

Asked & Answered | Laurie Simmons

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“Tiny Furniture” is Lena Dunham’s breakout indie, a picture so promising that, after its debut at the South by Southwest film festival in March, it landed Dunham, 24, work on both an HBO series with Judd Apatow and a film project with Scott Rudin. Last week, Apatow was in the audience at the Museum of Modern Art for the premiere of “Tiny Furniture,” and during a question-and-answer session afterward, he asked something of Laurie Simmons, who is Dunham’s mother, both in the movie and in real life. “Will you raise my kids?”

Simmons, of course, is not just a mom-turned-unlikely-actress but also an important New York artist, a member of the so-called Pictures Generation, who became famous for her constructed photo sets of dollhouse interiors in the early 1980s. “Tiny Furniture” is set inside her TriBeCa apartment, which doubles as her studio. It featured not only Lena, but also Simmons’s younger daughter, Grace Dunham, and even her studio assistant, Rachel Howe. Simmons is now busy preparing work for her next show, centered on “this beautifully articulated Japanese love doll,” which will be at Salon 94 in February. She’s also trying to wrap her mind around her daughter’s catapult into fame, which is where we began a recent telephone conversation.

The reviews of “Tiny Furniture” have been almost overwhelmingly positive, although there were a few negative reviews. As a mother, and also as an artist who has no doubt been reviewed in the past, is it difficult to see your daughter subjected to criticism?

It seemed like such a small project that I never fast-forwarded to the point where I imagined so many reviews. I felt like the movie was going to get into South by Southwest. I knew she was struggling to meet that deadline. It felt so small and intimate that it was impossible to imagine what’s happening now.

When did you realize that this was going to be a big movie?

I’m just starting to realize it all now. It was her second feature, and I had been involved with some of her other projects. I knew that Lena was doing her work, and I knew that she felt compelled to use members of her family, and I related to that because I’d done the same thing in the past.

So, to what extent is art a family affair for you?

I photographed my parents, dressed up in costumes and dancing. It was just something I had to do. These pictures are called “Sam and Dottie Dance.” And there are some aspects of your own life that you have to mine in order to progress. And this was sort of a passage for her in her life. I can relate to that. As much as I was resistant to the acting part...

But you’ve made a film before...

I made a film based on my own work. I directed actors, but I haven’t acted in a real film.

This was the musical?

It was a musical in three acts (“The Music of Regrets”). I had a partner (Michael Rohatyn) and he wrote the music and I wrote the lyrics and Ed Lachman shot it, and Meryl Streep sang the songs with Adam Guettel and the Alvin Ailey dancers danced it. On an art level, for me, it was a total fantasy extravaganza. That’s the only film I ever made, and it was an amazing film experience.

How involved was the shoot for “Tiny Furniture”?

The shoot was 19 days. Everything was set up in our home and in our studio which are connected. Nineteen days of cast and crew and friends in our home. Plus, I was still working on my own work. It was kind of crazy.

And the experience of acting in the movie?

I loved doing it so much. My only fear, as a mother, was: I don't want to wreck my kid's movie!

She directed you to play yourself?

No, I was absolutely *not* directed to play myself. I was just talking to my friend today who seemed kind of impressed that I could play a character that was so brittle. Every time I acted too warm or too nice Lena slapped me back and said, “That was too nice,” “That was too warm,” “That was too friendly.” Let it just be said that the character of Aura is not Lena. That character could not have made this movie. And that mother would not have let the crew in for 19 days!

Did you have to restrain the maternal impulse at any time during filming?

There were a couple of times when I was in front of the camera as an actress but I was seeing something that was being directed and I might have blurted out once some idea that I had and then I put my hand over my mouth and said, “Oops!” The other thing that was really interesting for me was kind of art directing a little bit. If I knew a scene was going to be shot in the living room I just started moving things around. And Jody (Lee Lipes, the cinematographer) has a very precise eye, so in the end the decisions were up to him. But the house in the movie looks much starker, much whiter, much emptier than the way that we live. That's a kind of minimalist dream that I find to be a complete impossibility. I was able to allow that to happen in the movie by just moving a million things out of the shot. The house in the movie, the family in the movie, they're so quiet – except when they're fighting!

In the film, there's a scene in which Lena discovers your journals, written when your character was a young, struggling artist. Did you keep journals?

Yes, that's true. I was kind of a little upset (when she found them). But it was already done – they were already read. It's interesting because she did excerpt parts of my journal, but the parts of my journal that she didn't read, because they're more boring, is that, on every other page, I was going on about how I was going to pay my ConEd and how I was going to pay my rent. That was the complete and utter focus of my life: How am I going to pay for my rent and make work? And that's every artist's dilemma – or at least every artist that I knew. So for me the idea that Lena could find living at home bearable and raise the money to make this movie and make this movie at 24 – it's incredible.

In the film, Lena's character is very frank with you about her love life and other things. Is that forthrightness true of Lena herself?

Lena is an open book. There wouldn't be any deep, dark secrets in our family. I don't know, maybe I have daughters who are brutally honest with me? But I feel like this generation will share – or even overshare – with their parents. Certainly more than my generation did with our parents.

What was your relationship like with your own mother?

My mom is actually in the house right now. She's 90. She's upstairs. This could be the sequel to “Tiny Furniture.” She just moved in with me yesterday. Lena's off shooting an HBO show and my 90-year-old mom and her apricot-colored French poodle are here with me. It's just another chapter.