

ROAD TO OSCAR

Emerald Fennell Makes Auspicious Feature Directorial Debut

Continued from page 6

way and it can be boring when you talk about your family way too long. Talking about my family for two hours stands out to me as being the hardest. Then there were the limited time and resources--and within that having Alan, our seven-year-old actor (who portrayed David) on set for just six hours a day. He's almost in every scene. So there was no room for error during 25 days of shooting. For me and everyone, we couldn't make a mistake. You didn't always have time to think some things through. It felt like we worked a lot on intuition. Lachlan's (DP Milne) great experience helped. He's experienced in working on features that have had difficult schedules." And Chung was quick to credit the cast in dealing with that schedule. "That family feels so real. They (the actors) had to be so real with each other when we had the cameras rolling."

Chung affirmed, "We gave it everything we had. By saying that, I just don't mean the effort. I also mean the honesty, being real with the audience. That's what we were all aspiring to do, to the point of being a little vulnerable with ourselves so we could show that humanity is universal."

Promising Young Woman

Promising Young Woman (Focus Features), which marks the feature directorial debut of Emerald Fennell, has already started to realize its promise on the awards show circuit with Carey Mulligan named Best Actress and Fennell winning for Best Screenplay at the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards.

Mulligan stars as Cassie, a medical school dropout whose once promising prospects have fallen off a cliff. She's working at a coffee house and spends her free time either moping about or pretending to be blind drunk at nightclubs where she ultimately shames guys who try to take advantage of her seemingly impaired state. It's an inexplicably strange double-life until we become privy to what made her quit med school, a despicable trauma suffered by her dear friend and fellow student, Nina, years ago. This genre-busting film plays at times like a dark comedy, a comic tragedy, a thriller, a psychological tale that perfectly dovetails with the #MeToo era, all the above and more.



A scene from *Minari*

Fennell—who first established herself as an actress spanning TV and features, and a writer (on such TV series as *The Drifters* and writer/producer on *Killing Eve*) before moving into the directorial ranks—explained simply, "I wanted to write a revenge movie, a classic revenge movie with a real person at the center of it." She added that the vibe she wanted for it was to be as "strange and unlikely as that journey would feel if you were actually in it."

Like *Minari*, *Promising Young Woman*

At first, becoming a director seemed what Fennell described as "an enigmatic thing" but over time she began to develop an appetite for it. "I've written forever," she said, noting that she wanted the chance to "really make something the way you want to make it, to direct your own material."

Fennell said she was fortunate to be able to work with "incredible directors" in film and TV. She cited her experience acting on a BBC series, *Call the Midwife*, as providing an invaluable education, being able to observe different directors and DPs coming in for episodes and being able to do "a side-by-side comparison of what works, what doesn't, what is time-saving, what isn't, what corners you can cut and the ones you really can't."

This education served Fennell in good stead as she became "kind of obsessive about the details while also knowing you've got to make your days."

She also knew first-hand the importance of selecting the right collaborators, among the prime examples on *Promising Young Woman* being cinematographer Benjamin Kracun, editor Frederic Thoraval and production designer Michael

shorthand with. If your relationship with a DP isn't easy, it slows everything down. Ben is a combination of being talented and great fun to be around. He could help me get the kind of performances I wanted and he could make the set itself a fun place to work, which is needed."

Kracun was essential in making *Promising Young Woman* work within the confines of 23 shoot days. Also integral in that regard was producer Fiona Walsh Heinz who did an "amazing" job according to Fennell, noting, "We had no fat. We were up against it but she helped that still feel like a fun place to be in." While the preparation had to be buttoned down, Fennell said they didn't lose the rush of feeling "like you're slightly flying by the seat of your pants."

As for her biggest takeaway from *Promising Young Woman*, Fennell shared, "It sounds so cheesy but I just loved directing in a way that really surprised me. Locking my car in the parking lot to go film on the first day, I just loved it. I loved being part of a team. I'm proud and grateful of how everyone worked so hard. I immediately want to do it all over again."

When that opportunity comes, though, Fennell would like "to loosen things up, have a little more time to play, a bit more space to work in."

Promising Young Woman is not Fennell's first project to score recognition at Sundance. Back in 2019, she directed *Careful How You Go* which was in the running for the Short Film Grand Jury Prize.

Fennell also has two primetime Emmy nominations to her credit, one for drama series writing, the other for Outstanding Drama Series—both for *Killing Eve* in 2019.

One Night in Miami

Based on the stage play by Kemp Powers who also penned the screenplay, *One Night in Miami* (Amazon Studios) relates a fictional account of four high-profile Black Americans together in a hotel room in 1964 the night after a 22-year-old Cassius Clay (portrayed by Eli Goree) won the heavyweight boxing title with a stunning knockout of Sonny Liston. Clay, who would later change his name to Muhammad Ali, joins Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir), singer Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom Jr.)



Emerald Fennell (center) on the set of *Promising Young Woman*

made a big impact at last year's Sundance fest. And while its release was also delayed during the pandemic, *Promising Young Woman* is now picking up awards season momentum. The stellar cast also includes Bo Burnham as Ryan, Cassie's love interest, Alison Brie as a former school friend, Connie Britton as a med school dean, Laverne Cox as Cassie's coffee house boss, and Alfred Molina as a deeply remorseful attorney.

Perry. Fennell had worked, for instance, with Kracun about a year earlier on a commercial project, liked him and was drawn in particular to his work on *Beat*, for which he won a British Independent Film Award in 2019 for Best Cinematography. "He made that movie look spectacular," assessed Fennell, who added, "I was a first-time film director in Los Angeles shooting my baby. I knew my DP was important, someone I could have an easy