

Rachel Levin Talks About 'Gaby'

By Elizabeth Hanly

The more they talked the more there was to say. Two women sat together, wheelchair to wheelchair, one cautious with her questions, the other welcoming them with alacrity. Rachel Levin was to play Gabriela Brimmer, a young poet born in Mexico who has cerebral palsy in "Gaby—A True Story," directed by Luis Mandoki. "Gaby wanted me to have it all," Ms. Levin says, "whatever details I needed, however intimate." Yet finally, with all the uncanny parallels between their experiences, who was giving what to whom?

It wasn't an easy project. The film is about cerebral palsy in its extremes. It would take years to find the proper collaboration to get it off the ground. Ms. Brimmer knew that. About the time she began talking to producers and directors, Ms. Levin was playing Juliet in a Circle in the Square showcase. Then came a phone call: an important agent wanted a meeting. She decided to postpone it for a week; her legs were feeling strange—stiff and numb. Within the week, the young actress was hospitalized with Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a progressive neuro-muscular disorder which would eventually paralyze her completely. This disease occasionally reverses itself, but it was several months before Ms. Levin or her doctors saw any signs of that. And even then, there were no guarantees about how complete the recovery would be.

"I was afraid of so much before I was sick," she said. "After that fear was a luxury. This is something Gaby and I have talked a lot about—promising oneself to take life anywhere one can find it. This isn't to say there weren't some terrible times. I'm an actress; I couldn't move. I remember one afternoon lying there. A friend had left some magazines on my bed in the hospital. By this time a little feeling had come back in one arm. Town and Country was just out of reach. I kept trying for it. It was pathetic. O.K., I thought. Every acting teacher I'd ever had had talked about filing away

moments—knowing an emotion well enough to use it later on. I made damned sure I knew all the nuances of this one."

About a year later Ms. Levin was making casting rounds on crutches. "I got a lot of offers for hospital scenes," she said, laughing broadly. "Really, it was very confusing. I wasn't sure which world I belonged in. I was feeling so lucky to be out of bed at all. While the rest of the world was seeing me as sick—broken."

A few months later Ms. Levin wrote to prize-winning London playwright Tom Kempinski, whose "Duet for One," the story of a woman cellist who loses feeling in her legs and arms, she had seen performed long before she became ill. In it the heroine tries to explain what music means to her. " 'Duet' was saying the worlds I wanted to say about

theater. And no amount of determination was going to change physical reality for this woman. I needed to play that—to get inside her terror, her process, her possibilities to make peace with my own," Ms. Levin explained.

Mr. Kempinski wrote Ms. Levin that the play was hers. Ms. Brimmer's producers happened to see her performance in New York. She had four days to prepare for the screen test.

After she got the part, Ms. Levin worked for six months before the shooting began. She asked her physical therapist, the woman who had literally taught her to move again, how a hand might be disabled, how she'd have to breathe. Ms. Levin visited New York's United Cerebral Palsy Institute each day. She asked for help learning to play

checkers with her feet as Gaby did. Eventually those living there trusted Ms. Levin enough to read her their plays—more than one on infanticide for people born with handicaps. Ms. Levin went to Mexico where she met Gaby's first love (called Fernando in the film and played by Lawrence Monoson), who was now 40 years old and also has cerebral palsy. By this time, she had become so used to the problems faced by people with this disability that she was not even surprised when she learned that each year he had to return to sixth grade at the local "special" school because it was their highest grade—and no one could imagine him functioning in any other context.

"I wasn't afraid of getting close to all this," Ms. Levin said. "I might have been, without 'Duet.' After that I knew what catharsis meant. I was free."

Ms. Levin lived with Gaby and her family, her adopted daughter Alma, and Florencia, her life-long companion (Norma Aleandro in the film) for 10 days right before the shooting.

"I had bought Gaby the music I felt closest to, Beethoven's Violin Concerto. It turned out to be a favorite of hers too. She'd sing. She can't speak, but she can make beautiful sounds."

During the shooting work days averaged 14 hours. For Ms. Levin they were longer. She felt she needed to get into the character two hours ahead in order to make the gestures look natural. She would sit in her wheelchair with her alphabet board as mosquitoes hovered around her. Most days Gaby was there on the set, scrutinizing Ms. Levin at least as intensely as Ms. Levin had scrutinized Gaby.

Gaby is now at work on her second book of poetry. Ms. Levin's recovery is complete. She is now preparing for the New York premier of Mr. Kempinski's "Separation," a play he wrote for her.

"The best you can hope for ever is to give your life meaning," Ms. Levin said. "The film and Gaby are not about disability, but about everybody's fight. With Gaby it's just writ large."



Above: Liv Ullmann as Sari Brimmer, Gaby's mother, and Rachel Levin as Gaby, a young woman who must overcome incredible obstacles in her life. Left: Norma Aleandro as Florencia, Gaby's nanny.