

## **MAY DECEMBER PRESS NOTES**

**A Film by Todd Haynes**

# MAY DECEMBER

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## LOGLINE

Twenty years after their notorious tabloid romance gripped the nation, a married couple buckles under the pressure when an actress arrives to do research for a film about their past.

## SYNOPSIS

Despite what began as a shocking affair, then 36-year old Gracie (Julianne Moore) and 13-year old Joe (Charles Melton) now lead a seemingly picture-perfect suburban life some 20 years later. Their domestic bliss is disrupted when Elizabeth (Natalie Portman), a famous actress, arrives in their tight-knit community to research her upcoming role as Gracie. As Elizabeth ingratiates herself into the everyday lives of Gracie and Joe, the uncomfortable facts of their scandal unfurl, causing long-dormant emotions to resurface. In *May December*, director Todd Haynes (*Safe*, *Carol*) explores one of the great talents of the human species: our colossal refusal to look at ourselves.

## KEY CREDITS

DIRECTOR: Todd Haynes  
SCREENPLAY BY: Samy Burch  
STORY BY: Samy Burch and Alex Mechanik  
PRODUCERS: Natalie Portman, Sophie Mas, Pamela Koffler, Christine Vachon, Grant S. Johnson, Tyler W. Konney, Jessica Elbaum, Will Ferrell  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Madeleine K. Rudin, Thomas K. Richards, Lee Broda, Jeff Rice, Jonathan Montepare, Samy Burch, Alex Brown, Thorsten Schumacher, Claire Taylor  
CAST: Natalie Portman, Julianne Moore, Charles Melton, Cory Michael Smith, Elizabeth Yu, Gabriel Chung, Piper Curda, D.W. Moffett, Lawrence Arancio  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Christopher Blauvelt  
PRODUCTION DESIGNER: Sam Lisenco  
COSTUME DESIGNER: April Napier  
EDITOR: Affonso Gonçalves  
MAKEUP: Heba Thorisdottir and Susan Reilly Lehane  
HAIR: Kim Santantonio and Nicole Bridgeford  
MUSIC: From the film *The Go-Between* by Michel Legrand  
With adaptation and original score by Marcelo Zarvos

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*May December* explores one of the great talents of the human species: our colossal refusal to look at ourselves. Through the narrative premise of a film being made about a particular American family, a family born out of a public scandal that became a national media event, an actress descends upon Savannah, Georgia, to study the woman she'll be portraying and the lives that have carried on as a family ever since. It is through this delicate process of narrative exploration that this strange, unsettling

story is framed, and that we come to learn about the past, the matriarch at the center of the scandal and her young husband, a Korean American, who she began her affair with when he was 13-years-old.

All lives, all families, are the result of choices, and revisiting them, probing them, is a risky business. But it's hard to think of more volatile romantic choices than these, and all the more so when so many defenses have been called upon to shut out such unanimous contempt and judgment from the world. The rigid stasis Elizabeth, the actress, begins to penetrate is the result of two stubborn decades of Gracie and Joe Yoo's persistence, now on the final days leading up to their two remaining children's high school graduation.

But as Elizabeth observes and studies Gracie and her world, and gets to know her husband Joe, her reliability as narrator begins to falter. The honest portrait she hopes to erect, her own investment in revealing truths, becomes clouded by her own ambitions and presumptions, her own denials. And as Joe comes more and more into focus, both for us and to himself, we begin to see more similarities between Elizabeth and Gracie than either seem capable of seeing in themselves. Through this quiet shifting of perspective, the film moves from single to double to triple portrait.

What so appealed to me about Samy Burch's exceptional script, which Natalie Portman sent me in 2020, was how it navigated potentially volatile subject matter with a kind of observational patience that allowed the characters in the story to be explored with uncommon subtlety. It simmered with moral and narrative ambiguity which, as a film, would enlist the viewer into an active and excited state of watching and questioning. With such compelling material, the project provided me the long-awaited opportunity to work with Natalie Portman — to ignite the reflexive whirligig of an actress playing an actress — and if that was not enough, to pair her with Julianne Moore in the fierce and inscrutable role of Gracie. Completing the triad would be no simple feat; but the casting of Charles Melton as Joe would serve to fill in the storied past and depict the treacherous present with astonishing subtlety.

Immediate cinematic associations were undeniable: *Persona*, of course, and other Bergman's which put women in confrontation with one another, or which put characters, in key moments, in direct address to the lens, like in *Autumn Sonata*, *Winter Light* or various films of Godard's. (This direct address, when our three central characters confront themselves in mirrors, would become a through-line in *May December*.) In addition, films about older women and younger men, like *The Graduate*, *Sunset Boulevard* or *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (or the more traditional inverse variety, like in *Manhattan* or *Lolita*). But particularly those examples in which a stylistic minimalism — like in *The Graduate* or *Manhattan* — is nearly indistinguishable from how the film succeeds.

Due to shifting schedules the production was launched quickly during the second half of 2022, creating a kind of synergy that would benefit a limited budget and extremely tight shooting schedule. But everyone involved took hold and shared in the creative strategies that provided both an economy of style and a way, I hoped, to invigorate how the film would be experienced. One might call it an excited, at times mordant, suspense, often reflected in the film's uncommon use of music. Michel Legrand's score for Joseph Losey's 1971 film, *The Go-Between*, began as a working document during my preparatory stages, but quickly spilled into production, where the score was played throughout the film's shooting — in ways I'd never used a singular existing score before—and on through the cutting of

the film. Composer Marcelo Zarvos, in the end, used the Legrand in combination with his own compositions for his arrangement of the film's completed music. The result, like many of my films, along with its stylistic references, is a kind of dialogue between the themes and narrative strategies in *May December* and those of other films, directors and eras of filmmaking it evokes.

The film's remarkable script and lead performances — filled out by Cory Michael Smith, Elizabeth Yu, Gabriel Chung, Piper Curda, among others — and all of the beauty and nuance provided by my creative partners, have restored what I believe is still possible in cinema: to find identification in the least likely places, and be compelled and surprised by a story and its characters without ever being entirely comfortable with who is right or wrong. — Todd Haynes

## **A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR TODD HAYNES**

### **How did you discover Samy Burch's script, and why did it resonate with you?**

Natalie Portman sent me Samy's script in 2020 at the height of COVID, when there was a lot of speculation about what people were going to do once the industry returned. I was reading a lot of scripts, but Samy's was incredibly impressive and arresting. For a relatively new writer, she was so confident in navigating these morally trepidatious themes with this sense of observation and restraint and nuance and wit that actually made the process of reading the script very unnerving and intensely gripping.

### **What sort of visual aesthetic and tone did you want this film to capture?**

When I first read *May December*, it was hard not to think about the Ingmar Bergman film *Persona*. The pairing of these two female central characters, one of whom actually is an actress as well in *Persona*, and the merging of the two female subjects. And then I started to think about other films that deal with parallel female characters — *Autumn Sonata*, also by Bergman, and *Three Women* by Robert Altman — and films that deal with older women in relationships with younger men — *The Graduate*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. Coming out of these various references, I started to picture a way of looking at this story in frames that would hold back and be still and allow the subjects to exist in the frame over time.

### **You have a deep history of working with Julianne, going back to 1995's *Safe*. What does her performance in *May December* reveal that we haven't seen from her before?**

Julianne's repertoire over the years encompasses such an amazing plethora of complex women and a range of characters and sensibilities. In *Gracie*, there are aspects that are reminiscent of some other characters she has played, but what really distinguishes *Gracie* is how much she's driven by her own will and desires, and how much she has learned to expect that the world is going to accommodate them, and that the men in her life are going to ultimately yield to her needs and demands.

And so there's a fortitude, an almost stubborn refusal to take anything but the answer that she seeks in life. And yet that is countered by all these ways of playing somebody who needs to be saved and rescued and somebody who wants to feel that she's made almost more feminine and more girlish. In a way, it's obviously a device to deny the age difference between her and Joe and to imbue him with a masculine agency. There are few actors who can navigate those kinds of permutations with such

commitment, nuance, understatement, and then shocking moments of revelation where you just can't believe the extremity of the emotional experience that Gracie's undergoing.

### **What do you find most compelling about Natalie's performance?**

Natalie gives such an uncanny performance that you're destabilized by it. You have a set of expectations going in that her character, Elizabeth, is going to be our proxy, our way into this story, and we're going to be able to trust her. She's the outsider coming in. She's asking all the questions of the relevant people in the story, and she has a mission. She wants to represent the real truth with all the presumptions and blindness that might also entail.

But as you start to watch the story unfold, you start to lose faith in the reliability of her point of view as a character and her own blindness, her own ability to make people yield to what she wants, which so fully reflects aspects in Gracie. But the things that Elizabeth does not see in herself start to reveal themselves through the course of the story. And so you're really watching this dance around the unveiling of these two characters, and that the very things that they see in the other are the things they cannot see in themselves.

The final monologue that Natalie performs as Gracie reading a lost letter that Joe had managed to hang onto is just one of the most incredible moments in this film. If there was one thing that I read in the script that made me know I had to do this movie, it was that scene. And I had pictured it as we shot it: in a single, static medium shot where Elizabeth delivers this letter as Gracie to the camera lens.

### **There's also so much buzz about Charles Melton's breakout performance. Why did he land the role?**

I knew finding our Joe was going to be a bit of discovery. I worked with my casting director, Laura Rosenthal, to find somebody very special for this role. And we did. Charles Melton is probably best known to people from the TV show *Riverdale*, so this probably was going to be a real departure for him as an actor.

Right away in Charles' readings and auditions I was stunned by his understatement and understanding of Joe in a way that exceeded my own understanding of who this character was. I just kept going back to it and was like, "It has to be this guy. This guy makes it all seem viable." He brought this pent-up quality to the way he interpreted the role from the very beginning that made such a huge impression on me and really completed the storytelling.

### **It's hard to stop thinking about the mirror scene when Gracie shows Elizabeth how she does her makeup and then applies it to her. What did you want that scene to convey?**

The makeup scene in the bathroom is a centerpiece, a turning point in the film, marking the progression of Elizabeth studying Gracie and the give and take of trust and disclosure that the two women are trading. And, of course, it's imbued with an innate intimacy, a crossing of a boundary, but then you realize that both women are willing to take that risk with each other. But because it's a story about an actor embodying a subject and what that process really is and then ways in which the subject reflects aspects of the woman who is playing the actor as well, it's all there in one scene and in one shot. It's probably the scene that most directly evokes images from *Persona* because it's the two women in profile applying the makeup and then turning back to the lens of a camera, which is the mirror, and looking at how that transformation is being experienced.

### **Composer Marcelo Zarvos' adapted score is so arresting, almost like its own character in this film. Why was the music so pivotal?**

The music represents a throughline throughout the making of this movie that I can't really think an example of in anything I've done before. Marcelo adapted it from Michel Legrand's score for the 1971 film *The Go-Between*, which I discovered in pre-production for *May December*. It put me on the edge of my seat and into a state of interpretation, which is exactly what I was trying to do with *May December*.

It became an example of how music can do this in films and in a very different way from traditional melodrama scores. It had a pensive urgency to it. It was like a warning bell that something was not right or that there was going to be a doomful result to the events unfolding in front of you. And there was something delicious about how that invited you as a viewer.

Marcelo had also already written and created additional music that took the score to this whole other level. We decided together that we would adapt the Legrand music, but under Marcelo's complete and total creative oversight. And I couldn't be happier with what we ended up with.

**We get a taste of the power of the score early on in a scene everyone seems to be obsessed with. Let's talk about the hot dogs and how the music punctuates that moment. Is the viewer invited to laugh?**

Yes. There were markers in Samy's original script that began to show that there were little signals of an unhealthy domestic life. All of this was intensified by the fact that a successful television actress was coming to town and going to invade this family that had lived in a fortress these past 20 years. And one of those moments was this scene early on where I think it was described in the script that Gracie looks suddenly very disturbed as she opens up the refrigerator and says, "I don't think we have enough hot dogs." In the editing process, I chose to introduce a dramatic zoom to underscore it.

That scene has been singled out and discussed a lot, but I feel like it doesn't fall that far outside the vernacular of the film as a whole. From the very beginning, you're watching this pastoral shot of butterflies over milkweed plants laying an egg, and immediately the force of this music cuts in and undermines this metaphor, this image that if taken too seriously could have been too precious. Clearly it parallels this idea of a man – in this case Joe – who is maybe working toward a sense of transformation and maybe ultimate liberation.

**Beyond that scene, how does the film play with humor?**

There was this wit, this sardonic humor that was evident from the start in Samy's script, but we were always trying to play this film extremely straight. I don't think any of us quite realized how much the humor would ultimately play for audiences until we started to show the film to viewers while we were cutting the film and getting feedback. And I almost was taken aback. I was like, this movie is really funny because it's playing with very dark and complicated themes and you're very disquieted by what's going on. The moral ambiguities in the film keep shifting and you keep not knowing which character to align with and what to believe. So the humor is welcome as a way of interpreting this film and experiencing it.

**Why did you decide to shoot in Georgia?**

The script was originally set in Camden, Maine, and for reasons practical but also narrative and aesthetic, we settled on Savannah, Georgia, as the locale for *May December*. Sam Lisenco, the production designer, and I saw Tybee Island on the map, and we thought, "Now that's probably where Gracie would live. She wouldn't live in the center of historic Savannah."

And so we went there in August of 2022 and discovered that Savannah was everything and more that we hoped it would be as a location for this film. But Tybee, a beach community about 30 minutes outside Savannah, is where we found this precise location.

The kind of humidity and marshland light that emanates from that region offered such a specific visual language. That kind of milky light seeps past the frames and often silhouettes the shots. So this became a language that we kept leaning into and a lot of the scenes had frames within frames in the architecture and in the setting that we were looking at.

### **What does the title of the film mean?**

May December is a term for a relationship between someone younger and someone much older. I thought it was a nuanced way of setting up the terms of the film right in the title. May is also an important month in this film because that's when it takes place. There's obviously all the stress and tension of an actress coming to visit this family and poke into the past and open up these tender histories, but it's also leading up to the graduation of the last two kids at home and an empty nest, which this couple is facing. And so all of that has to do with May, and the graduation of the twins happens toward the end of the film.

### **The graduation scene is heartbreaking as we watch Joe from afar. What do you think that moment means for him and his future?**

*May December* really begins as a double portrait between two women, an actress and somebody she is going to be portraying in a film, along with the process of getting to know and mirror each other and the issues of trust and distrust that emerge. But the film ultimately yields to the centerpiece of the story, and that's really in the character of Joe. So it becomes a triple portrait.

This particular story has been intensified all the more because it had an entire national scandal rise up around it, forcing the people involved to be even more resistant to questioning what they had done, and more stubborn about hanging onto their decisions. And all these years later, somebody comes to town to start picking away at what those decisions were and how they arose. That's all embodied in the tenderness and the fragility of Joe and how Charles interpreted that role.

After getting knocked around in the course of this film, he is sort of standing on his own at the end when his last two kids are graduating and receiving their diplomas. There's such genuine emotion that Charles was able to tap into in that scene.

We don't know what's going to happen with these characters when the movie ends. But there's something compelling and contradictory, but ultimately very moving about the fact that these people have pushed back the rest of the world and all of its criticism. What remains is something very personal and very intimate between two people. We can judge it. We can critique it. We can dismiss it. But the fact is, this story demonstrated that people can make these decisions for themselves and survive.

## **A CONVERSATION WITH THE PRODUCERS**

### **Why did your production company want to develop this project?**

**JESSICA ELBAUM (Gloria Sanchez Productions):** One of our agents sent me the script, and it immediately stopped me in my tracks. I just was so blown away by the writing and the characters and their complexities. It was a spec script that was making its way around. I was so drawn to that. I was like, "Who is this Samy Burch? Where did she come from?" She had worked in casting for years. I was just blown away by the voice, and it just felt very much in line with what Will and I are looking to do here at

Gloria Sanchez, which is championing new voices, female voices, and that's why we threw our hat in the ring and met and vibed with Samy, and I'm happy she chose us.

**WILL FERRELL (Gloria Sanchez Productions):** As a company, we're always drawn toward what we haven't seen before. We'd never read a script like this before. It was artful, funny, and also extremely melancholy.

**SOPHIE MAS (MountainA):** Jessica Elbaum at Gloria Sanchez submitted it to us, and fundamentally as producers we thought there was an incredible opportunity here. And while at MountainA we produce projects both with and without Natalie starring, the role of Elizabeth was very compelling and felt like unexplored territory for her. We are drawn to unique and daring material like this, exploring layered subject matter, but we knew it needed a great filmmaker to work in today's world. We immediately thought of Todd Haynes. Natalie shared the script with him and we were thrilled when he signed on. This is really what we want to do with MountainA: work with and support the best filmmakers and storytellers.

**PAMELA KOFFLER (Killer Films):** We always saw it as one of the great unproduced scripts, and we love the story and its complexity. When Todd decided he wanted to direct it, it just sort of clicked in. The potential of this kind of story in his hands felt very special and full of a mysterious potential because when Todd finds something in material, it's always excavating.

**CHRISTINE VACHON (Killer Films):** Usually when scripts come to us for Todd, I always read them with an eye of, "Is this something he will respond to?" which because we've worked together for close to 30 years, I have a fairly good radar for that. He read it, and his first call to me was to say, "I bet Julianne will play the other role." He was already right in there. I think the script appealed to him on many levels. Its command of tone, for example, is so precise and walks such a wonderfully fine line. It's stylized, it's melodramatic, but it's also heartbreaking.

### **Why did Samy Burch's script resonate with you?**

**JESSICA:** It's darkly comedic, but also eerie. It just felt so different, and I was so excited at the opportunity to put this movie together and get this script out to women. These roles are so rich and so juicy, and to be a producer who gets to send out a script like this to women like Natalie and Julianne – there's nothing more fulfilling than that. So I was just drawn to Samy's voice and the complexities of these characters and the tone.

**PAMELA:** What resonated with me about Samy's script is it's deceptively simple. It's a straightforward story. You're introduced to the characters, they go through action together, it concludes. But at each turn, the layering and the complexity of the interactions and what they reveal about everyone is so unknowable in a way. It throws you off balance. You're wondering, "how should I be feeling about these characters? They're appealing and they're likable, and I'm curious about them, but they're despicable. But are they really despicable?" I've thought about this movie so much, and it's this complex presentation of interpersonal dynamics that is not one thing, and with each viewing, it almost seems to refract in new ways.

**SOPHIE:** Immediately we felt this was incredibly well written with a strong vision – layered, fresh, funny, and surprising. You see so many films and series now that explore true crime. I think people gravitate toward these stories because you're trying to understand why people do what they do. We get caught in the drama of the moment, but it's intriguing to explore a narrative that shows the story after the controversy has subsided – the effects that controversy has had on these people and their lives and how it haunts them even as they have tried to move on. A trauma deferred, but not properly dealt with by anyone. This felt so fresh to us.

### **How do you describe this film to someone who's coming to it cold?**

**PAMELA:** *May December* is a drama about an actress preparing for a part, and she visits the family that were involved in a scandal 20 years prior. And she's portraying the woman in that relationship, and she's there to try to understand the character and understand the family. But in doing so, she disrupts the family's equilibrium in ways that nobody could quite predict that reveals a lot about each character in this triangle. And the result is moving, disturbing, heartbreaking, and a real reflection on people's inability to really understand themselves and understand the relationships they're in.

**WILL:** It's a dark story that's funny, grounded, chilling, and heartbreaking – directed by a genius.

**CHRISTINE:** There's a tabloid quality that I think comes through in a really delicious way in the film. And it almost feels like it will be a guilty pleasure, and then it really turns that on its head.

### **Why was Todd the perfect director for *May December*?**

**CHRISTINE:** When Todd first read the script and started talking about why he wanted this to be his next film, there were a number of things that really excited him. The opportunity to work with Natalie Portman, whom he had not yet worked with, and the idea of pairing her with Julianne Moore and the fireworks that would bring. The idea of finding somebody like Charles Melton who feels like such an extraordinary discovery was exciting. And in the story of *May December*, which could, in the wrong hands, feel salacious or prurient, he saw an opportunity to really play with tone and identification in a way that was exciting to him.

**PAMELA:** The potential of what Todd could do with this script was one of the most exciting exercises in producing this film. Todd just has always found such depth and ripeness in these female spaces, stories that involve domesticity, the power dynamics of men and women, and turning them around in interesting ways. So it just felt like Todd's concerns and interests in filmmaking were very bound up in what this story could be and the most cinematic way to tell it.

**JESSICA:** My biggest priority was making sure that Samy's voice and what she set out to put in the world was preserved in the best possible way. I was so impressed by Todd's immediate desire to collaborate with Samy and bring her into all the script conversations. Beyond that, with the aesthetic of the film and the casting of the film, Samy was so immediately a part of everything, and she was so grateful for that. I was really pleased and blown away by that.

**WILL:** Who doesn't love a Todd Haynes movie? He's masterful. He was the perfect director to pull off that tone and grant the characters each their own sliver of dignity, their own self-respect that they were trying to hold onto.

**SOPHIE:** This isn't an easy film to categorize. There's melodrama and humor. It's familiar but evades your first impressions of stories like this. As producers and storytellers, we gravitated toward the complexity of the characters and didn't want to oversimplify. We knew instantly that Todd would be a great fit for the material – he is really a master of our modern times. We've always respected him, and having worked with him it's easy to see why he is so beloved. He's an incredibly open and prepared collaborator. It was one of the happiest, smoothest productions we've ever worked on which is also a testament to our crew and our producing partners at Killer and Gloria Sanchez, who assembled the absolute best team.

## FINDING THE PERFECT CAST

Todd Haynes knew almost instantly which two acclaimed actors would anchor *May December* and its twisted portrait of identity and what he calls our “colossal refusal to see ourselves.”

“I was completely intrigued by the script and began talking to Natalie about the character of Elizabeth Berry – the ways that it riffs on assumptions and projections people would bring to Natalie Portman, herself an actor, playing an actor, and who might be the best choice to play the role of Gracie Atherton-Yoo,” the director says.

“And it didn't take very long for me to think about Julianne Moore for that role. Julianne read the script and thought it was so compelling, complex, and nuanced, and she and Natalie had never worked together in a movie before. So it was an amazing opportunity to have these two incredible women share a film like this.”

Moore was hooked the moment she read the script, her interest piqued by the bonus of working with a fellow Academy Award winner she had long respected from afar.

“Todd said, ‘Natalie Portman sent me the script, and she's playing Elizabeth.’ She's someone whom I've always admired so much. She's just extraordinary. I knew her a little bit socially and always loved talking to her,” Moore says. “But I don't think I was prepared for how wonderful she would be, how easy she would be, and how our connection has been pretty great on this. She's just a dream as an actor and as a person.”

The feeling was mutual.

“Working with Julianne was so incredible. I've admired her for so long, and particularly her work with Todd,” Portman echoes. “I've been such a fan of Todd's forever, and his collaborations with Julianne have always stayed in my mind. The mirror scene where she teaches me how to do her makeup

is absolutely a highlight of my career. His perspective was so genius, and, of course, Julianne is perfection.”

Portman relished the meta possibilities of digging into a character so familiar and yet so entirely foreign.

“I was excited to explore an actress. I've never really played an actress, and, of course, it's something I have insight into by being one myself for a long time,” Portman says. “It's interesting to me the kind of performance that people create in their own lives that is akin to acting.”

As Elizabeth, Portman was drawn to the notion of playing an actress who's portraying a woman who was so publicly – and relentlessly – ostracized.

“People who do things that society might deem bad are often interesting to actors because art is a place where you're supposed to be able to look for understanding behavior, but without judgment,” Portman says. “And judgment is for law or for society, but art is for just peering into a mind and allowing yourself that curiosity.”

Portman had been looking for a project to work on with Haynes for years, but *May December* far exceeded her expectations.

“Todd is one of those rare instances of admiring someone from afar and then getting to meet them up close and they surpass your wildest imagination of how awesome they could be. I just looked up to him and loved his films so much for so long,” Portman says. “He's so prepared, so specific, so knows exactly what he wants, and gives very exact but spare kind of feedback.”

As seasoned as she is, especially in her chameleonic collaborations with Haynes starting with *Safe* (1995), Moore also found something new in the role of Gracie.

“I loved this script when I first read it. The minute you get into it and start playing it, it's unbelievably sturdy. It holds a tremendous amount of feeling and humanity and complexity,” Moore says. “It was evident that it was wonderful on the page, but it became increasingly more interesting and deeper and more alive as we played it.

“It afforded me an opportunity to present a public version of the character, of how she's seen in the world by others, and then also a private version,” she adds. “We get that experience in our own lives. We get the public and the private, but you don't always get that opportunity in a movie.”

Moore was masterful in navigating the morally dubious aspects of her character, mostly because she refused to cast Gracie as either hero or villain.

“When you work on a character, you don't come from a place of sympathy. You always want to come from a place of empathy because you are trying to put yourself in that person's position,” Moore says. “And so with Gracie, I was attempting to put myself in a place of what does it feel like to have made this

choice, to be living this life, and to believe in this life when you've done something that society judges as truly transgressive? It's an interesting journey to take as an actor.”

Of course, it helped that Moore has such a long and illustrious history of collaborating with Haynes.

“Todd is such an extraordinary filmmaker, such a talent, and the fact that my creative life has collided with his at all has been a miracle,” Moore says. “He really knows what he wants to say with the movie. He knows who the characters are, he knows how he wants to frame things, he knows how he wants to edit things. The pure pleasure you get from working with Todd is just unmatched.”

## DISCOVERING CHARLES MELTON

With Natalie Portman and Julianne Moore already locked in, finding Joe Yoo, Gracie’s husband, was the real challenge for casting director Laura Rosenthal.

“Any cast is a constellation, and this particular one was like a three-pronged star. That's kind of how I saw it. But all three points needed to be sharp, and two were already occupied by movie stars,” says Rosenthal, whose long partnership with Haynes dates to *Velvet Goldmine* (1998).

“And the third would most likely be somebody that I needed to find: an unknown actor, approximately 36 years old, a Korean-American man who would be married to Gracie. And that actor would need to have an immense amount of screen presence and confidence so that the triangle worked.”

They found their rising star in Charles Melton, a commanding 32-year-old actor known for playing Reggie Mantle, a clean-cut teen on the CW drama *Riverdale*.

“When I first read the script, I felt this intuitive connection to Joe's character,” says Melton. “I was really attracted to this idea of loneliness, emotional repression, and the layered experience that Joe had throughout the film. As an actor I am really drawn to these kinds of characters. I really wanted to portray Joe from a place of empathy.

“Todd and I had constant conversations about what Joe would feel like, and how all that Joe was holding onto would reflect in how he walked, how he talked, how he acted in social situations, and how he moved,” he adds. “I felt so safe with Todd. His process throughout the film was so open, collaborative, and encouraging. Todd always trusted me to lean into my instincts.”

Even alongside powerhouses such as Portman and Moore, Melton’s performance startled everyone around him. He embodied Joe with an aching vulnerability, morphing from soft and naive to enlightened and defiant as he starts to untangle his past by the film’s end.

“I read with Charles when they were auditioning different actors to play Joe,” Moore says. “And really the minute that he walked in the door, I was like, ‘Wow, I think this is our Joe.’ I didn't even want to say

anything to Todd because it was his decision, not mine. But I just kept my fingers crossed that it would be Charles.”

His audition process, which he estimates lasted six to eight weeks, revealed layers to Joe that even Haynes and Rosenthal hadn’t envisioned.

“I definitely noticed Charles in the first round of auditions. He was thoughtful and intuitive, but wait, isn't he too handsome? Could someone this physically dynamic and good-looking really be our Joe?,” Rosenthal says. “When we went for a second round with new material, we included Charles, and this time there was even more depth that came out in the audition, and it just kept surprising us. There was a vulnerability and a childlike quality, and he just sort of kept giving us clues as to who Joe is and maybe what he should be like.”

“Charles, for us, was one of the beautiful discoveries of making the movie,” says producer Pamela Koffler of Killer Films. “Giving Charles the part was this fantastic experience, getting to know him and seeing what he's capable of and how amazingly he did in the dynamic with two other movie stars who are so formidable. He just exudes grace all the way.”

## **TRANSFORMING ELIZABETH INTO GRACIE**

When we first meet Julianne Moore’s Gracie and Natalie Portman’s Elizabeth, they couldn’t be more different. There’s little overlap in how they dress, how they speak, how they engage others. They circle each other like rival planets in a way that disorients the viewer: Will they be friends? Do they even want to be? Whom should we root for?

Gracie, hardened by 20 years of national ridicule for her relationship with husband Joe, has burrowed into her own world, immune to how others perceive and scorn her. In her pastels and feathered hair, she might present like a princess, but she doesn’t mince her words, even when they’re punctuated by a lisp that, jarringly, disappears when it doesn’t suit her performative femininity.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth slinks into town with the air of Hollywood royalty that she has earned as a famous television actress. She’s here on a mission: to learn the truth about the woman she’s preparing to portray in a movie. Peering through a curtain of dark bangs, she’s sly in her demeanor as she starts to infiltrate the fortress Gracie has built around her and her family.

Director Todd Haynes took his initial cues from Moore on how to play up the dichotomies between Gracie and Elizabeth.

“*May December* was made on a low budget with a very limited schedule. We had no time to rehearse. We had time to have a couple of dinners together and get to know each other and really start dealing immediately with hair and clothes and makeup and what the looks of these two women would be,” Haynes says. “But that put a particular burden on Julianne, who basically had to come up with the character, how she speaks, her cadence, her manner, her look, her presence, with some specificity that

could allow Natalie's Elizabeth to start latching on to aspects of that character and start to incorporate it in her transformation in her process as an actor who's studying this woman.”

The hair, makeup, and costume teams knew Elizabeth's transformation into Gracie had to be subtle and perfectly paced.

“Todd was really clear from the beginning about how the arc of Elizabeth has to go toward Gracie. We established Gracie first – what her color palette was, and that was based on her needing to be soft, feminine, and princess-like. We used a lot of lavenders, pinks, salmons, ivories,” says costume designer April Napier.

“Once we had those costumes set, then we could bring in Elizabeth and we knew that we needed Elizabeth to start dark. She's coming from a city; she was going to be in black, in darker colors. She's in a deep burgundy the first time that we see her, when she comes to the barbecue,” Napier adds. “And then slowly you see the arc of her getting softer and softer into some grays, some lavenders, some pinks, some beiges as she transforms into this person that she's mirroring.”

Both actresses had their own teams to create their looks: Heba Thorisdottir (makeup) and Kim Santantonio (hair) for Portman, and Susan Reilly Lehane (makeup) and Nicole Bridgeford (hair) for Moore.

“There was a collaboration that happened very early on, very quickly,” says Reilly Lehane. “We only had a few days of prep, and we tested so many different looks. We did full makeup and hair for costume fittings so that we all immediately and cohesively got on the same page. We could see where April's direction was, and what Heba and Kim were doing with Natalie.”

Shaping early ideas about how the characters would look in their environment, Napier and her colleagues found inspiration in the work of photographers such as Deborah Turbeville, Tina Barney, Nicholas Nixon, and Gregory Crewdson. Jane Birkin, the late singer-actor and 1960s icon, was a style touchstone for Elizabeth: the bangs, the easy T-shirt under a designer blazer.

As the ultimate compliment for the hair crew, the viewer might be shocked to realize both Portman and Moore wear wigs the entire film.

“In Savannah, you can't predict what the weather's like,” says Santantonio. “We had warm days. We had rainy days. And because Natalie's hair is really wavy, I just said to Todd, ‘If it starts to frizz up, we're going to have to take her back to the trailer and blow dry it, straighten it out. You guys are going to be sitting there waiting.’”

“Natalie's look didn't come together really until they did the camera test,” says Thorisdottir. “I think they did a few different looks and then Todd picked from that. Once we knew how Julianne was going to look, then we could say, ‘OK, I'm using this lipstick and this particular makeup. If you are focusing more on the pink lips, then I'll do stronger eyes.’”

For Gracie, Moore's glam squad leaned into the character's mystique.

"We definitely had an intentional plan to have something slightly, subtly off about her. For example, Gracie's pink lipstick is not a color you can find on the shelves. We don't know if she found that lip color and started wearing it in high school or college, or maybe when she met Joe," Reilly Lehane says. "But it's definitely a nod to the past and something that is very unique to her that no one else would wear in the movie, and very girlish and youthful and romantic – like a spring day."

The same logic applied to Gracie's hair. "Gracie is almost in her own bubble, her own world that she's created and that makes sense to her," says Bridgeford. "Same with the hair. The color is very intentional and has a lot of brightness. She's not someone who is trying out a lot of different hairstyles. She found something that she's comfortable with and she's sticking with it."

Perhaps most crucial to Elizabeth's metamorphosis was the film's innovative use of mirrors to convey the underlying themes of self-reflection and identity.

"That became a motif through the entirety of the film, particularly with Gracie and Elizabeth where scenes are played in mirrors, but they're playing it directly to the lens of the camera and you're observing the two women seeing themselves in the lens," Haynes says.

Nowhere is that more apparent and potent than in the mirror scene that lingers long after the film ends: Watching Gracie show Elizabeth how she does her makeup and then applies it herself.

"That scene has a lot of tension in it, and it goes to that question of who is playing who in this story? Natalie's got her agenda as the actress. Julianne is vulnerable. This woman is there to portray a really difficult, tender part of her adult life, but she's letting her in and she's schooling her in how to be me, which is such a position of power," producer Pamela Koffler says.

The mechanics of that instant-classic scene weren't as simple as they appear in the final cut.

"It took me and a lot of us some time to really understand that scene," says cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt. "We had to find a way to hide the camera because we were looking directly at ourselves. It became more of a logistical thing for us in prep: How do we pull this off in a tactile sense where we don't see the camera?"

"We had a little vanity mirror on a table, and then we had our two actresses sitting in front of us, so it was the back of their heads. And then we had a three-panel, full-length mirror in front of us so we would see them multiple times," Blauvelt continues. "We had to understand it very logistically and practically before we could do the scene. But the important thing was that we held space for our actors to tell the story. And when they do it in such a way that conveys the exact idea of what is supposed to be translated, then now you're making a film and you're on another level of expertise."

The emotional resonance of that moment, which lasts all of 3 ½ minutes, rippled throughout the set.

“When we shot that scene, I remember looking around and seeing everybody's jaw was on the floor because it was the first time we really saw Natalie's Elizabeth becoming Gracie,” Thorisdottir says. “There's so much going on in that scene that has everything and nothing to do with makeup. A woman's cosmetic bag is her holy grail, and so when Gracie says, ‘Oh, it's just better if I do your makeup,’ Elizabeth hesitates a little bit because she's shocked by it. Most women would be because it is so intimate. I think that scene is everything. It could just stand on its own.”

## SETTING THE TONE AND KEEPING SCORE

The very premise of *May December* extends an invitation to the audience: Look beyond the salacious scandal that inspired this story to see the humanity lurking behind the headlines.

“When I read the script, it was so remarkable to me that, although it's about an extraordinary tabloid story from the past and something that doesn't happen to most of us,” director Todd Haynes says, “it's really universal in the ways in which all the people in this story persist in a defiant refusal to look at themselves and the choices that they've made.”

“And then, of course, we had to contend with the very troubling and disconcerting themes around the history of this relationship and how young this guy was. When Gracie first met up with Joe, he was 13 and she was 36,” Haynes adds. “I really wanted to find a vernacular in the film that let the audience know that they were being asked to question and think and really enjoy that process of interpretation while the film unfolded.”

It's a testament to the actors, Haynes, and his entire crew – particularly cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt, composer Marcelo Zarvos, and editor Affonso Gonçalves – that *May December* transcends its subject matter and gifts the viewer with so much to ponder and savor.

That started with striking the right tone and paying close attention to how the audience might process the moral dilemma at the heart of the film.

“I would describe the tone as walking a fine line between a salacious tabloid moment and the story of a family in crisis and people who have lost the ability to have any kind of self-awareness,” says producer Christine Vachon. “It's one of those films where you find yourself laughing and then you realize you're not laughing anymore, and that's the real trick of the film.”

Fellow producer Jessica Elbaum echoes that sentiment. “I think you laugh more than you think you're going to, and you laugh more than you think you should allow yourself to do at something like this,” she says. “The melodrama and Todd's choice for the music make for this super intoxicating watch. It has an unexpected dark humor.”

To harness the disparate emotions and contradictions that make *May December* so compelling, Haynes enlisted Blauvelt to ground the film with a sumptuous visual language.

“I would describe the cinematography of *May December* as very structured in our compositions, very soft and textured,” the cinematographer says. “All the references that Todd was bringing to me, they were all soft, filmic photography, and that seemed to be what we were all gravitating to with this story.”

It’s even more startling, then, to realize how the music imparts such an overwhelming counterpoint. A mere minute into *May December*, the film introduces the evocative – others might call it dramatic, intense, or even unnerving – score that has left nearly every viewer gripped by what they just heard. As the actors’ names flash across the screen in the opening credits, the music portends a sense of doom with a minor-chord assault of cascading piano notes. In any other film, you’d expect the protagonist was about to be killed off. With European flair, it feels downright at odds with the minimalist sophistication that *May December* exudes.

Zarvos adapted the score from the 1971 film *The Go-Between*, which featured a suite of orchestral interludes from seminal French composer Michel Legrand.

“The effect of this music is so bold, and I think clearly people have reacted to it very strongly because it’s unapologetic in a way that I can’t think of many films that have used music in such a powerful way,” Zarvos says. “Todd was very interested in the fact that the music was relentless and was not bowing down to the story, so all the conventions of film scoring went right out the window. That’s when I was like, ‘Wow, we are really in some uncharted territory here.’”

From the moment Haynes saw *The Go-Between* – a period drama starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates as besotted lovers having a forbidden affair in the English countryside – he knew he wanted to feature elements of the original score. He gave Zarvos creative freedom to tinker with Legrand’s score, while also asking him to write original musical cues to complete the score. An orchestra in Prague recorded the fragments from Legrand’s score, while Zarvos played solo piano for the film’s other musical cues.

“Music in film should bring you in. A lot of times in modern film scoring, you gently bring in the viewer and kind of seduce them,” Zarvos says. “In this case, you grab them by the collar and you’re like, ‘Here you go, you’re coming with me!’ It’s an emotional journey.”

Does the propulsive score complement the film’s storytelling? “Actually, no,” Zarvos says. “I think it contrasts beautifully with the performances, which are very naturalistic. That’s what makes the music even more kind of shocking at times because it is at a much higher level of intensity. I think the film catches up to it, as do the performances. But there’s nothing apologetic or shy about how the music is used in *May December*.”

Other times the music signals that it’s OK to laugh in the face of uncertainty, most notably in an early scene where it crowns the moment when Julianne Moore’s Gracie frets in front of her refrigerator and quips, “I don’t think we have enough hot dogs.” Out of nowhere, the music flares up in sync with a sudden zoom that has to be seen to be believed.

“Todd wanted that zoom, and when we saw it and both laughed, we knew we were on the right track,” editor Gonçalves says.

Even with Haynes championing the score – to the point that he played it on set between takes to put everyone in the same mindset – it still posed a considerable challenge for some of the other crafts talent.

“It took me a minute to get onboard with it, to be honest,” Blauvelt says. “I was confused because I didn’t understand how the music was going to work in the film. A lot of what I do is very minimal realism, and Todd does, as well. But I think he was really interested in what that score does to a viewer, and it ended up being a signature part of the film.”

Gonçalves still remembers how the music was so intrusive that it informed how he edited *May December*.

“It was interesting because this music was written for another film that’s completely different from ours. And even within the material, the way *The Go-Between* used the music, it was always for a specific feeling,” Gonçalves says. “Here, we just put it in the scenes and learned from it. It was this feeling that was hard to describe, but I was finding out things about the cut because the music was telling me something, that it just drew out a different emotion sometimes.”

From the music to its subject matter to the performances, there’s no denying that *May December* provokes a range of emphatic emotions and critiques. And that’s part of its genius.

“One of the things I love about a lot of the audience reactions I’ve read is a common denominator of people saying, ‘I can’t stop thinking about it. It’s been three days, and I’m still processing it,’” Vachon says. “It leaves you with all these questions: Who’s the villain? Is there one? What happened to Joe, and what would have been the right thing? All these kinds of layers of identity and identification, but also guilt and shame. I think Todd absolutely wants his films to have that kind of resonance where you can’t stop thinking about them.”

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