

# About A GIRL

Newcomer Allison Williams talks about *Girls*, her famous family and saying no to nudity.

By ELIO IANNACCI. Photographed by SEIJI FUJIMORI.  
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# It's

26 minutes and 11 seconds into the third episode of HBO's *Girls*. A struggling writer named Hannah Horvath, played by the show's 26-year-old creator/star, Lena Dunham, is in her bedroom staring at a laptop. She's just endured the most hellish month of her adult life: Her parents have stopped paying her rent, her doctor has diagnosed her with HPV and her former college boyfriend has let her know that her "handsomeness" helped him realize his attraction to men.

Instead of having a breakdown, Hannah decides to throw down. She double clicks an MP3 of Robyn's "Dancing On My Own," jumps off her bed and swings her tattooed arms to the gunning beat. Her impeccably put-together roommate, Marnie, played by 24-year-old Allison Williams, catches Hannah's impromptu dance party and

joins in. Together in their tiny Brooklyn apartment they hair-flip the pain away, share a hug and make the tragic magic. The credits roll.

"That right there is my all-time favourite scene of the season," Williams says, sipping a bowl of latte in a café in New York's Chelsea district. "Lena and I cried our eyes out after we did it because it was so beautiful. That song has a deeper meaning for the four of them," she adds, referring to the quartet of twentysomething girlfriends the series focuses on. There is Hannah—the show's sardonic, forever-at-a-crossroads heroine—and her best friend/flawless foil, Marnie, a posh gallery assistant whose life is seemingly all worked out. Then there is Jessa, a British drifter/jetsetter who serves as the show's girl-gone-wild, and her cousin, Shoshanna, a sheltered NYU student who is obsessed with losing her virginity. "It seems all the young female characters on the show have moments when they feel like they're kind of unwanted by the world, so I think 'Dancing On My Own' is their song," Williams says. "It is so unabashedly about

being vulnerable and rejected and having the strength to keep going, to keep fighting to get noticed."

In contrast, the show—and Williams—has had no trouble getting noticed since the series debuted on April 15. In fact, *Girls* is the only new HBO project that has been able to heartily feed the 24-hour news cycle; its comical, taboo-riddled scripts are laden with enough issues and tissues to keep pundits laughing, weeping and, sometimes, raging. Even Vanity Fair.com has three critics (Bruce Handy, Juli Weiner and Sarah Ball) debating the show's characters as if they were a UC Berkeley women's studies panel. Yet the show's main hook is really the lives of these four extremely dissimilar New York gal pals. Stop yourself if you're thinking this sounds remotely like *Sex and the City*. There are no Carrie Bradshaw-esque shoe-shopping expeditions, no diner brunches and no dishy relationship questions answered on a Mac Powerbook, wrapping up the message of each episode with a silk bow. Watching a scene Dunham has written is like listening in on a private conversation, which is probably why Judd Apatow—the man who produced *Bridesmaids* and wrote and directed *Knocked Up*—signed on as executive producer. "It's not at all like most television out there," Apatow says via phone from Los Angeles. "It's not easy and it's not safe. Lena is not afraid to show women—warts and all. Their beauty, their madness, their ridiculousness, their stupidity, their strength. That's why some people get thrown by it. It is controversial because it's really frank." »

Part of the discussion is how Marnie has become one of *Girls*' most popular—and polarizing—characters. Working in a trendy art space in Manhattan, Marnie wears the chicest, most ladylike outfits of the bunch, furthering the gap between her polished, attractive life and Hannah's often slovenly, haphazard one. Marnie is the Mary Tyler Moore to Hannah's Rhoda.

Williams says that she, like Mary and Marnie, is a classic A-type personality. "She has this instinct of keeping everyone protected—she needs control and she needs to know that her friends are OK at all times. She's like a sheep dog, trying to safely herd everyone around her. I was able to connect with that. On the other hand, she's a deeply scared and insecure perfectionist, which is so not me. Marnie hasn't yet realized that perfection isn't a real, attainable goal."

Christopher Abbott, who plays Marnie's sheepish ex-boyfriend Charlie, says there is a method to Williams' persuasive performance. "Allison filled in all the blanks," Abbott says. "She wanted to talk out what Charlie and Marnie's relationship would be like before hitting the set. She wanted all the answers. It was like studying for an exam sometimes!"

When she's dissecting Marnie's quirks, you get the feeling Williams is talking about a close friend rather than a role. "There was a line in the pilot that was scrapped in editing that I loved. It's a scene where Marnie opens the fridge and she eats half a yogurt and puts it back into the fridge. Lena's character says, 'How could you put away a half-eaten yogurt? That is so foreign to me,'" Williams says, laughing. "I immediately liked the character more because of that small thing—anyone who can rationalize doing that, I want to get to know."

Williams' taste for the limelight came early, when she saw *The Wizard of Oz* at four years old. Her famous father, NBC news anchor Brian Williams, and her mother, TV and radio producer Jane Gillan Stoddard, sat her down to explain that the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man, the Wicked Witch of the West and Dorothy were not real people and were played by actors who had more than one role in the film. "I got the idea that I could play *all* of the characters in *Oz*—and sing everyone's parts," she says. "By the age of seven I had told them I wanted to be a movie star but when *Oz* came up in the school play, they made me the mayor of the munchkins. I couldn't get any of the [good] parts. I totally needed an agent."

Although she had an agent when she was going for *Girls*, Williams already had an in before the audition. She had met Apatow at what he calls "a strange dinner party at the Nantucket Film Festival with news anchor Chris Matthews, Allison's mom and Meg Ryan" and he was floored by how funny she was. He was later reminded of her charm when he saw a YouTube video that cast Williams as a supper club chanteuse, singing "Nature Boy" while a jazz orchestra played the theme song to *Mad Men*.

Apatow's hunch was partially superficial. A slim five foot five, Williams is just as refined and elegant as her *Girls* character—she names Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan and Victoria Beckham as her go-to red carpet designers. Her beauty is reminiscent of the top American models of the 1980s—the Stephanie Seymours, Carol Alts and Kathy Irelands of the world. The show, which does a great job of jabbing at her good looks, has characters comparing Marnie to "a young Brooke Shields," "J.Lo at the Grammys" and "a Real Housewife."

In conversation, Williams comes off as a well-read, beyond-her-years Manhattan socialite (she loves Chaucer, quotes Joan Didion,

does the charity circuit) but once in a while she slides into goofy tween territory (she watches *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* religiously). However, when she talks about studying toward her English degree at Yale (she graduated in 2010), working as a personal assistant for Tina Fey and contributing to Apatow's and Will Ferrell's *Funny Or Die* website (she played a geeky Kate Middleton in a web series that debuted post-royal wedding), she glows.

The best part of her trajectory so far? Meeting the Hollywooders she most respects, including Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson and director Rob Marshall. "Everyone says you never want to meet your heroes but the ones I met have all been just as gracious and smart as I could have imagined. These people live quiet lives and make smart choices with their scripts," she says, adding that Meryl Streep tops her list. "I got to know Meryl relatively well as we were around each other every day while I was an assistant on [Robert Altman's] *A Prairie Home Companion* and I recently watched her give Hillary Clinton an award. She is so much more than an actor. I met her daughters too. They are the biggest testament to her. She has talented, smart, driven, normal children. The fact that one of the most famous actresses in the world can have a good family life means so much."

When it comes to Williams' own successes—including her first talk show booking on *The Late Show with David Letterman*—she says her career is a team effort. "My parents were the first people I talked to when I got offered Marnie. They've both been exposed to the business so that's helpful. I always ask for their opinion."

Asked how her parents have reacted to *Girls*' risqué scripts, Williams laughs. "We've watched it together three times and they are fine. I'm the one that gets giggly and awkward," she says. "When it first came time to come home and tell them, 'You're gonna see me having fake sex on the show,' they said something like, 'OK, what do you need?' and that was it."

Those sex scenes won't get too graphic though. "Right now, I don't see myself ever doing nude scenes," she says. "Once you do them, you can't take it back because of the way Google Images works. I also think that unfortunately nudity seems to overshadow some of the more brilliant things that are going on." In the unlikely event that she is offered the lead for one of Tinseltown's

most buzzy about-to-be-made films, *Fifty Shades of Grey*—the steamy best-selling novel currently on her nightstand—Williams says she would decline. "I wouldn't take it. It is just too much for me but I applaud whatever actress steps up to the plate and I can't wait to watch it."

Aside from filming the second season of *Girls*, Williams has a few plates spinning in the air. She is sifting through a stack of movie and TV scripts that have come her way ("They are totally different—I've always played comic relief but that is changing") and is in the throes of recording an album of covers from the '50s, '60s and '70s. Although the disc's release date is not set, Williams does hint at who her dream production team would be: "I'd love to work with Mark Ronson and I am obsessed with Don Was—he is such a genius. I would give a limb to work with them."

With regards to the ongoing hoopla surrounding *Girls*, Williams feels all the chatter—both negative and positive—is productive. "Any show that gets girls talking about STDs, boyfriend insecurity, roommate problems and friendships with other women is going to make noise. [*Girls*] can open doors for other young female filmmakers to feel like their voice is relevant. If these conversations are happening as a result of the show, I think we've done our job." □

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