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Meet Booksmart's Beanie Feldstein, Jonah Hill's Brilliantly Funny Sister

Following her supporting role in 2017's 'Lady Bird,' Beanie Feldstein is front and center in Olivia Wilde's directorial debut, 'Booksmart'



LEADING LADY | “There can never be too many female friendship stories, as far as I’m concerned,” says Feldstein, who stars, alongside Kaitlyn Dever, in *Booksmart*, out now, as well as in the upcoming film *How to Build a Girl*. “I hope there are thousands.”
PHOTO: KATIE MCCURDY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By Kayleen Schaefer - May 20, 2019

The film *Booksmart* begins with a close-up of Beanie Feldstein, as Molly, the valedictorian of her high school class. She glowers, with her jaw clenched and eyes closed, as she prepares for a final day in the trenches with her fellow (and supposedly inferior) classmates. They partied instead of studying and won't be going to Yale, like her.

In real life, Feldstein, who has her hair clipped to the side, gold rings on almost every finger and an impeccable complexion, is awestruck by her first starring role. “The film starts, like, on my face,” she says.

At 25, she still goes by the nickname given to her as an infant—her birth certificate says Elizabeth—and, unlike Molly, she doesn't look down on others. "There are so many people that are naturally gifted or intensely talented and don't get to do what I get to do," she says. "I'm not taking this for granted, any little step of it." Post *Booksmart*, she's also starring in an adaptation of Caitlin Moran's best-selling novel *How to Build a Girl*.

Feldstein is all hugs, laughs and compliments. The list of people and things she adores is extensive. It includes the recent Broadway production of the musical *Oklahoma!*, her college experience as a sociology major at Wesleyan University ("I really fell in love with academics," she says) and the gold nameplate *Booksmart* necklace she's wearing. She and *Booksmart* co-star Kaitlyn Dever, who plays Molly's ride-or-die, Amy, also got matching ones for director Olivia Wilde and writer Katie Silberman.

Booksmart, out now, is a teen comedy with nonstop jokes, but it's also got emotional heft. It's about seeing other people as individuals instead of stereotypes. It's about fumbling with your sexuality. And at its center, it's a love story between two best friends, Molly and Amy. After Molly realizes that the peers she'd dismissed as dummies also got into good schools, she convinces Amy to cram in all of the partying they missed into one final night of high school.

Feldstein was drawn to *Booksmart* because "my female friendships are the center of my universe," she says. She's excited by the recent uptick in movies about BFFs, like *Bridesmaids*, *Girls Trip* and *Lady Bird*, the 2017 film she had a supporting role in. "There can never be too many female friendship stories, as far as I'm concerned," she says. "I hope there are thousands."

Feldstein told Wilde she saw *Booksmart* as a love story when they first met to talk about the movie at Cafe Un Deux Trois in Times Square. They were both on breaks from the respective Broadway shows they were starring in—Wilde was in *1984*; Feldstein in *Hello, Dolly!*—and Wilde approached the film in the same light. "We were discussing this ballsy comedy as though it were *The English Patient*," Wilde says. "I remember skipping out of the restaurant and high-fiving the sky."

Feldstein never thought she'd act in films. Since she was 5, she wanted to be on Broadway. She pursued the dream by doing up to five musicals a year, in high school at Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles and at Stagedoor Manor summer camp in the Catskills. But her Broadway debut was set up by a film. In Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*, Feldstein played the devoted best friend, Julie, who gets the lead in the school musical (*Merrily We Roll Along*). The film's producers were also in charge of the *Hello, Dolly!* Broadway revival starring Bette Midler and, after seeing Feldstein in the musical within a movie, asked her to audition for the shopgirl Minnie Fay. "Talk about turning points," she says. "Getting *Hello, Dolly!* through *Lady Bird* very much changed my life in sort of every single way."

Feldstein is the younger sister and best friend of director and actor Jonah Hill. There are nine and a half years between them, but the age gap didn't prevent them from becoming close. He often calls her his hero. "People think I'm being over the top. I'm dead-ass serious," says Hill, who has a tattoo on his forearm that says HELLO, BEANIE!, an homage to his sister's Broadway debut. "The things I struggle with she had knocked down when she was 14."

Feldstein is comfortable with who she is and adamant about not trying to contort herself into something she's not. "I was told very young that my body was different than the norm, slightly," she says. "And I think for a while that plagued me." But when she was 17, she realized that she could only be herself, and ever since she's had a personal motto: "They either want the Bean or they don't want the Bean."

In *Booksmart*, there are several gay characters, including Amy, but whom they want to date is treated like "the eighth thing about them," Feldstein says. "That they're smart, funny and weird in all sorts of different ways is amazing because it just shows more queer characters on-screen in a way that is exactly how they appear in real life, which is, they're funny, brilliant, weird and special, just like how everyone else on this planet is." The choice to not make sexuality a defining quality has resonated with early viewers. At the question-and-answer session after the SXSW Film Festival premiere in Austin, Texas, a young woman told the cast how much it meant to see gay characters who were more than just the gay characters. Her candor inspired Feldstein to speak publicly about her own sexuality, even though she treats it the same way it's presented in the movie: It's not the most important thing about her. "It was really meaningful for me to watch the film," Feldstein told the crowd. "My partner is a woman."

"One of my gifts is an openness and an emotional authenticity," Feldstein says, recalling that moment. "Sometimes, like with that girl, I was like, I'm not gonna not address it, because it is my truth. I only do it when it feels right, but she got up there and she was like, 'Thank you for making a film that I feel really represented by.' And it's actually not how I represent, because I wasn't gay in high school. I'm just in love with a woman right now, and forever, I think, but Amy's high school experience wasn't mine. I found myself a little bit later, but I feel like, I'm moved by it too, and how could I not say that?"

The movie is bound to be compared to *Superbad*, the 2007 comedy about two male best friends in high school that starred Hill and Michael Cera. Feldstein and Dever actually decided to live together during the *Booksmart* shoot because Hill told Feldstein that he thought his and Cera's on-screen friendship was successful because they'd become close before filming. She mentioned this to Wilde and Dever at their first lunch as a trio, and Wilde joked, "You guys should get an apartment together."

"Kaitlyn and I sat back and looked at each other and were like, Would you be down? Because I'd be down," Feldstein says.

Most of the shoot was at night, so they had blackout curtains in their West Hollywood apartment and would sleep during the day. “Then we’d eat pancakes and watch *Gilmore Girls* in our pajamas and run lines and then go back to work,” Feldstein says.

Hill says if their career trajectories were reversed, he wouldn’t have tried to follow his sister with a similar role. “My insecurity would lead me to be like, I’m going nowhere near anything like that,” he says. “And she’s such a baller. With two middle fingers up, she’s like, ‘Oh word, yeah, Jonah was in *Superbad*? OK, cool, I’m going to make this movie that’s as good if not better and be better than him in it.’”

Feldstein and Hill recently had lunch with their mom and a few family members in New York. On his way to the restaurant, Hill passed the Angelika Film Center and noticed a *Booksmart* poster outside. After lunch he suggested they go back to see the poster, something their family used to do with his early roles. So they did, and took turns posing in front of it. “I would worry about anyone else about to go through what she’s about to go through in the world,” he says, “except for her.”