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Newcomer Zethphan Smith-Gneist Holds the Screen With ‘Tár’ Star Cate Blanchett in Film’s Most Talked-About Scene

The 21-year-old Berlin actor plays the "BIPOC pangender" Juilliard student who faces off with the conductor in an intensely debated sequence from the movie: "She pretty much murders Max in front of a live audience."

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Zethphan Smith-Gneist *Courtesy of Richard Kranzin*

Few scenes from writer-director Todd Field’s provocative masterpiece *Tár* have gotten audiences talking — and sometimes hotly debating — more than the first-act showdown between Cate Blanchett’s brilliant conductor, Lydia Tár, and Max, a student in her Juilliard master class. Shot in one white-knuckle take, the ten-minute sequence begins elegantly enough, with Lydia commanding the space in her typical way, a handful of impressionable music students attuned to her every utterance.

But then she hones in on Max — an affable young student played by Zethphan Smith-Gneist — who, it turns out, cares not for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. “As a BIPOC pangender,” Max offers, “I have difficulty connecting with Bach — and wasn’t he a misogynist anyway?” Thus begins a highly charged intergenerational face-off. “If you want to dance the mask,” Tár growls, “you must service the composer. You’ve got to sublimate yourself. Your ego and yes your identity.” By the end, Max storms out of the class disgusted, whatever pedestal Lydia had once occupied having come crashing down to the ground.

Smith-Gneist, 21, was born in New York City but after his parents' separation was brought to Berlin, where he was raised by his mother, the actress Aimée Gneist. She turned him onto acting by screening some of her favorite films. (He cites Gary Oldman's performance in *Léon: The Professional* and Christoph Waltz's work in *Inglourious Basterds* as two of his favorites.)

Acting is a relatively new thing for Smith-Gneist — he only started doing it during the pandemic. Shortly after he turned 18 he landed a regular role on *Druck*, a German show following a group of teen friends. Then word came around about an audition for a mysterious new film starring Cate Blanchett set in the world of classical music — and, well, the rest of his history has yet to be written. He hasn't even seen *Tár* yet. (It doesn't open in Germany until February.)

But that hasn't stopped American audiences from sitting up and taking notice. *The Hollywood Reporter* caught up with Smith-Gneist for his first-ever interview where he filled us in on everything from learning to speak in American-style uptalk to the challenges of nervous leg-shaking for hours at a time.

How did you first hear about the audition for *Tár*?

I got this email from my agent: "There's this audition, a big film, Cate Blanchett and Nina Hoss." And that was the big headline. "And it's about music. Tell me quickly if you're interested, and send in an audition tape as soon as possible." When you get these messages, you try not to get too excited. Oh, and it also said, "Really intense scene, much to play with Cate Blanchett." So then I sent in the first audition tape.

Did they send you the scene or the whole script?

I got the scene and that's it. And that's it, to this point, everything I know about this movie. They really kept it a secret. I met Noémie Merlant [who plays Francesca, Lydia Tár's long-suffering assistant] on set one day, and we were talking about the movie and she was talking about Tár, the character, and I was so interested and she was like, "Hold on, you don't have the script? You don't know anything about the movie?" I'm like, "I have no idea what this is about."

I had no idea even what tone this film had, which was really exciting, actually, because it helped me to just look at the scene as the scene without any context. In my head, it was like a music film with some conducting, and that's all I really knew. It wasn't until I watched the first teaser trailer where I was like, "Wow. What?!" I had no idea that it was. And I still don't know. I still haven't seen the movie because in Germany it releases on Feb. 23, and I want to watch it with my friends and family together.

What about the trailer made you go, "Wow?"

The images were so intense. I kept thinking of *Black Swan*, I don't know. Someone on set told me that the film had kind of a thriller vibe or psychological things going on, but I somehow didn't believe them. I was like, "OK, sounds weird. How can that work?" But when I saw the trailer, I was like, "Oh wow — this looks special."

How did you ultimately get cast as Max?

That was the longest and hardest audition process I ever had. I ended up sending in so many tapes because Todd's vision of this character was so unbelievably detailed and rich, and I really had to get everything right. From the way Max talks, speaks and moves, and with the correct accent and the *uptalk*? And the tone of this character and attitude. So when I got one thing right, something else was missing. When I got the acting right, the *uptalk* wasn't enough. He wanted more *uptalk*. Which was so cool. So you felt really safe. And when my agent called me and told me that I got a part, I jumped out of my bed and ran around the apartment in underwear screaming, "Yeah!" It was satisfying.

Who was reading Lydia Tár in your audition tapes? Was it your mother?

Yeah, it was my mother. And wow, she was patient because it was so much work and she has much more to say in the scene than me — that huge monologue. There came a point where she knew it by heart. It will be so interesting for her to watch the scene in the film.

This is the first time I've interviewed someone who's in a movie and I can't spoil what happens.

Yeah, it's funny, right? It's weird.

You can tell from this scene that it's no ordinary scene. It really builds to a confrontational climax. So let's get to the shoot. What happened?

It wasn't at all like a regular shooting day. I felt right from the beginning that this was something else. First, I got coaches for conducting — because Todd wanted everything to be as realistic as possible. So I had to learn how to conduct. And then we had two whole days of rehearsal. That's when I met Cate and Todd. The three of us were rehearsing from morning to evening, two days straight, and then we shot the scene from morning to evening, two days straight. We shot this one scene — this one take — from morning to evening in two days straight over and over again. And I never had that before for a scene.

In the midst of the first rehearsal day, Todd sat down and went like, "Hmm, I think we have to do this in one take." This big-ass scene. There's actually a real reason and purpose behind that decision, which was so effective.

And what is the reason? That he wanted it to build naturally, the confrontation between the two of you?

Yeah. But also it says a lot about the character, too. The scene should feel like Tár was actually conducting the scene. *She* was deciding when the camera is allowed to point somewhere else. Even when Max is shown, it's only when *she* points to Max and wants him to say something. She's in so much control. I heard that the scene comes back later in the film but in a version [edited for the internet]. So that's really important — that as an audience member, you don't miss anything that happens in the original scene. So you really know what happened and how it happened.

What's amazing about the scene is that she is a woman who's a control freak, right? But she wasn't ready for you. You're something else. You're just slightly out of her realm of capabilities. And so the confrontation is fascinating to watch. Those kinds of confrontations are happening everywhere right now. I think that's why this scene resonates so much.

Yeah. Definitely.

And then ultimately you just tell her, “You’re a *fucking bitch*.” And it’s like something she’s never heard in her life, I’m sure.

Yes, exactly. And yeah, you’re right: These conversations happen really often, but most of the time it happens online or where it’s really easy to do that. But I think that makes this scene so intense. I think it’s a personal thing. It’s not even only this argument that they have about separating the art from the artist. At first, it’s only this argument, two opinions colliding. But there’s so much that makes it so intense.

But first of all, it’s amazingly written. That’s the most detailed and beautifully written scene I’ve ever read. But also, Todd said a thing — he saw the scene kind of as Tár talking to a 20-year-old version of herself. There’s this young student and she really, really, really tries to get Max to understand. But Max just won’t.

At one point she just attacks Max’s whole identity and beliefs, and she pretty much murders Max in front of a live audience. She’s not just a regular person or not just some celebrity. She’s actually a person that Max looks up to. She’s an idol and a hero and that makes it much more devastating. The first time I read the scene, I did it the obvious way where this young student is pissed because, “You don’t understand me and it’s your generation and you don’t get me, you’re stupid.” But when I later worked on the scene, I actually discovered that Max really tries to make Tár become their friend and to make Tár like them, which is so frustrating.

So if I were to ask you — you as Zethphan — who do you sympathize with in that scene, is it Max or Tár?

I think why the scene is so great is that it shows us these two people, these two opinions, two sides of a coin, and the scene just flips the coin and it lands differently for each person that watches the scene. So I really don’t want to interfere with that. I think that Max really, really understands what Tár is saying. Max really understands Tár, but there’s just these principles and beliefs and things that Max just built up around them as part of their identity, and she just can’t accept it. At some point, it just breaks. It just becomes too much.

I want to ask about your leg in the scene.

(Laughs.) Yeah.

Where did that nervous shaking come from?

The knee thing was written down on the page — exactly when the hammering starts going and when it’s the strongest and at what point she stops it.

Was it difficult for you to do that *and* say your lines *and* do the upspeak and everything else Todd Field asked for?

Yeah, totally. I almost had to do it for four days continuously. And the hard thing is to keep your tempo consistent, I think. I think the scene is more than ten minutes long, but when you’re eight minutes into the scene, you can’t go like, “Oh, I can’t do this anymore.” It was awesome.

And it's one take. So you have to keep the rhythm for 10 minutes solid.

Oh yeah.

What did Cate Blanchett say to you to help you feel comfortable enough to do this with her?

She told me that I was doing great. She also told me that everyone in the room, in the back room at the monitor, is talking about how “good I am” which really pushed me. She's just so chill and down to earth. Everyone keeps saying, “Man, you must have been so nervous or intimidated.” But I wasn't at all. I wasn't intimidated because she's way too humble and down to earth with that. When she talks to you, she's just that humble human being, like you and me. At least that's what I kept telling myself.

She kept cracking jokes and she has a great sense of humor, which I think helped that I felt like I was allowed to crack jokes too, which isn't always the case. I totally forgot who she was until I stepped out of the building and saw all these people, these fans and photographers waiting for her to come out, and was like, “Oh, shit. Right.”

Tár is a wonderful launching pad for you. I'm wondering what you're going to do next.

Oh, me too. Me too. I'm really looking forward to it. And this time right now is so exciting to me. I'm really, “Whoo, what's going to happen next?” There's many things, just many, many ... how do you say it?

Say it in German.

So viele Eindrücke, die auf mich einprasseln.