

An Interview with Sarah Michelle Gellar

This interview, conducted by Dietmar Dath, about »The Grudge« and other recent and not so recent aspects of SMG's career was conducted in December of 2004. Differently edited and re-mixed versions have appeared in the »Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung« and »Spex«, but this is the most extended & nearly complete version which tries to stay as close [i.e. almost verbatim] to the transcript of the actual interview.

1. Challenging and helping audiences

I'm still trying to wrap my head around that very nice day/night/present/flashback scene you had with Bill Pullman. A very neat thing indeed.

This was in fact one of the most interesting reasons to do the film because on paper that scene... it doesn't really work on paper and it's one of those things where it's up to the actors and the director. And if the director doesn't... when you... basically, when you have that non-linear aspect and you have these two very different times, I mean literally Bill Pullman and I would have to ask each time: does he see me, do I see him, where am I, am I in his vision...

And you're not talking.

Yeah. We... You know, we knew that the movie hinged on that and I think one of the first things that Bill and I said when we saw that sequence was: Whew! It was definitely... if that scene didn't work...

The film would fall apart.

I like your hat. [It's a grey »Dawson's Creek« cap].

Oh, thank you.

The movie would completely fall apart. And for me it was one of the greatest challenges of the film because – you know, the last year or so I really sat back and you think about films and a lot of American films give you excessive information. They're so petrified that people don't follow...

With music, with everything... it comments on itself all the time.

And you know, as an audience member, the more information you have coming at you the more you just sit back and you take it. But the second you take that away, the second there's silence, if you watch the audience, then everybody leans forward because it becomes participation.

It sucks you in.

Yeah, because you're experiencing everything for the first time with that character and I know as an audience member, I would rather have that. To me, that is why »Sixth Sense« works so well because you're watching something and then you realize...

Bruce Willis is not...

You're not even...

Out of the corner of his eye...

You're not even really watching it. And to me, that was some of the fascination I had with it – as well as the fact that the second you bring two different cultures together, you're seeing two very different viewpoints, especially when you bring eastern and western. You have western culture which is so literal just in terms of what we believe and what we think, everything is very black and white.

That's Bill Pullman. He's just so western...

And then you have the grey which is the detective to me. He's the character...

He's the director. Sort of has that function...

In a sense. And he had the only explanation scene which to me kept it

interesting because Shimizu moved the camera so much and one thing that I always in the beginning would wonder was: How come Shimizu never has the camera on anyone that's speaking – I kept thinking, does he not like me, am I gonna be getting a close-up. But part of what Shimizu does is very stylish – when you take an Asian film, a film that really at its heart takes the tradition, takes the custom, takes the believes, and you put in an American director, then it's really an American view. It's what we see, it's how we perceive, versus when you have Shimizu it is what he sees, it is what he believes, it is what he knows. And as the American actors in the film it was our responsibility then to bring truth to the western characters, and this is how we were looked at.

2. What do I look like? Telling vs. showing.

I think that generally you're an actress who employs facial expressions, gestures, physicality in interesting ways – how is it that... I got the feeling, both from your way of delivering the lines and from the physical acting, that you're giving the people not just more information than they knew before but sometimes more than the character herself knows...

Well, I think...

Like telling us what she doesn't acknowledge, in a lot of your films you have these moments... how do you prepare that?

I give lot of credit here to Shimizu because he was willing to give up a lot of the work to us and you don't do that in Japan. In Japan, an actor comes on set, the director says what you do and you just do it. I think the first week he was a little put off by the fact that I said: Well, this is how I see this... and I didn't know that you didn't do that. Nobody prepared me...

That you were not to co-create...

Yeah, nobody told me that's inappropriate. And so I didn't realize at first that I was overstepping bounds. And by the end I think Shimizu realized how collaborative the process can be. And I just always find that... dialogue is good and great, but again it's that whole idea of... telling versus involving I guess it would be and I would much rather have less dialogue and let the audience have that experience with the character.

It's like the photos in Entertainment Weekly that you did. Not many actresses could do that so effectively.

Well, thank you. It was so much fun and part of the growing part of the process is that part of it and I was very lucky that Entertainment Weekly which is a magazine that I respect so much gave me the freedom to do something... well, I think when we finally looked at it, it was a stylish version of sort of the Italian idea of scaring people...

Argento.

Yeah...one of the things about Argento specifically was everything was really beautiful...

Lush.

Everything's beautiful. And we just loved that idea of, umm... you know, to me, art is art, and art is expression, and it doesn't matter whether you're looking at a painting, a picture, a film, a book, it's about ways of expression and the hope is that each person takes away from it something else and to me, if I can continue to do that then I will have succeeded in what it is that I love to do.

3. Playing a Western couple & other non-method-acting-jobs

Jason Behr – Given that you both starred in tv shows which end with the principal characters leaving their town in a bus...

Really?

Both shows end the same way...

I never knew that.

Of course it doesn't mean anything.

No, but it's interesting.

Yeah, sort of funny. So, you and Jason Behr: Those were the Americans in Japan, both literally – on set – and in the movie, so I got the impression that maybe that was sort of a nucleus, this relationship between the two characters, that you built your story around.

Jason and I have known each other for... like... probably like thirteen years.

You worked on »Buffy« together...

We knew each other before that. I was very lucky to have him as a co-star because... there you are in this new environment that's so different and it's not like you're fighting the environment but you're trying to kind of find your way through it, but if at the same time I was trying to get to know my co-star: So, where are you from, you know, what do you like to do... that can be a struggle. And one of the hardest things that we found was communicating the difference between an American couple on screen and a Japanese couple on screen. And again, as Americans in the film it was our responsibility to bring truth to those characters. Young kids in Japan don't really co-habitate, they don't... public displays of affection are considered rude in Japan, all those things... it was our responsibility...

So you holding hands there was sort of a comment because it really jumped out of the screen in the traffic moment...

Because it looked so different, and you know, I remember, the opening scene when you see us in the apartment together, Shimizu really wanted to move that scene into the kitchen. He did not like that much physical intimacy, it's not something that they like, and again that was something that was important to the Americans because the whole idea... why re-make it if you're just gonna do the exact same movie? And to me the idea

of remaking it was taking what is essentially a Japanese film and bringing these Americans into it and their viewpoints but not only how they see this experience but how do they react to it.

I've talked to Amber Benson a year ago and she praised you as the consummate professional and she said that for her there were basically two kinds of actors: those that just get absorbed in the moment a lot of times and those others that... she praised you as very controlled. Is this valid, this distinction?

Amber said something to me a long time ago and I'll never forget it and I steal it from her all the time is... we were talking about method actors.

Okay, yes, that's it.

And we were talking about people that like don't take a shower or don't do that and...

Get tattoos...

We both come from the school of: Well, just act! Act like you smell, why do you have to offend everybody else? And Amber said something a long time ago that I love which was: I'm an actor, I don't channel.

Great.

Definitely I'm with Amber on that. And I'm not saying there's anything wrong with method acting, it's certainly a whole 'nother idea but I just, you know... when my character doesn't take a bath I don't see the need to offend everybody else on the set with my stench. I would rather just pretend like I smell.

And it's harder to do that.

I think so. I mean I think it's more challenging...

To project something.

Yeah. I mean, we can all experience what it felt like when our dog died when we were six years old – or I can experience my boyfriend dying in front of me, Karen experiencing Jason's... I mean, Doug... a little jet-lagged, I'm sorry. But I think it's every actor's choice.

4. The quest for variety

Coming from that non-method acting-approach, it's very interesting that you spread your...I mean, we've seen you as shy characters or... »I knew what you did last summer« was something completely different from »Cruel Intentions« where we saw more of a mean streak and... how difficult is it to orchestrate the quest for range, for a wide spectrum of characters to play in a movie market like America?

Very difficult. Especially as a female. It is incredible.

You tend to get typecast.

It's not even that so much, it's just that I don't know if in films the three-dimensional female characters are as prevalent. They're harder to find. I mean if one more person asks me today: How come you don't make a romantic movie? But the truth is: I find it very clichéd, I don't understand what is interesting about watching a woman pining away for a man and do silly things to get his attention, I don't appreciate that, I think we've come way past that. You get a movie every once in a while like »Pretty Woman« where a woman stands alone or Bridget Jones where there's an individual, that I find interesting, but those are very far and few between.

There are not very many Jodie Fosters in Hollywood.

I don't even know that so much... pardon me, they haven't fed me, pardon my growling stomach. I don't think it's that much about the actors as it about...

Oh no, I don't mean... I mean, they don't make them, they don't let them do that. I didn't mean that there aren't many actresses that... I don't know...

Well probably not of Jodie Foster's character calibre but you know, it's difficult. When I wanted to do »Cruel Intentions«, a lot of people tried to talk me out of it: Why would you do that? You're America's sweet-

heart, you play a lovable character, people aren't gonna accept you, why don't you play Annette? And I kept saying: Why? I play Buffy! Why do I wanna do... On my downtime I wanna do stuff that's different and characters that are different. And I think I've been very blessed considering that for the last eight years I worked ten months a year on a television show and I only had two months to do something else. So not only is it about finding something that I find interesting but about finding something that fits into that schedule. And I sort of look at now as the second movement of that. Now it's about... now I can pick projects... It used to be, the first that came first is when does it shoot? Then: do I like it? Now the only thing that's important is: do I like it, do I like the filmmaker, is there something to say, is there a reason to do it? And I don't care what genre it is. The only people that label people... are journalists, and I'm not saying you, but I mean that's where it comes from.

They do so desire ... they want a headline so badly.

And it has to be produced fast, you have to have copy, you know we don't care much for careers or for, for...

And so that's the only way people get pigeonholed. And that's unfortunate, it's like... it's like in high-school, I mean it's the same thing, people just wanna label other people. Well, get to know them and you'd be surprised how much... you know, how three-dimensional and how many different facets there are to people.

I always found it quite courageous that you... scenes like, you know, the ending of »Cruel Intentions« where she gets found out and she just ages twenty years in twenty seconds, that was really courageous to do that, to step out of the cliché so far, because it's really in a sense ugly but it's also very raw, it communicates a lot.

I mean I'm not gonna lie and not say that at one point they wanted to change the ending, but I... we were all very adamant. We're talking about »Les Liaisons Dangereuses«, I mean who doesn't remember the

movie version when Glen Close walks into the Opera. That to me is one of the sadest, most tragic scenes on film: There is this character that does all these horrible things to people, there's no reason to feel sympathy for her, yet when she walks into that opera house you feel badly, and to me that was the most important thing with Kathryn, that she does all those unlikable things and I wasn't trying to make her likable, it wasn't important to me, but what I wanted people to do was understand. I don't wanna... I don't like stereotypical characters and to me she was lonely, she was neglected, all the money in the world does not give you security...

And she really wants her half-brother to love her...

Oh absolutely.

Even when she sees she's lost him...

Absolutely... step-brother, not half-brother, that'd be really disgusting.

Okay, I'm sorry.

That'd be really inappropriate and a whole 'nuther movie.

We had a case here in Germany, we're not that good with these distinctions.

Okay, maybe you can have that kind of movie in Germany, we just can't have that in the states.

Well I won't propose it.

[laughs]

Alright. Joshua Jackson, with whom you sadly didn't have a scene because I...

I worked in so many movies with him and not having a... no, I worked with him, I did have a scene with him, you know I had a scene with him...

Where?

Scream 2!

Right.

We had a scene together.

So... he's going to do theatre work there early next year, was that every something that you...that's why I mentioned Joshua Jackson, because I'll try if I can see him...

In Germany?

No, no, in London.

I thought you meant in Germany, I'm like: really?

No, no, no.

I came from theatre. I mean that's why I started. I was a teenager. You know the one thing with theatre, when you're on television with Buffy, you can't get that commitment, and right now as well, I'm not ready to give up nine months to anything. I need a little more freedom right now, eventually it's something that I do like to do, I love live stage and I've been lucky that I've gotten... to've been able to do things that are live in the meantime, uh, but I also like to do things that are different, and it seems to me like everybody I know is going to London to do stage [laughs]

I've seen Alyson Hannigan there...

Yeah, you gotta keep... you gotta keep it different, you know, you gotta do stuff that's...

Go to Paris!

Yeah, go to Paris, I'll be in the Moulin Rouge stage show.

Great.

That'd be a disaster.

5. Coming Attractions & final words on »The Grudge«

Is there anything you can already say about »Southland Tales« with Richard Kelly?

Well, Richard Kelly is... you know I always say to people: could you imagine to describe »Donnie Darko« bevor it came out? I'm making

a movie about a six-foot mean bunny. People would look at you like you were nuts and it was career suicide. I always say the best person to describe Richard Kelly is Richard Kelly but I will say that he's crafted another really incredible world, a really different world. I think he's incredibly smart, he's incredibly innovative, he scares me just a little bit, he's a little on the insane side but, you know, more than anything I'm a fan.

You've worked for and with people who have very distinct visual and other styles, you had a Kevin Williamson script, you had Joss Whedon...

I'm working with Asif Kapadia right now who directed »The Warrior«.

You're... and what is that?

Umm... it's getting this... it's so hard, I'm so bad at describing them before you actually have like really gotten into them, it's...it's sort of on the idea of true love and what happens when a love is taken away and it... can it transcend, I mean, does that continue, do you find that person? He's really...what I find interesting about him is the worlds he creates, he's about very... open space, it's very vast, it's very empty where Richard Kelly is so full of everything I mean I love the idea of sort of...

Cluttered.

Yeah it's really as opposite as opposite can be are the two.

For you, as an actress, you know working with all these people who have very clear visions you know, visually, narratively, military, whatever – does it change when you're to deliver a line by Williamson or... or do you try to, you know, do you have in mind your own continuity of... playing different characters...

I think as an actor it's your job to bring the director's vision to the screen. And one of the things about Shimizu, especially with the language barrier, it was so important to me...it was so important to me that I was speaking for him because that's essentially what an actor does. In the end, you're the one putting forth the directors vision. And that's...

So how did you communicate?

It's funny you know, in the beginning through a translator but at the end you realize, I mean for me it was an education in communication, I mean you learn how little language is really necessary if actually spend some time to get to know someone.

So on set it was like glances or...

You just...

You just knew when you did it right.

You just know, it's like even the way he would say: Cut! You knew the difference. You could hear it.

If he was satisfied or...

And that's about when you really get to know someone and I think when you speak the same language you take for granted they're just gonna tell you. And you don't really spare the time to get to know lilt and voices or even the way they sit, if they're like this [sits up differently] or if they're like this [hunches forward] or you know whatever that is and you know because we didn't have language, so much more time was spent on getting to know the other person.

Music. I mean when you do a movie, you don't know the music and when you finally see it... I thought in »The Grudge« it was very much like »Suspiria«, it was very Argento ...

Shimizu fought so hard for the music, both Shimizu and Sam I mean they spent... that was one of the things that they spent the most time on because it was so important that you didn't have this very stylish Japanese movie and then an American soundtrack, and that silences were allowed to be had. That is one thing that American moves are petrified of is just absent sounds. One of the scenes in films ... I just thought sometimes... My favorite scene in a film I wasn't in this year was Kill Bill Two, was Uma Thurman in the box...

In the box, that was...

That scene to me when, I mean... there had to be just two minutes of just blackened silence, I thought that was one of the most, I mean hands down, in years... but of the year it was hands down my favorite scene in a film.

It also reminded me of a television show where someone clawed herself out of a grave...

Yeah, little bit, little bit, I could see that, although that scene when she walked ... she asked for a glass of water almost killed me, almost killed me.

Anything else you would like to say, you know on »The Grudge« or...

Well just that I'm... I'm really proud, this was a true American-Japanese partnership, and it's never been done, and I'm just, I'm really proud of Shimizu and proud of the cast and proud of the crew, this was not an easy experience for anyone, everybody had to work really hard...

How long has...

Three months. It was three months of work, ten times as hard as they normally do which of course for Japanese is not saying that much 'cause they work so hard anyway but for me it's a good complement and there is so much love in this film that I'm just proud of the work that went into that.

Actually there is one more question, I just saw it [on my notepad], umm: crowd scenes or scenes with many participants as opposed to very intimate scenes. I mean in »The Grudge« obviously you have a lot of very intimate stuff going on...what do you prefer because again, thinking of the last scene in »Cruel Intentions« when she is confronted by all these people...

You know what, that is so dependent on the environment I will say one of the things that I remember very distinctly about that was they worked so hard to get a group of extras on that scene that very so into it, I mean these people were so into it, I have never seen, you know, so if you get

lucky, I got, it's great, sometimes you get so unlucky that it becomes so difficult that you wind up doing it by yourself...

Carrying everything.

Even the other side, yes, so I was very lucky in that scene, so I think it just depends.

Okay. Good.

Thank you very much.

It was very nice talking to you.