping to “Johnny Be Good” and wearing bee costumes. There was one girl who didn’t know it so well. I became increasingly aggravated by her and finally, halfway through the song, I pushed her into the wings. Then I tapped back onstage to finish the routine, much relieved that she could no longer muddy up the stage picture.

II.

In kindergarten I became obsessed with *Starlight Express*. I used to ask the other children on the playground if they wanted to be in the school-yard version I was directing. I’d play most of the parts and they (the two who agreed) would “skate” around me. I was always disappointed by their lack of commitment to the material.

III.

At seven, I participated in a children’s summer theater production of *Peter Pan*. I was annoyed that I’d been relegated to the background, one of the dozens of “lost children.” To amend this situation, I memorized the entire script. If one of the lucky children who had a big part did not say their line IMMEDIATELY, I would jump in to say it for them.

IV.

In high school I ran for student council every year. Not because I had a burning desire to be part of student government, but because I *loved*

doing the speech. Each September, I would create an original rap that I would perform in front of the entire school. And I wasn't one of those well-loved students that everyone thought "Oh, Greta, she's such a personality!" I'm not even sure that a single person besides me enjoyed it. I never won, but I had an audience for my material, and that was all I really wanted to begin with.

V.

But the REAL moment for me, the biggest of the big and utterly sincere, happened my senior year in high school.

During high school—I grew up in Sacramento, California—I had done all the shows and musicals I possibly could, but I had never gotten a lead. The best I could hope for was a sidekick kind of role, which was fun and funny but not THE part. So senior year, the school held auditions for the spring musical: *The Wizard of Oz*.

It was already a tense time in my house—we were talking about colleges. It must not be easy for your kid to say "I want to be an actor" when you are looking at taking out tens of thousands of dollars in loans. I kept saying "I want to be an actor," but I wasn't sure I really believed it. I still lacked that inner trust and confidence. So when my mom said to me "Do you *really* think you're as good as Meryl Streep?" and I responded "I just have to be as good as ME," there was still a great deal of unacknowledged doubt.

In any case, we were in one of those classic parent struggles, and my mom asked why I would want to audition for *The Wizard of Oz*—what would I hope to get? I said, "I'd play a Munchkin just to be onstage!" (Side note: I was, and am, five foot nine. I should also mention that I had a shaved head due to an infatuation with Ani DiFranco. And wore a lot of cargo pants. I did not look very Lullaby-League.)

The audition: We sang, we read scenes, and then there were cuts—I stayed. Again singing, again scenes, again I stayed. And then, to my amazement, the director asked me to sing "Over the Rainbow." And then I was asked to read for Dorothy with two other girls. It seemed like a mistake.

The other girls had hair and could sing really well and looked like girls. I looked and sounded like . . . me. I did the best I could and went home, telling my mom I was sure I'd at least be a Flying Monkey.

When I looked at the casting list the next day, there it was: *I was Dorothy. ME.*

Mom asked if they were doing something “weird.” It turns out they really were. The director (who is still one of the best directors I've ever worked with) had us show up to the first day of rehearsal with the script and a red pen. Over the course of the rehearsal process, the student cast completely rewrote *The Wizard of Oz*. We put in jokes and asides. We decided that the tornado should be represented by two guys holding leaf blowers. Dorothy became kind of a punk rocker (ruby-red Converse). We made it our own.

The months that followed were what put the finishing touches (or nail in the coffin, depending on your perspective) on my lifelong love of being on the stage and behind the scenes. Rehearsal for *The Wizard of Oz* is what made me know that storytelling was what I wanted to do with my life, and that I *could* do it. I had never been encouraged in that way before, to create original content and then perform it.

When the play finally went up, and I was onstage, getting laughs for jokes I had written myself—well, basically nothing has ever felt better and I have essentially spent the rest of my life trying to re-create that feeling. I finally felt like there was a way for me to make sense of all of the things inside of me that had never quite fit clearly into one path or goal.

Deep down, I've always known this is what I wanted to do, but I never would have done it if I hadn't had the good fortune of knowing the people who showed me the way. People like the high school theater director who saw that this strange, tall buzzcut girl could be Dorothy.

It is so easy to doubt and fall and not be true to your heart. But I had been right—I did only have to be as good as me.

P.S. My mom is now very proud of me and happy for me.

GRETA GERWIG is an actress, writer, and director. She stars in the film *Frances Ha*, a comedy she cowrote with Noah Baumbach. Gerwig also starred in Woody Allen's *To Rome with Love* and Whit Stillman's *Damsels in Distress*. Other credits include *Greenberg* with Ben Stiller, *Arthur* with Russell Brand and Helen Mirren, and *No Strings Attached* with Natalie Portman and Ashton Kutcher. She cowrote *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, and cowrote and co-directed *Nights and Weekends*. Gerwig graduated magna cum laude from Barnard College, and currently resides in New York City.