



Q&A//

“Lee Miller is my most inspiring role”

KATE WINSLET tells Jessica Prupas why it took quite so long to bring the photographer’s story to screen

PORTRAIT: ZOE MCCONNELL/AUGUST

► **KATE WINSLET CAN DO ANYTHING**, right? She can hold her breath for seven minutes and 15 seconds (a skill she learned for underwater shoots on *Avatar: The Way of Water*), she can survive out-of-control house fires (like when she lived through a blaze that broke out on Sir Richard Branson’s private island estate and helped his 90-year-old mum to safety), and she can wow audiences in every role she plays – from *Titanic*’s Rose to the delightfully bonkers Chancellor Elena Vernham in this year’s outrageous political satire, *The Regime*.

So you’d think, if the Oscar-winning actor wanted to make a film about Lee Miller – the fashion model and Man Ray muse who became a World War II correspondent – it would be a cinch. But it took Winslet almost 10 years to get the film out into the world.

Why? Well, it’s partially that Winslet and her creative partner – Antony Penrose, Lee Miller’s son and author of *The Lives of Lee Miller*, on which the film is based – wanted to get it right. “We want to tell her story as a woman,” Winslet tells me. “Not through the labels that were slapped on her – the muse, the ex-model, the former cover girl.” They also began development before the eruption of #MeToo, which Winslet says “created a platform” for women’s stories to be told in new ways. *Vera* spoke with the megastar about finally putting her passion project out into the world, and what she learned from playing such a “phenomenal” woman.

Lee was very moving, I thought. The Holocaust is very close to my family...

Oh, I’m so sorry. For [costar] Andy Samberg, it was phenomenally hard as a Jewish man. When we filmed that particular section, we were really ruthless with ourselves creatively. We only followed the facts in terms of what Lee and Davey [photographer David Scherman] saw. The thing we had to really remember is that this is a film about a woman. It’s a film about her emotional war, with the backdrop being World War II. And the phenomenal courage that she had to be the voice for those voiceless victims. When we shot those Dachau sequences, we were quite sparse in terms of shot sequences, so not over-covering things, not digging too deeply into things that we don’t know whether Lee witnessed or not. We tried to be as respectful as we possibly could because Lee lived her life with incredible integrity but also passion, compassion and respect. As a filmmaking group of women, it was important to us that we took her lead.

It struck me that Lee lived the life of a true artist. Do you think one can still live the kind of artist life Lee did?

I actually know someone who does, but that someone is a man. I certainly think it’s a lot harder, because I think that now people’s means of business is displaying their work often digitally or through social media in a world that can be quite aggressive sometimes and can be quite critical in a way that I’m not sure is necessarily supportive to art. I stay away from the digital world and social media myself in order to actually protect my own creativity and integrity, and that thing of that negative white noise that can sometimes creep into one’s psyche and can make you

Above: Kate Winslet as photographer Lee Miller in *Lee*



Below: With Hugh Grant in *The Regime*

question your integrity and your creative truth and intentions. I will say that playing Lee Miller was the most inspiring role by far that I've ever been asked to inhabit. She has left a lasting impression on me in terms of... her acceptance of herself, her celebration of herself and her close personal relationships. And really throwing herself at life full throttle because life is so short.

Why do you think it took this long to tell Lee's story?

[Laughs] I can tell you exactly why. Well, first of all, many people have tried to make films about Lee Miller in the past. Antony Penrose told me very early on, in 2015, "I've read many screenplays. Many people have had a stab at this." And I asked, why weren't those films made? And he said, "Because no one really captured her." And often, from what I gather, people would always start from the period of her life that included Man Ray or Picasso. You know, these significant male figures who, if you put these characters on film and bring them back to life, they can be quite a dominating presence because they were hugely significant artistic people then and historically are. It took a long time to distil which decade of her life was the one that was the most important. The film is based on *The Lives of Lee Miller*, and that book is entirely about her life going through the war and the price that she paid to reveal the truth about the atrocities of the Nazi regime, when so much was being covered up.

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It took you a long time to get this made. Was there ever a point where you were like, I'm giving up?

No, I never had a moment where I wanted to give up. As I became closer and closer to Antony Penrose, I realised just how important it was to him to tell this story. And as time went by, the world around us changed. The #MeToo movement happened while we were still in development stages and suddenly women's voices were being heard in a completely new way. That makes a difference, to have the world more receptive to hearing female-driven stories about phenomenal women who perhaps they didn't know enough about before.

Why do you think Lee never spoke to Antony about her experience in the war when she was alive?

There was a code of silence. Anyone who went through the traumas of World War II, they just wrapped it around everything. They didn't talk about it. She [Lee] had phenomenal PTSD. She had struggled with alcohol because of it. She struggled parenting her only child because of it. Antony, who has spoken at length about his difficulties being raised by Lee, never understood what was wrong with her, or what was wrong with him.

You said you worked with a neuroscientist for *The Regime*. What was the most surprising thing you learned about the way trauma manifests in the body?

Between the age two and four, if a child is exposed to significant trauma in that age, it can have a lasting impact on speech patterns and the learning of speech. I had no idea about that. I also had no idea that there are some neuroscientists who are able to reverse stammers or speech impediments in some form through a process of brain training. I found all that really fascinating.

You seemed to have a lot of fun playing Chancellor Elena Vernham in *The Regime*. Is having fun in a role important to you?

[Laughs] No! No! That doesn't usually come into play. But it was certainly refreshing for me to have an opportunity to play someone who is as outrageous and sometimes ridiculous as Elena Vernham.

● *Lee is in theatres now and will be available to watch on Virgin Atlantic flights next year*

WATCH THE REGIME