

# BORN FREE

Their parents are well-known artists, but these two women are making it on their own. KARIN NELSON meets the new downtown film auteurs.



Lena Dunham, photographed by Laurie Simmons.

## LENA DUNHAM

After spending a year postcollege lolling around her parents' TriBeCa loft, working a dead-end job as a hostess, and hoping for some clue as to what to do with her life, Lena Dunham, now 24, figured she'd put her creative-writing degree from Oberlin College to use and make a movie out of it. "I found that year so painful and humiliating," she says. "It was like a slap in the face. Like, how rude! This was the way I comforted myself."

Dunham wrote *Tiny Furniture* in four days last October ("I'm a binge writer," she says, "and not proud of it"), shot it last November, and this past March premiered it at South by Southwest, where it won the Best Narrative Feature Award—a top honor. In it she plays Aura, a witty, self-aware 22-year-old with a useless film-theory degree, a video on YouTube that's gotten nothing but negative comments, two foolish boyfriends, and full-body Spanx, into which Dunham stuffs herself in one unforgettable scene. ("This character has a lot of problems," she notes. "But worrying about what she looks like isn't one of them.")

The film, due out November 12, also stars Dunham's mom, fine arts photographer Laurie Simmons, as Aura's mother. Dunham's younger sister, Grace, plays her younger sister, Nadine. "It's become less clear to me the further I get from it what was real and what was fake," says Dunham, who is currently at work on an HBO pilot about a group of twentysomething girls living in New York two years out of college. "But the cool thing about writing is that you can add in the quips that you never got to say in real life."

## STELLA SCHNABEL

In *You Wont Miss Me*, Stella Schnabel, the 27-year-old daughter of artist Julian Schnabel, plays Shelly Brown, a born and bred New Yorker who has recently been released from a mental hospital and is trying to make it as an actress. She is funny, intelligent, and completely unpredictable. Many people assume she is playing a version of herself.

"There are parts of me in it," admits the actress, who cowrote the film, due out December 10, with her childhood friend Ry Russo-Young, who is also its director. "She's confident and strong, and gets really honest with people," Schnabel adds. "But beyond that I don't find Shelly and myself to be that similar at all."

If the portrayal seems all too authentic, it is a testament, then, to Schnabel's acting ability. She first appeared on the big screen in Julian Schnabel's 1996 biopic *Basquiat*—in which she did in fact play herself—following that with a small role in 2000's *Before Night Falls* (also by her father). Her turn as Shelly, however, is by all accounts her breakthrough performance. Likened by one reviewer to the fearlessly manic actor Klaus Kinski, she is raw, uninhibited, and totally unapologetic, battering everything in her way but with utter precision. It is a role seemingly born of necessity. "Playing Shelly felt great," says Schnabel, who will also soon be seen in her father's Middle Eastern drama, *Miral*, out December 3. "It was a chance to finally express myself, express things inside of me. You fill up with all these emotions, and acting is a way to get it all out. I find it very cathartic."

Stella Schnabel on the set of *You Wont Miss Me*.

