

Chloë Sevigny on figuring things out as you go along

The actress discusses making her directorial debut and explains how sometimes the only way to learn how to do new things is by actually doing them.

December 27, 2016 - Since making her big screen debut in 1995's *Kids*, actress, director, and designer Chloë Sevigny has appeared in nearly forty feature films and over a dozen television shows. Widely hailed as one of the preeminent fashion icons of her generation, Sevigny has not only designed her own line of clothing (in partnership with Opening Ceremony), but also seen her lifelong stylistic oeuvre celebrated in the form of a coffee table book published in 2015 by Rizzoli. Earlier this year Sevigny stepped behind the camera to direct *Kitty*, a short film starring Ione Skye, Lee Meriwether, and Edie Yvonne that was adapted from a short story by Paul Bowles.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3211 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [First attempts](#), [Anxiety](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

You recently directed your first short film, *Kitty*. Was directing something you'd been wanting to do for a long time?

It is. I first read the story at some point in the mid '90s. After we made *Kids*, *Harmony* [Korine] and I went to Morocco on a trip. We were both reading a lot of Paul and Jane Bowles. I think I first read the short story "Kitty" in *Midnight Mass*, which is a collection of Paul Bowles' short stories. I was obsessed with it. I always knew that if I ever got to make a short film of my own, I'd want to try and make one about that story. I remember talking to Jean-Yves Escoffier, the great cinematographer who shot *Gummo*, about it. He was one of my favorite cinematographers and was also great at handling visual effects. He always did a great job of meshing visual effects with a compelling narrative, which I thought was really important for this story.

Then I don't know what happened. I lost the enthusiasm or I think I became more intimidated by the idea of doing it or it seemed more daunting. It's not necessarily that I lost interest, I just didn't have the drive to do it for a while. I was distracted with my actual acting career and a million other projects. Over the years, I've gone back to it then and again and thought about it. Oh, if I ever direct anything I still want to do *that*. Two years ago, I sat down and I finally said, "I'm going to do this." So I did. Just like everything else in this business, it took forever to finally make it happen.





STARRING EDIE YVONNE IONE SKYE LEE MERIWETHER
PRODUCED BY LIZZIE NASTRO CHRISTINA PIOVESAN MICHEL MERKT MUSIC SUPERVISOR BRIAN DEGRAW
COSTUME DESIGNER JENNIFER JOHNSON PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHILLY NATHAN
CASTING BY LARAY MAYFIELD EDITOR SOPHIE CORRA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY SEAMUS MCGARVEY
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS AMY EMMERICH SHANNON GIBSON BASED ON THE STORY BY PAUL BOWLES

Willow & Directed by CHLOË SEVIGNY

Was directing a film different than you thought it would be? More challenging?

I guess what was challenging was finding a producer that was willing to come on board. Had a lot of people say that it was too big of a project to take on, mostly because there are no monetary gains with making short films.

I actually had a producer that was on board for a while, then called me one day and was just like, "I think you should try and do something smaller." I was like, "No, I think you should go fuck yourself." Maybe that's not exactly what I said, but yeah... I had to find somebody else.

Going into the making of the film—and preparing to work with the cinematographer, Seamus McGarvey—I had so many visual references. I felt really prepared in that way, but then he really pressed me about emotion in the scenes and the camera stuff. Those were conversations that I had never really been a part of before. That was pretty new for me and very challenging in the sense that he came to the project wanting a lot of answers. Part of what I like about the film is that it's very ambiguous, it's open for interpretation, which is part of the magic of it. I often felt like I wasn't giving Seamus the answers he wanted and then I kind of discovered the answers while we were actually in the process of making it.



I've always found that as an actor—when I'm in the movie or doing a television show—it's so hard to talk about what you're doing while you're actually doing it. Afterwards you kind of have this crystallizing moment of interpreting it or figuring out what it means to you. That was really the most challenging part of making a film—I was often frustrated that I didn't necessarily know what I wanted to do. You think you've thought of everything, that you've considered the story from every angle, and then in the moment you realize there are these other things you haven't figured out yet. The biggest lessons I learned came from those work sessions with Seamus where we'd sit for hours and go over every detail, even though it was a very brief script.

It was challenging, but great. He's a great cinematographer but we didn't always have the same defined vision for things. He'd be like, "I think when the main character goes over to the neighbor's house it should look like this dark world." I was like, "I don't think the neighbor is unkind. I don't think they exist in a dark world." He wanted things to be more cut and dry in ways that would enhance that world. Whereas I was like, "The whole world is kind of dreamy." I was more vague and he was more specific: "Dreamy" how? Define "dreamy."

Did the experience make you want to do more directing?

Yes. I've already done another one, actually. I bought all of the "short ends" of 35 millimeter film from *Nocturnal Animals*, the Tom Ford movie. They shot that movie on 35 millimeter and Seamus was the one who actually shot it. For *Kitty* I knew I wanted to shoot on 35 millimeter since we were going to be doing a lot of practical special effects on the little girl in the film and I knew that digital filming would be less forgiving. I just also love the feel and the texture and the romance of 35 and all the rest that goes along with it. Seamus was like, "You can get a great deal if you buy the short ends, I know the stock and I'm really familiar with the film." So I bought it and we used it for *Kitty* but then I still had a bunch left over, so I shot another thing up in Portland with the cinematographer Eric Edwards. He did *Kids* and *My Own Private Idaho*, a lot of iconic films from the '90s. So yeah, I tried it again.

The second one was very different. It was more improvisational, working from more of a sketch or an outline of a script. I was just kind of experimenting. I'm a little frustrated with it, to be honest. The idea is pretty simple and straightforward: a portrait of a performer in a strange place. Because I'm so often on the road for work, I often think about the kind of isolation you feel walking around in some unfamiliar town. There's a sense of relief that comes with getting to be on set and do your work and the satisfaction of that, but then you often walk away questioning what you just did and whether or not it was any good. I have a lot of friends in bands or who are visual artists who will go off on these residencies in other places and have a similar experience. I just think it's a very familiar theme for artists—being on the road and the isolation that comes with that.

But like I said, the second short film was a much different experience. Having a more fully-developed script for *Kitty* was a much more comforting and a safer place for me. You have this guide to follow. Doing the improvisational stuff was fun, but it also felt like really being under the gun. We only had two days, so it's hard to really have the freedom you need to experiment and try stuff.



I know you made a movie recently with Alex Ross Perry, who is someone that credits much of their education as a filmmaker to having literally watched a million movies...

Right. He was my Kim's Video guy! He and Sean Price Williams, who shoots all of his movies, they were my clerks at Kim's for years. And Kim's was our school. He's great. Also, not to expose him in any way, but when we were on set over the summer, we were doing some scenes where I play a psychiatrist. I was like, "Well we should just block shoot this." He's like, "What's block shooting?" I was like, "Excuse me? How can you not know what block shooting is?" (laughs)

He's definitely someone that I feel like experiments in his movies. I really tried that with my second one. I really wanted to think of it like an exercise and an experiment, but ultimately it's too precious. I learned that maybe I don't just want to be working things out in the moment, you know what I mean? Maybe I need more of a plan. Sometimes the only way you learn that is by doing it, by trying.

It's also a hard thing to do on your second film. Maybe on your 10th thing after you feel a little more comfortable on that side of the camera, you do something purely experimental.

Yeah, maybe you're right. I also had to remind myself that I'm learning, I'm figuring it out, and that's fine.

You've been making movies for a long time now. Do you find that, as an actor, your process or the way you think about what you do has radically changed over the years?

I'm actually trying to get back to where I was in the beginning. I feel like I was less aware or self-conscious. I think I was a better actor when I was looser and calmer in front of the camera. I'm trying to get back to that place a little bit.

What gets in the way of it?

Ego. And aging. I don't know if it's some sort of body dysmorphia but the angle thing, lighting, the way you see yourself. I think over time you can become kind of insecure and vulnerable. You start feeling exposed. You try and protect yourself. Then you go into this more guarded place that isn't the best place to begin as an actor. When you are starting out, you don't always know enough to be self-conscious. You just kind of show up and jump in. You just do it. For me, it's often about trying to get back to that place.

So much acting seems explicitly about extreme self-consciousness, hitting your marks but also knowing exactly what your face is doing, what your hands are doing...

I love hand acting. I love doing inserts. I'm really good at it! (laughs) I'm very into showing emotion through my hands.

What is a good example of hand acting?

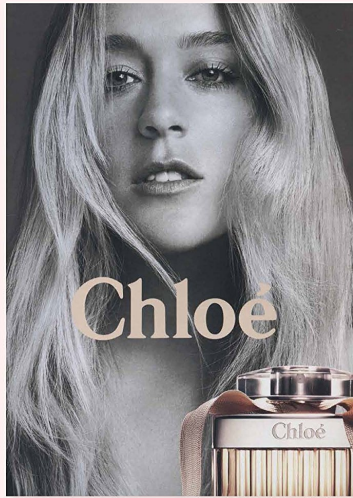
Just the way you touch something or whenever they want to do an insert where your face isn't actually being shown. I always still say the lines so there's still some sort of emotion going on with what you're doing. I think it's important. It's often just kind of this rote thing, but I still really get into it. I'm doing this film right now with Kristen Stewart and we have this scene together where we pass a book back and forth to each other. We did the scene with just our hands and it was one of the most beautiful shots. I love those weird acting moments. How many different ways can you hand someone this book or touch this object? Hand acting. I love it.



You've done a lot of different kinds of things, aside from just acting. Is it important for you to sort have these other creative outlets?

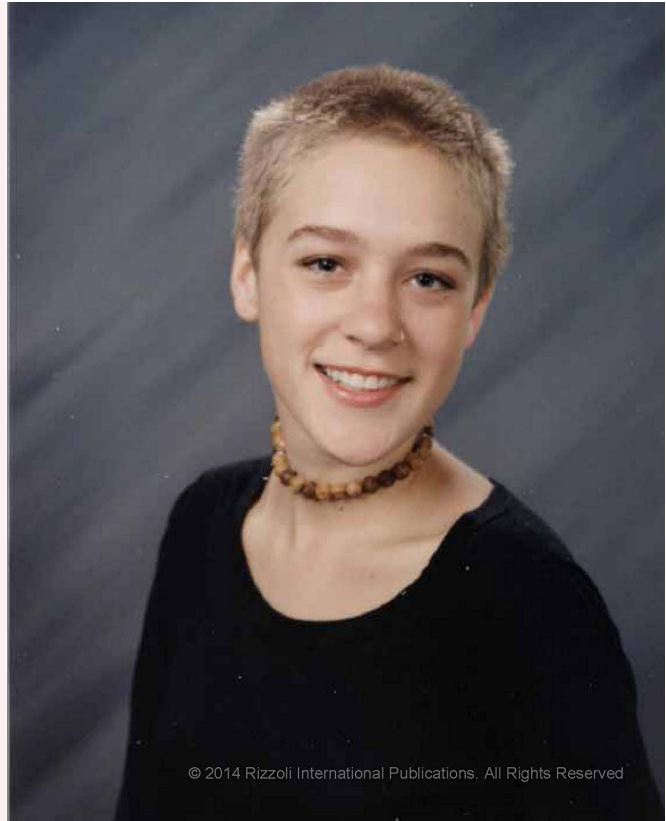
Sometimes, yes. I think doing the clothing lines with Opening Ceremony was really great for me and was definitely a confidence-building thing as well as a way to communicate ideas. I feel like now it's all kind of culminating—all these creative pursuits—as I'm working towards becoming a filmmaker. The things you learn doing a clothing line actually translate to filmmaking in ways you wouldn't expect. Having to come up with a story and then creating the visuals that were attached to the line, creating look books and a variety of different presentations, all in service of this larger thing that you have to communicate and try and sell to people—the designers, press people, and buyers. It's really an exhausting process, but I learned so much about how to communicate in a way to get people enthusiastic about something, about how to sell an idea. Those were things I'd never had to do before.

Maybe I could've started out by trying to be a filmmaker, but that wasn't the road I was on. All of the things I've done over the years have been preparing me, in one way or another, for doing this. I did a book with Rizzoli, even this little fanzine thing I made called No Time For Love. All of these different things have been helping me build up to what I want to do.



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Paul Lee, you want Paul Lee, you.



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Did you always know that you would be an actor?

I did. When I was five, my mom brought me to see *Annie* on Broadway. That was it.

***Annie* is the gateway drug for so many people.**

So many. I loved Broadway stuff. They were singing and dancing, which I did all the time anyways. I was like, "These other little girls are doing this, I want to!" So I actually did commercials and modeled for catalogs in Connecticut. I did a lot of that work when I was young. Then when I started to hit puberty, my mom was like, "Wait a minute." I think she saw how vulnerable I was dealing with the cattle calls and the rejections. She's like, "No more of this. You can do it at school, you can go to summer theatre camp, but no more of this professional stuff until you're 18." Thank god. She looked out for me. Even in high school, after I was spotted on the street and Jane Pratt, the editor of *Sassy*, wanted me to walk in a show for them, my mom was on it. The fashion editor, Andrea Linett, was like, "Oh we want Chloë to model for us." My mom's like, "Only if you give her an internship." My mom was smart. She was very protective.

You stand out as someone who didn't have to compromise their individuality to exist in an industry that is often all about erasing the personality.

I get that, but I also interpret it as a little bit of a double-edged sword because people want to project so much onto actors. I feel like if you're less of a "personality" then it's easier and you get more roles, especially for women. Although there are the actors that are big personalities and they just play themselves over and over again and they're really good at it. Often they're huge movie stars and are incredibly successful because of it.

Where do you feel like you exist in that continuum? Has that been a constant battle for you?

It has. I feel like I've often been frustrated by my lack of opportunities. Don't get me wrong, I've done great work and I feel like I've had great opportunities with great directors. But for example, this movie I'm shooting now is the first time I've ever been number one on a call sheet. Not that that's what you strive for, but it's the first time I've ever starred in a movie with top billing. All of my work in the past 20-something years has been supporting or basically day playing or working in ensemble pieces. I don't want to sound like I'm unhappy with the opportunities I've been given—not at all—but it's been a little frustrating for me. Of course I would've liked to have done more already, but maybe this is my time. I don't know. You never know.

What kind of practical advice might you have for an aspiring actor—or for someone who's trying to pursue a creative career?

Oh my god, I don't know. It's such a hard thing and there are so many weird factors involved. However, I remember early on in my career I went to some kind of dinner and Francis McDormand was there. I think we were represented by the same agent or something. Somehow I was in her vicinity and got up the nerve to talk to her. She was like, "My only advice to you is that you should fire your publicist." I think that that's kind of stuck with me and that's why now I'm always blaming any career issues on the fact that I'm seen as some downtown cool kid or that I'm somehow too involved in fashion. Still, throughout my career I'm the one who made those choices—I chose to do big advertising campaigns, but I did them so I wouldn't have to compromise when it came to my film choices. I also had to support my family from a young age, so I don't know... maybe I'm just justifying things to myself. You have to be careful about how you present yourself to the world. Not that I would tell people other people what they should do, but this notion did really stick with me as a real thing—like, oh my god, did I really become too much of a personality? Too much my own person? Too identifiable with the downtown cool girl thing? Did that hurt my career as an actress? I don't know. Maybe.

Essential Chloë Sevigny:

Sevigny has appeared in a variety of music videos over the years (including a memorable turn in The Lemonhead's clip for "Big Gay Heart"), but Sonic Youth's 1992 video for "[Sugar Cane](#)" marks her first appearance on film (surrounded by Mark Jacob's "grunge" collection for Perry Ellis.)

Kids might have put her on the map, but it was Sevigny's Oscar-nominated [performance](#) in 1999's *Boy's Don't Cry* that established her as a force to reckon with in Hollywood.

[Chloë Sevigny](#), written by Chloë Sevigny. A celebration of all things Chloë, this beautifully articulated coffee table book includes everything from film stills, ad campaigns, personal ephemera (zines, polaroids, casting fliers), magazine editorials, and images by the likes of Mark Borthwick and Juergen Teller.

Sevigny has a history of [collaboration](#) with NYC's Opening Ceremony and her ready-to-wear collections often include references not only to downtown NYC, but sly nods to her Connecticut upbringing and subtle pop culture homages like a black trenchcoat modeled after the one worn by Christian Slater in *Heathers*.

Though she has modeled for the likes of Miu Miu, H&M, and Louis Vuitton, Sevigny's most iconic bit of spokespersonship might be the most obvious, a fragrance ad for iconic French fashion house Chloé.

People often take so much heat for doing endorsement deals and ad campaigns, but you never know what's happening in someone's personal life. They also might be supporting their entire family, putting people through school, etc. You never know.

You also think like, oh my god—I can make this amount of money that my father would work two years for in one day. You're like, am I an asshole to take it or an asshole not to take it? What does it mean? Oh, selling out. Trials and tribulations. You do the best you can, try to make things that are good, not do things that make you feel gross. As with anything, you figure it out as you go along.

Name

Chloë Sevigny

Vocation

Actor, Director, Designer

Fact

Since making her big screen debut in 1995's *Kids*, actress, director, and designer Chloë Sevigny has appeared in nearly forty feature films and over a dozen television shows. Widely hailed as one of the preeminent fashion icons of her generation, Sevigny has not only designed her own line of clothing (in partnership with Opening Ceremony), but also seen her lifelong stylistic oeuvre celebrated in the form of a coffee table book published in 2015 by Rizzoli. Earlier this year Sevigny stepped behind the camera to direct *Kitty*, a short film starring Ione Skye, Lee Meriwether, and Edie Yvonne that was adapted from a short story by Paul Bowles.

