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IAR EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: NATALIE ZEA TALKS 'SWEET TALK,' 'JUSTIFIED,' AND 'THE FOLLOWING'

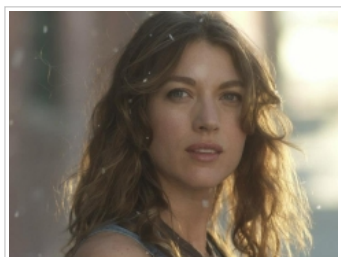
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Written by [Justine Browning](#)

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It wouldn't seem that a film about a phone sex hotline could be so imaginative and creative but *Sweet Talk: An Unexpected Love Story* manages to be just that.

Written by author, playwright, and screenwriter **Peter Lefcourt** (*Desperate Housewives*, *The Deal*) and directed by actress **Terri Hanauer** (whose short *Recycling Flo* proved promising), the indie comedy marks the pair's first project as a married couple. This no doubt contributed to the intriguing dynamic between the two leads, a frustrated yet fiery young woman (**Natalie Zea**) and a blocked writer (**Jeffrey Vincent Parise**). The

pair, who begin chatting over a phone sex hotline, soon find that they're on a journey of self-exploration. What starts out as soulless small talk, turns into something much more—as they create scenarios that have less to do with sex and more to do with the excitement of feeling alive and connected to someone.

Zea's portrayal of Delilah is what makes the film so grounded and alluring. This is no surprise given that the actress turned what could have been hollow small screen roles on shows like *Justified* and *The Following* and gave them an edge. In *Sweet Talk*, **Zea** takes Delilah from a woman consumed with bitterness to a woman who openly shares her fantasy about having a dangerous love affair in war-torn Budapest.

I had the chance to speak with **Zea** about acting with a phone instead of a scene partner, the scarcity of dynamic female roles, and how she approached conveying her character's sexuality in an honest light.



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IAR: A lot of Delilah's interaction is with a phone, and you're not interacting with a scene partner very often, so what are some of the challenges that that posed?

Natalie Zea: To be honest, it was way more challenging doing it on the other side. **Jeffrey** and I were both on the phone for each other's coverage in a different room. They built for me, I'd have to ask **Jeffrey** because I'm not sure where he was and we didn't see much of each other, but for me they built this really sad makeshift soundproof pocket. Blankets and nothing else surrounded me; I was just in there with my landline and my iPad and hour after hour would go by and I wouldn't see anybody or talk to anybody. I would pop out every once in a while to get some food and the crew would be like: "oh, we didn't know you were here today," so that was really challenging. The loneliness was palpable, but I was really lucky, because he did his coverage first, so I got to play around and learn my lines. I got to get a head start on it, whereas he had to just jump right in.

So when you were on the phone, he had already filmed it, so you were actually speaking to him?

Zea: We both there on the day for each other's coverage, so even though he had already shot the scenes, I'm really glad we did it this way, because I really wouldn't have wanted to go first. I would have been like, "I'm so over this, and I already did this." So I think he got the disadvantage but he was a trooper. He showed up every day and was great and put one hundred percent into it.

Many people have compared the state of TV to that of the Indie Film world. So as someone who has been a part of both of those worlds, what's your take on that?

Zea: In my life, I've done one studio film, so I have virtually nothing to compare it to, and the only thing I noticed that was different about that was that no one was concerned about time. No one was concerned about burning film, or "we've got to make our day", "we've got to get to the next location." There's so much stress that goes on, on a television set or an indie film about just reaching your goals for the day, because time is money. And when there's a limited amount of it, you have no room for error. That's the only thing that I noticed differently on a big budget film as opposed to the other stuff I've done, but my frame of reference is pretty slim.

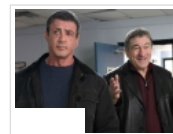


Having that extra time, with this film specifically, and not being rushed, what do you think that that allowed you to bring to the role?

Zea: *Sweet Talk* was very indie, so we were concerned with making our days. But that's all I've ever known, so you work it in as part of your process, I guess. I don't even know what I would do with the luxury of being told to take my time.

With female sexuality on screen, it is seldom portrayed in a realistic or relatable manner but I feel like with *Sweet Talk*, that's definitely the case. Do you think that it's rare for these scripts to come along or are these scripts out there and it's rare for studios to take them on?

Zea: Well, I think there's something very vintage in feel about this script. It harkens back to, there's kind of a '70s feel to it.

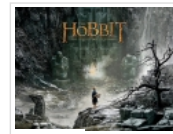


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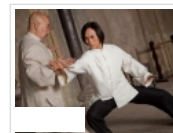
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I'm not sure where it comes from, but I feel like the movies and plays that I grew up watching were about these fully realized female characters, and their sexuality was just one more facet to them, amongst many. And it wasn't what defined and it wasn't the primary character of them, it was just one more very healthy normal thing that made them who they were. And I think that that essence is what I loved about the script and what I like about the character. It's arguably a sexually, thematically, it's sexual, but that's not really what the movie is about. And I love that, I love that **Terri**, being a female director, has so much to do with that. It sucks that still in this day and age, we have to put a caveat in front of director, with gender, but that's the way it is. And it does make a difference. It makes a huge difference. She approached me on a couple occasions and said, "in terms of what you are willing to expose physically in this scene, how are you feeling?" and I was like "I'm fine. I'm fine, don't even worry, whatever you want me to do, I'm fine." I would never say that to a male director. I have a nudity waiver that's five pages long. Literally, it's a custom-made studio waiver that's at my agency, it's on file, and it's not short. But with her, I just knew that she wasn't going to do anything that wasn't right.

In some films, it seems like the woman is there for the male gaze. It's like that in a huge percentage of films but not in this one.

Zea: Right. So often, we're all guilty of it. I think women sometimes do it to, even women writers, because it's so ingrained in us. But again, I think when you have more ladies than men in the room. I think that the nuances end up being there. And I think that the intention ends up being way more pure.



Interesting, and with *The Following* and with *Justified*, a lot of people have talked about how your roles on those shows could have easily been the one-dimensional girlfriend or wife character, but they're not. They're so layered, I am curious how much of that was on the page initially, and how much of that eventually developed when you started portraying the character?

Zea: For *Justified*, I was supposed to be a guest star in the pilot, and I was in one scene at the very end, and very few lines, but I saw it. With her, I saw it. I was like, "okay, this could be really good." So I think that was already there and it's no coincidence that this is **Elmore Leonard**, and there's something about his characters, whether they're big or small, it just doesn't matter. There are so much to even the right roles. So I just knew that it could end up being something special. With *Winona*, or *Claire*, I thought it was completely miscast in the beginning. "This is not for me," and as a matter of fact, there was an actress that always popped in my head, and I can't remember her name, but I'm like, "she would be great at this, the role is perfect for her," so a lot of that character I ended up forcing onto the writers. The way I saw her initially didn't quite fit with my essence, necessarily. So they were really great about sort of molding her and shifting her to be a little more in the direction that I was forcing her into.

Going from *Justified* to *The Following*, it seems like you jumped from those shows pretty quickly.

Zea: Yeah, I did.

Was it difficult to shed *Winona* and take on *Claire* so quickly?

Zea: You know, it wasn't because I still had *Winona*; she's still with us. So she's easy to compartmentalize. One of the reasons I'm not on full-time is because I feel like they were trying really hard, and bless their hearts for it, to make her something more than what she is. And what she is, is a supporting role, and she should be, because it's about him, and it's always going to be about him. And I felt that she needed to be a presence, but she needed to be a peripheral presence. So now, she's sort of easier for me, because I feel like her true purpose is being served, as opposed to trying to shove her out front and center. There was plenty for them to have done, and they didn't, but it's fine. They're two very different characters, they're easy to compartmentalize.

Sweet Talk is available to view via VOD starting December 15, 2013.

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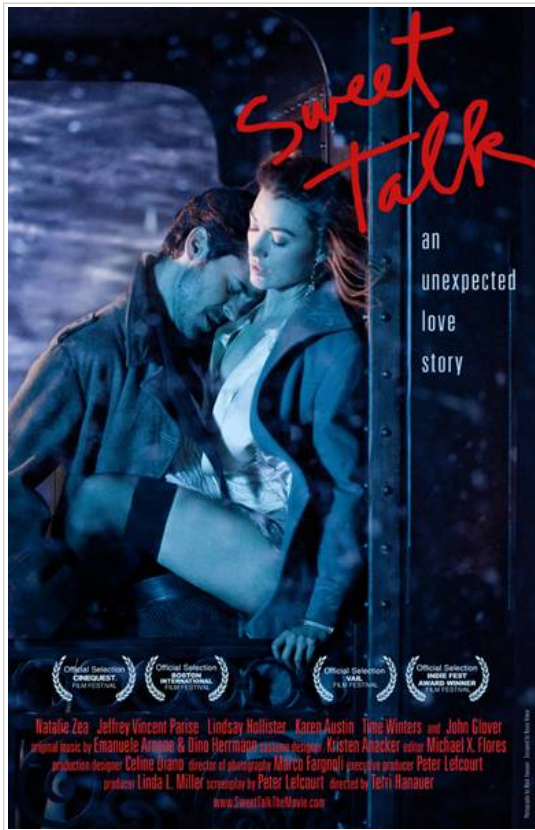
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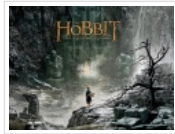
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