

BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE

Vanessa and Laura Marano take a leap of faith with indie film, *Saving Zoë*

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE

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It's early July in New York City when I arrive at the The Whitby Bar & Restaurant and find Vanessa and Laura Marano waiting at the hostess stand. Vanessa, 26, —best known for playing April on *Gilmore Girls* and Bay on *Switched at Birth*— is dressed in all black: a short flowy dress, paired with a leather jacket, and sneakers. Laura, 23, —recognized for her portrayal of Ally on Disney TV series, *Austin & Ally*, and most recently as Celia on Netflix's *The Perfect Date*, opposite Noah Centineo— is wearing a short, fitted blue denim dress with black Nikes. Their dark brown hair is in waves and swept away from their faces.



Laura

Vintage slip from by Moshi Moshi Sister Sister
www.moshimoshisistersister.com

Necklaces: Vienna necklace by Eye of Iris
www.iritrends.com / Instagram: @eyeofiris
pearl necklaces, earrings, choker,
and belt (worn as bracelet) from
City of Angels Vintage,
Instagram: @cityofangelsvintage

Rings, stylist's own

Vanessa

Dress by Miss Tashina
www.misstashina.com / Instagram: @miss_tashina

Necklaces by Aaron Perez, Instagram: @vvron__,
City of Angels Vintage, Instagram: @cityofangelsvintage,
and Jenny Dayco, Instagram: @jennydayco

Earrings, stylist's own

Cuff bracelets by Rue 21
www.rue21.com / Instagram: @rue21



Dresses by Tashina Hunter
Necklace on Laura by Aaron Perez
Body Chains, stylist's own

The energy surrounding the Marano sisters this evening is light and bright. The Los Angeles natives have been acting in TV and film since they were children, but this week is major as they are releasing the first film they produced and acted in together, *Saving Zoë*. “Because we’re going to be go-go-go in the next two weeks, I don’t think it’s going to truly hit us until two weeks from now. But we’re like, ‘We did it! We put a movie out.’ This is a moment of celebration no matter what. This is amazing,” Laura exclaims animatedly.

In the works for twelve years, *Saving Zoë* was a way the Marano sisters, plus mom, could harness some control in their careers. “*Saving Zoë* itself was kinda born out of like, one of us getting fired off of a job; one of us booking a movie that was supposed to be career-changing; and then an investor embezzling money and that film never going; and then getting fired again; and then the writers strikes; and there’s no work; and it was just so many things that were like, OK, this isn’t going well right now,” Vanessa explains, adding that this was before they landed the TV roles they’re known for.

When Vanessa and Laura’s parents realized that these two still wanted to pursue acting, in spite of the myriad setbacks and disappointments the entertainment industry doled out, their mother, Ellen, got proactive. “That was the first time my mom went, ‘OK, fine. If we’re going to do it, we’re going to the bookstore. Let’s read a bunch of books, and we’re going to find one to option and we’re going to focus on making that.’ We went to Barnes & Noble, picked out a bunch of books with teenage girls on the cover, and *Saving Zoë* was the one we fell in love with. Twelve years later, here we are. But it’s just crazy to think that she was so against it and it wasn’t until everything happened to us that she feared: the rejection, the hardship, us sacrificing normal childhood experiences for roles we weren’t ultimately going to ever get,” says Vanessa. “I missed a whale-watching trip in third grade,” Laura quips.

Vanessa was 14 and Laura was 11 when the two, along with their mother, decided to pursue the challenge of taking the YA book to the big

screen. To say it was a long, arduous process is an understatement. “It’s been an insane roller coaster of just like, perseverance, rejection, excitement all of a sudden, rejection again,” Vanessa laughs. “And excitement now for this week,” adds Laura. “It’s finally coming out in Americal” The Marano sisters call what happened next, kismet. They reached out to Alyson Noël, the author of *Saving Zoë*, and requested a meeting. “Alyson is like, ‘This is super weird, I was watching you,’” says Vanessa. Coincidentally, Alyson and her husband had recently started watching *Gilmore Girls*, where Vanessa portrayed Luke’s daughter, April.

Alyson met with the Marano ladies and ended up giving them the rights to her book. “I think the fact that two siblings were coming forward, and this book spoke to us so much... She just believed in us and worked with us for 10 years,” says Laura. The production of this film was such a labor of love that no one was paid—including screenwriters Brian J. Adams and LeeAnne H. Adams, and director, Jeffrey Hunt—until the film was sold and went into production. *Saving Zoë* was shot in 15 days, edited in about 3 weeks, and took another 2 years to get distributed.

What really motivated these ladies to make this film was that no one was really interested in shining a light on what they thought was an important subject: online sexual exploitation. “People kept being like, ‘Eh, that’s not what your audience wants. Your audience wants light and fluffy.’ And I think that pushed us even more to be like, No, we’re going to keep going then. We’re going to make this personal because...” says Vanessa. “We are our audience!” Laura exclaims. “Yeah, we believed so much in the story. It is a story about young women, for young women, told by a mother-and-two-daughter producing team,” says Vanessa. “Our hope really is that mothers and daughters can sit down and watch this and have a conversation afterwards. But the fact that people were scared and didn’t want to talk about the subject and were like, ‘Eh, there’s no place for this in the film world.’ We were like, Alright, that means we *absolutely* have to keep going and have to get it made, because if people don’t want to talk about it, that means we should be talking about it.”

The whole project is a departure for Vanessa and Laura —it’s the sister’s first foray into producing a film and their first time —in a long while— taking on such serious roles, especially side by side. It was a scary yet exciting experience, Laura tells me. “We both have played dark characters before. I know Vanessa has really put her foot into drama —there’s a point when you’re tired, where you’re coming up with phrases that aren’t real. But....” Laura smiles. “Like, put your foot into drama,” Vanessa adds. “I think that’s a famous phrase, no one really says it but,” Laura continues. “Dame Judi Dench has been *known* for putting her foot into drama,” says Vanessa without missing a beat. Vanessa and Laura are elated to see how their fans react to them in these dramatic roles. The film is not only a departure for them, but for most involved, including the director, writers, and a few of the actors. “We had never produced before, that was a departure for us. Ken Jeong is playing a very dramatic role, that’s a departure for him from comedy.... I think it was such a kismet thing, of people really wanting to do something they’ve always dreamed of doing and do something different than what they had been doing. This group of people got together and were like, ‘Let’s make something meaningful to all of us,’” says Vanessa.

But this is just the beginning for these nascent producers. The Marano sisters have already optioned two more books and are excited to work on those. “We love telling stories. We love telling stories in any capacity, whether it be as actors, producers, maybe as writers someday, maybe as directors someday,” says Vanessa. “To get the opportunity to tell a story that’s important to you, about a topic you’re extremely passionate about —we feel incredibly lucky, and feel an incredible sense of, ‘Alright, this is what we should be doing.’”

Vanessa and Laura also intend to act in their future projects. Before *Saving Zoë*, it had been a long time since they have acted in the same project. “Our very first time doing a television show or very first theatrical job, we played sisters together,” Vanessa shares. “And then we never worked together again!” Laura says theatrically. “Until now,” says Vanessa. “Until now. Yeah, we’ve had our individual careers, which was kinda awesome,” says Laura. The following responses pour out swiftly and comedically.

Vanessa: We did do some work together.
Laura: We did. This has been our biggest role...
Vanessa: To-date.
Laura: The background voices in *Finding Nemo*.
Vanessa: That was a big moment. It was a loop group.
Laura: LG.
Vanessa: That’s right! We didn’t play sisters in that one.
Laura: I’d like to think we did.
Vanessa: I don’t know. We’ll never know, because the story of the baby sea turtles wasn’t really explored as much in *Finding Nemo*.
Laura: It was when I was doing it.
Vanessa: Laura had a whole backstory.
Laura: I had a whole backstory as always —as an actor, you have to have it, damn it!
Vanessa: That’s right.

Their bantery exchange is entertaining and makes you wish you were a part of the Marano clan.

Was it challenging to work together? Do you two get along for the most part? “Well, Mom was there, too,” says Laura. “She produced the movie as well with us. There was all three of us like, loving each other.” “And wanting to kill each other,” adds Vanessa. “Wanting to kill each other. Respecting each other,” says Laura in a sing-songy voice. “And yelling at each other. And crying with each other and then laughing for no reason, after all of those things with each other. We were so sleep deprived,” Vanessa laughs. “I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world... I think we made something really special and I’m really glad we got to do it all together.”

Vanessa and Laura have an endearing familiarity about them that makes you feel like you could be the best of friends and that *je ne sais quoi* (both are quick-witted, fun-loving, and charming) that makes people stars. There’s no questioning it —they were born to entertain. I mean, their IG story that showed the 14+ ways to watch *Saving Zoë* definitely demonstrates it. And to think, their mother didn’t want them to go into acting. “How it really did not work out for her on that,” says Laura. “She

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www.kennethbarlis.com
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Ring, stylist’s own

Earrings from City of Angels Vintage
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What would fans be surprised to find out about each of you?

“I think that we really have the yin and yang within us, in each of us,” says Laura. “Let me clarify. When people first meet us, right away, we kinda seem like, Vanessa’s the realist/pessimist and I’m like the optimist. Vanessa is like really anal-retentive, and I’m really like, *Ah. Let it go. It’s fine.* But I really do think that both of us have those different sides of the spectrum qualities within us.” Vanessa smiles. “You really think I have a side of me that’s like, ‘Let it go. It will be fine!?’” Vanessa asks incredulously. “You do! I know you do. 100%,” says Laura. “That makes me so happy. Is it just when I’m watching *The Housewives*?” Vanessa asks. Laura smiles. “You definitely are in a place of zen when watching *The Housewives*, for sure,” says Laura. “That’s when I feel my most zen, when I’m watching *Bravo*, for sure,” adds Vanessa.

was not supportive of that because she loves us and she knows that it’s a tough business. We really had to prove to her —Vanessa particularly.” For two years, Vanessa told her parents she wanted to act professionally. “Not really understanding what that was. But Mom owned a children’s theater, and I just knew I liked acting. I liked memorizing lines. I was like, *I want to do it more.* And for two years, she said no. She was like, ‘It’s a horrible industry, you’re going to give up your childhood.’”

Finally, Ellen, conceded and took the girls to an agent “who supposedly turned kids down, and crushed their spirits.” Ellen, Vanessa, and Laura went to the agent’s office, and Vanessa auditioned. “She called my mom in and was like, ‘I’m going to take her.’ And my mom was like, *What!?*,” Vanessa explains. “And I came in and I was like, ‘I don’t have an agent.’” says Laura in a sweet, childlike voice as she makes an innocent face. “And the agent was like, ‘Honey, I’ll take you, too.’” Laura smiles. “*That one. That one’s cute.*

I like what she’s doing there,” quips Vanessa. “Then, it was just our mom driving us pretty much every day of our lives on the crowded 405 freeway turning to the back and being like, ‘Do you guys really want to do this, because we can turn around right now? We don’t have to do this.’ She was so against it for so long. At that point, we were like, We get to leave school early and listen to Destiny’s Child in the car,” says Vanessa enthusiastically. “Oh, what a time. What a time to be alive,” says Laura with comedic wistfulness. ML

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Follow Laura on Facebook, Twitter, and IG: @LauraMarano

For more on how to watch *Saving Zoë*,
visit geni.us/SavingZoe

Do you two give one another acting tips?

"Oh, for sure," says Vanessa. "Oh yeah, definitely," says Laura. "We've been doing that since 5 and 8," says Vanessa. "Vanessa is so protective. She's such an older sister. She's very on top of it, and she's like a little director. For me, I was like, 'Vanessa knows what she's doing, right?' I was like, I really feel like if I give any notes at all, in any capacity, on something other than production, we might all explode," Laura says lightheartedly, about working together on *Saving Zoë*.

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