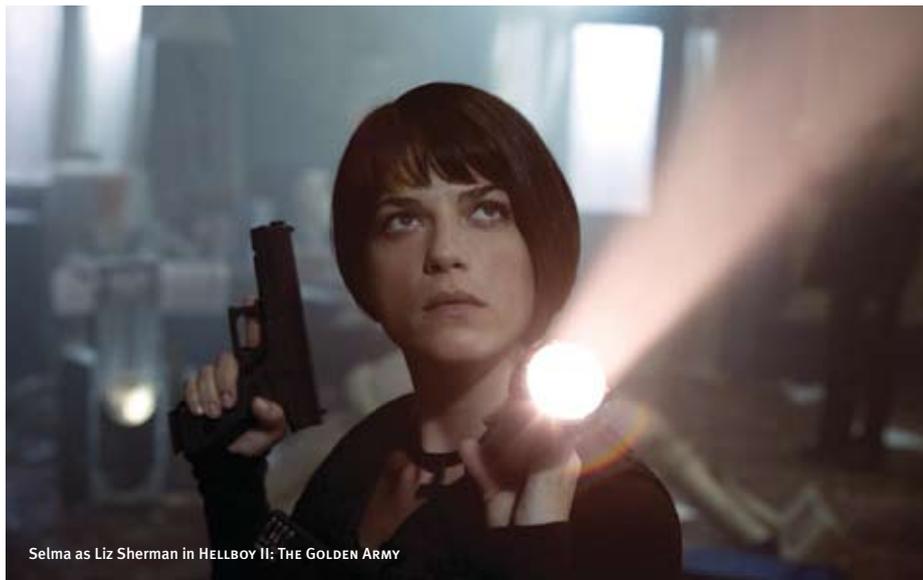


SELMA BLAIR: MODEST, VERSATILE AND ON FIRE!



Selma as Liz Sherman in HELLBOY II: THE GOLDEN ARMY

If there were an Actor's Dictionary, next to "versatile" would be Selma Blair's photo. Check out this very brief rundown of just some of the roles she's played: a deranged mother, a self-absorbed adult daughter, the pyrokinetic girlfriend to Hellboy, a married woman who falls in love with another woman (and leaves her husband), a rape victim who survives a horrific family tragedy.

By Colleen Patrick

Well, the list goes on. Briefly, Selma Blair has a career to which most actors can only aspire. Incredibly, she did not become an actor intentionally. No, she was determined to become a writer. But when her college English (writing) teacher saw her in a school play, he stayed long after the curtain fell and the audience dispersed. To, um, encourage Selma to pursue acting.

After the initial double take of a dream dashed, she took his advice. First, she attended a summer acting workshop in New York to explore the idea. After graduating with combined degrees—a BA in English and BFA in Fine Arts from the University of Michigan—she studied at the Stella Adler

Conservatory of Acting (www.stellaadler.com) to which she had been invited after her initial seminar.

She gave herself a deadline. If she couldn't support herself acting by that time, she would investigate other professions. Needless to say, she started working well before that deadline, breaking into the world of camera acting with several supporting roles until her starring turn as Cecile Caldwell in *CRUEL INTENTIONS* (1999). At 26, Selma played a 14-year-old girl. The cult teen film started as an indie, but was picked up by Columbia Pictures, winning a number of awards—including MTV's *Best Kiss* between Cecile (Selma) and Kathryn Merteuil (Sarah Michelle Gellar).

Here's something you should know about this respected actor: she's incredibly, sincerely, self-effacing. Not in the British humourous, Jack Davenport, Hugh Grant or Emma Thompson way. No. She states honestly what she sees as her "deficiencies". Frankly. Openly. As if stating a fact. Several of her self-deprecating "facts" will leave you perplexed.

However, I have to say that, when challenged, she does admit she "has her moments" on the plus side of her *deficit* list. You'll see what I mean.

From your gut—or your heart—what made you choose acting?

I think I was too terrified to do anything else. There's not a lot that gives me joy in this life. I don't really engage with much. This was one of the things that brought me



HELLBOY II: THE GOLDEN ARMY

joy. The camaraderie of being at rehearsals and going on stage. I never thought I would be a film or TV actress. I *never* thought I had a shot at that.

Why is that?

I thought you had to be really attractive, you know, beautiful. I was afraid of having the camera look at me. But I became a character actress.

You're not exactly chopped liver...

I do have my moments. It can go either way. There are all types of roles, and sometimes

Wow. I can see I'm speaking with a real diva. Someone full of herself...

Oh, I have my moments, believe me. I have my moments. I have an ego. At times.

How do you choose your roles?

[For HELLBOY] I was aware of Guillermo del Toro's work from his film THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE, which I loved. I was thrilled when he thought of me for the role of Liz [Sherman]—a pyrokinetic, someone who can start fires with her mind—setting herself or something else aflame. Intensely enough to blow off a vault when she gets a

little... steamed. I hadn't heard of HELLBOY, but I said yes just to work with Guillermo. Then I read the script and thought Hellboy was such an endearing character; I was so happy to get the chance to play Liz.

Why?

I loved how damaged she was and that she had this power of bursting into flames, burning people that tried to damage her. I really related to that damaged side of her. I can play people that have something *off* about them much better than I can play a kind of relatable, normal *girl next door*. Given those [regular people] parts I kind of fall flat.

What about *Kath and Kim*? [The upcoming NBC sitcom in which Selma stars with Molly Shannon; it's the American version of the Australian TV mega hit based on the dysfunctional relationship between a mother and daughter. Selma plays the daughter, Kim.]

Kim has a lot of chinks in her armour. Kim is really self-absorbed; she's a bit delusional. She's a very juvenile character. She's a grown woman, but she's stuck in this case of arrested development like a lot of girls I've met in America, with this sense of entitlement. Stuck in the same clothes that they looked good in when they were 13; stuck in the same size when they were 13, walking around with their midriff showing, thinking they deserve to be trophy wives. To have some sort of celebrity. You know, really bratty. My character has that but, at the same time, she really loves her mom and has a certain sense of humour. And there is something that is kind of endearing about her.

A lot of the humour in *Kath and Kim* is based on the Australian lower class accent.

Yeah. We're not, obviously, Australian. We've adapted it to [speak] regular Florida. There are no discernable accents. The humour comes more from making fun of how a bit delusional my character is; how celebrity-obsessed, superficial and how American we are in that way—so we're making fun of ourselves.

Tell me about your work in Lori Petty's THE POKER HOUSE.

It's the first time I'm playing a grown woman. I normally play someone so much younger than my years, like when I first burst on the scene with CRUEL INTENTIONS. That all made sense at the time because I was so new to Hollywood and there was such a rush and such a sense of innocence. Now I'm finally settling into roles that are closer to my own age [36] and now I'm a bit more jaded about things. In this role, I play Lori's mother—a woman who was abused and who is very abusive to her children. She's drug addicted and alcoholic, with three children. I was worried about playing such a dislikeable character, but it was a breeze to play her with Lori there [directing], because she's such a great actress, she helped me do it so easily. It's an over-the-top role, but grounded in such reality. She's a really true character.

What about your "deranged" character in Tom Shankland's WAZ?

I'm really afraid of gore. And this character

“Maybe I need to learn a different approach so things won't be so hit-or-miss.”

I can, at times, play an attractive girl. There's plenty of roles to fill, and I'm happy for that. Hopefully, I'll get back on stage one of these days. But my strong suit is not my voice, either, and you need to project on stage. A whisper can be captured in film or television because there's a microphone right there. You don't have that luxury on stage. You have to command. And I have real limitations.

But the sound—the tonality of the character, which is so important... you have a (vocal) range?

Oh. At times. I don't even really know how to breathe. That's just a fact.

had a lot of gore around her; she tested people—how much they could love... through abuse. That was a very difficult role. I was actually sick to my stomach while inflicting so much pain on other people. But it's kind of a beautiful role, too, to play this character, Jean Lerner. She's been through a lot and she puts people through a lot.

What about approaching comedy and drama?

I don't approach it any differently. Sometimes that makes things not very successful. I've been really incredibly bad in some movies, and some movies really work. Maybe I need to learn a different approach so things won't be so hit-or-miss. I just kind of look at the lines, look at the character, and go from there. I don't approach it as like, this is a different genre, what's the tone, how do I do this? I just look at each project as the character and where they are in the story.

How do you develop your characters?

I start from the wardrobe. I start with how they feel in their wardrobe, how they move in their wardrobe. What kind of underwear they wear. Really simple things, because I'm not really the smartest person. But when I start with clothing, that really helps me. What kind of colours they like. Why do they like them? Do they wear a lot of bright colours? Do they wear a lot of dark colours? That might dictate how they move. How does their wardrobe relate to how they interact with themselves and other people? How other people see them. Then the lines—what has the writer given me that should come out of my mouth?

What are your priorities when it comes to roles?

With *WAZ*, there's an actor, Stellan Skarsgård, who I think is so amazing, and I wanted to work with him desperately. I loved him in *BREAKING THE WAVES* and a million other movies. I wanted to watch him and the chance to work with him. And I'd never played a character like Jean Lerner. It was a real challenge. I don't know if I quite pulled it off. She was so damaged and so dark. There was no slapstick at all in her. She was never a girl that was going to go for a laugh or try to amuse people. Other roles—it's been to work with a certain director; some roles I just wanted to work with a specific actress and spend a few days with her. The script might have been terrible, the director I've never heard of, but God I just loved that actress as a kid and I want to sit in the make-up chair next to her each morning. Not good career choices...



Selma as Jean Lerner in *WAZ*

But good life choices.

My career choices may not be great, but my life priorities are OK.

What are your life priorities?

More than ever, finding joy. That's never been a priority for me—I always go in for experiences, never really thinking of consequences, how it's going to play out in my life and affect other people. Now it's about finding joy and peace and maybe starting a family one day. Teaching my children how to find joy and bring joy to other people. God, I guess that's the most I can hope for. To keep the people I love... as safe as we can be in this life.

What are your professional priorities?

I don't know—just to make enough money to save something. Professionally, there are directors I would *love* to work with, whose stories I want to tell. I see some movies and think, "Oh! I wish I could be in that. I wish I could tell that story." I saw *TESS*—Roman Polanski's film—and thought, "God, I would have loved to have been in that story." I would *love* to work with Roman Polanski. That would be a real thrill. But that will probably never happen. I love Samantha Morton. She was so good in *CONTROL*. She's great in everything. We have the same manager—I've only met her, but I'm a huge fan. She's someone I really admire. There are people who inspire me. There are directors who inspire me—I would love to work with Guillermo again in a completely different type of role. He's someone I admire so much.

I'd love to impress him one day, to play a fairy for him, or something completely mystical and different.

What is it about directors you enjoy working with?

When they are completely strong with their vision, then you can sit back and feel really confident; it seems effortless. When they don't know what they want and they kind of flounder about, everything gets a little shaky for me. But when a director is really so confident and knows what he wants, and can explain where he's coming from, then everything just falls into place and it makes sense. They're comfortable on set. They have their details down. Then you're just free to do your work—it just happens. It's an unspoken language. When directors have vision—that's a blessing.

What do you enjoy the most working with actors you admire?

I love being in their energy. Watching their body language. I see how they take care of themselves. I have a kind of kindred love for them. It gives me more passion for acting. And I want to do well for them, and strive to work with them in the future.

Advice for other actors?

Show up. Really show up. Touch everything. Don't drink the night before you work. Show up. Be present. Fully present.

Thank you for sharing one of your "moments" with me! ■