



TODD COLE

N O W Y O U S E E H E R

Telling the truth is what interests Lena Dunham, says her friend and colleague Judd Apatow. And in her HBO series, *Girls*, Dunham's emotional candor is sometimes uncomfortable but always compelling. Says the actress-writer-producer-director: "I'm writing young people living life as I see it." BY ANN FARMER

Lena Dunham doesn't actually prefer sweets. She's more of a savory food fiend. Bacon, buttery biscuits and Cheetos are the snack foods she's likely to crave in a weak moment.

You wouldn't suspect that, though, watching her critically acclaimed HBO comedy, *Girls*, which launched its second season in January. Dunham — the series creator and leading lady, as well as an executive producer, writer and director — routinely pens scenes for her character, Hannah Horvath, which require her to shovel handfuls of cake into her mouth. Dunham reprised the gag at the Primetime Emmy Awards

last September. During the opening comedy sketch, pre-taped with host Jimmy Kimmel and a bevy of actresses, she was discovered hiding out in the bathroom, sitting naked atop a toilet seat, plowing through an entire cake.

"Cake is kind of a her thing," explains Dunham, when she shows up at the Hudson Diner in Manhattan in December for a breakfast interview. She says she was initially quite enthused about writing food scenes into her show, which revolves around the unsettled lives of four twenty-something women in hipster Brooklyn. They behave recklessly much of the time, engaging in unprotected sex, for instance, and bingeing on cupcakes. Dunham, however, stopped swallowing the food props many episodes ago. "Because eating that much cake," she says, "will just ruin your whole day."

She, in fact, looks slimmer than she appeared in the *Girls* first-season finale. Her new, short, perky hairdo — despite some feral strands in the back

that suggest she roused herself from bed moments earlier — also embraces her face appealingly.

"It's been very liberating," she says, her voice a little hoarse from a cold. "I always think of Hannah as having this wedge of cheese on her head. So it's really nice to be free of that wedge of cheese."

Does all this personal grooming mean that a more glamorous Hannah will emerge in season two? "No," Dunham insists. "I never feel glamorous. I think as Hannah gets older, she'll get a better sense of who she is and what she wants, and that's sort of a sexy, glamorous quality. But I'm not going to have any issues continuing to write depressing, slovenly circumstances."

Girls has been described as a non-aspirational *Sex and the City*. Growing up, Dunham, who is twenty-six, assiduously watched every episode of that HBO series, which followed four sexually active, upwardly mobile women as they navigated New York City with confidence.

Dunham's characters, on the other hand, "aren't even close to having a sense of what they want," says Dunham, whose Hannah, in particular, is portrayed as a loser — albeit an exceptionally self-aware and engaging one — who aspires to be a writer. She and her gal pals squeak by as baristas, babysitters and gallery assistants.

Plus, Dunham doesn't necessarily think in terms of story arcs. "The plot is in some ways incidental," she says, "and takes a back seat to each character's emotional development."

Shoshanna (played by Zosia Mamet), who was riddled with anxiety all season one over her virginity, got deflowered at the end. Tightly wound Mar-nie (Allison Williams) was loosening up. Hannah managed to get one foot out the door of her demeaning relationship with Adam (Adam Driver). But one

foot only. And free-spirited, acid-tongued Jessa (Jemima Kirke) married an ill-suited venture capitalist on some crazy whim. In the season-two opener, as they return from their honeymoon and arrogantly cut into the front of the airport taxi line, Jessa giggles because she's clueless about her husband's home address.

Bloggers took to task the characters' self-involved and self-defeating behavior. They raised eyebrows at the whiteness of the cast (something Dunham is addressing in season two). Dunham is fearless about peeling off her character's mismatched thrift store outfits and exposing her naked body on television. But she was faulted by some for letting it all hang out. She also took hits for the cringe-worthy sex that Hannah has with Adam, who's endearing one minute and loathsome the next.

"That was so good. I almost came," said Hannah to Adam in one scene during which he crudely flattened her face to the side while demanding that she request permission before climaxing. Once sex was over, he jumped up and blithely asked if she'd like a Gatorade.

Even Dunham admits that her characters sometimes drive her crazy. "I think it's really important as a writer not to judge your characters," she says. "But let them go where they will and have their experiences and not assign value to them. Obviously I'm not writing any villains and I'm not writing any heroes. I'm writing young people living life as I see it. To me, it never seemed important that they be likable. It seemed important that their behavior feel real and their reactions feel real."

The series is partly drawn from her own life. "I never felt that cool. I never felt that pretty," says Dunham, skillfully maneuvering between chatting and chewing this morning. "I'm a really good mouthful talker," she says, taking in a forkful of scrambled eggs. Dunham primarily grew up in lower Manhattan, less than a mile from where she's sitting. She attended Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn, where she met her *Girls* costar, Jemima Kirke. Later, she studied creative writing at Oberlin College.

Her accomplished and creatively risk-taking artist parents, Carroll Dunham and Laurie Simmons, encouraged her expressive side, but not in a heavy-handed way. "People think they placed an intense premium on success, but they did not," says Dunham, who recalls, for instance, a beatific week as a youngster obsessively cutting out paper shoes. "As my father would say," she explains, "going where the bliss is."

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Simmons said that her daughter was often overly eager to share her thoughts and experiences with her. "I used to think," Simmons told the writer, Calvin Tompkins, "Please don't let her call me on her cell phone when she's losing her virginity."

After graduating college in 2008, Dunham returned to her parents' Tribeca loft and embarked on a low-budget indie, *Tiny Furniture*. (The title refers to the staged dollhouse scenes that Simmons photographs.) In the film, Dunham featured herself (as she would in *Girls*) as a rudderless, self-lacerating college grad. Her sister and mother costar. It was named best narrative feature at the 2010 South by Southwest Music and Media Conference and brought her to the attention of HBO.

Six months ago, in the wake of her *Girls* success, Dunham finally moved to her own place in Brooklyn Heights. "I still visit [my parents] a lot," she says. "But especially after a long day of shooting, having your own space is essential."

Executive producer Jenni Konner has watched her colleague operate under highly stressful circumstances on set and says she never loses her cool. "It's remarkable. I remember the pilot..." she says. "We were shooting at night at 2 a.m. [Lena] was naked in some scene. The crew was tired. Everyone was tired. She was directing and acting, and her key makeup person came over to her. Lena stopped and turned to her and said, 'Hi, Patricia, how is your night going?' I remember thinking, 'I cannot believe you can be all of these things at one time, including a kind person.' And it's every bit sincere."

Dunham's multi-tasking even extends to directing her own sex scenes. "She gets up," Konner says. "She puts on a T-shirt usually, underwear, sometimes pants if we have the time, and she runs and watches playback at the monitors. And then she'll say, 'Okay, let's go again.' And then she'll be right back in the scene."

Film writer, director and producer Judd Apatow, also a *Girls* executive

producer, says that collaborating with Dunham has been one of the best working experiences in his career. "Lena is a great partner," he says. "She has an oddly positive disposition, so when people get tired and we are running out of scripts, she doesn't melt down. She just goes home and writes."

Apatow jumped on board the project after he saw *Tiny Furniture*. He was taken with Dunham's funny, distinctive voice and clear vision. "Lena is interested in telling the truth," he says. "She does not obsess about the commercial aspects." He adds that the criticisms of *Girls* — the frank hook-ups, the unabashed flaws in the characters — were anticipated. "It was always meant to be a show you could debate. The characters make lots of mistakes, and much of what some bloggers had issues with was something we intended."

Apatow's primary involvement is reading and noting the scripts. "I anticipate problems and try to solve them before they reach her," he says. "I don't sit on the set, so I usually have fresh eyes. Lena and I write an episode together each year and that's really fun. In post I try to be anal and tough on every detail, but all of the final choices are Lena's."

When the 2012 Emmys rolled around, *Girls* won for outstanding casting in a comedy series (Jennifer Euston, CSA, is casting director). It was also nominated in four other comedy-series categories: outstanding series (the nom went to Dunham and her fellow producers), lead actress (Dunham), directing (Dunham, for the episode "She Did") and writing (Dunham, again, for the pilot).

"It's been incredible, and people always use that word, *surreal*, but there really isn't another word that applies to the experience of having your work seen by a wide audience at this early stage," says Dunham, who has since parlayed her rising star into a reported \$3.5 million Random House book deal. Her personal essay-advice book will touch on a variety of topics, including dieting. "The thing about my advice book is, I don't really care. I'm giving you license to be ten pounds overweight," says Dunham, who noticeably avoided the hash browns on her breakfast plate.

Dunham wrote or cowrote all of the episodes in season one and directed half, including the finale, which garnered her the Emmy nod for directing. She relishes the task of blocking. "I'm sure there are directors who don't care about the camera," she says. "But I'm like, why are you going to direct if you're not going to have fun figuring out the camera angles and really making it your own?"

One scene in the finale takes place in a bathroom. Jessa sits on the toilet as Hannah stretches out on the floor in front of the sink. There is a beautiful symmetry to the shot. For Dunham, it was also a logical way to place two women in conversation.

"I sometimes feel like directors send someone over to the kitchen for a spoon," says Dunham, "and send someone back to the living room for a pillow and send someone to the bedroom to turn the music up. In life when we have a conversation, we just sit down and have that conversation."

All season long, fans kept track of her best lines. Like when Hannah goes in for a gynecological exam. After she shares her fears about contracting HIV/AIDs, the doctor sighs, "You could not pay me enough to be twenty-four again." Hannah responds: "Well, they're not paying me at all." In the season-two opener, she proclaims her radically independent spirit: "I've marched to my own drummer ever since I cut my camp shirt into a halter top."

"I love writing," says Dunham, who carries her characters around in her head all day long, gleaned dialogue for them out of the city's cacophony. "So I'm constantly writing down notes," she says, "and writing down little bits and testing things out on friends, and driving my boyfriend [indie rocker Jack Antonoff] crazy by telling the same jokes and stories eight times."

"I never thought of myself as a comedian," she continues. "I felt like I wrote a lot of serious things, too. But they always ended up making people laugh." She describes, for instance, an earnest poem she wrote after 9/11. To her surprise, her high school peers laughed at it. "I was like, I didn't think that was funny. That's a poem. That's a serious poem about, like, 9/11. Why are you laughing? I'm trying to express myself here."

Around that same time, she also wrote a play that included an abortion. "And to me," she says, "it was the heaviest play. To me, it was about the intensity of choice. And people just thought it was funny. And I was like, okay, at least they're not falling asleep. So I guess I will continue down this avenue." ☺

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