

## **SXSW: 'Introducing, Selma Blair' Director on Documenting the Actress' Multiple Sclerosis**

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**"She talks a lot about how she was a supporting actress, but she's a star. It took this illness, honestly, for the world to have an opportunity to see it," says filmmaker Rachel Fleit.**

In October 2018, actress Selma Blair revealed on [Instagram](#) that she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Less than one year later, in May 2019, documentary filmmaker Rachel Fleit found herself in the actress' Studio City home, filming Blair's daily struggles with the autoimmune disease for what would later become a feature documentary.

*Introducing, Selma Blair*, which premiered at the virtual SXSW and is set for a release later this year on Discovery+, chronicles the physical and emotional journey that the Hollywood star has been on since her M.S. diagnosis, including undergoing a stem-cell transplant with the hopes of slowing the progression of her disease.

Ahead of the film's SXSW debut, Fleit spoke to *The Hollywood Reporter* about Blair's "bull by the horns" approach to her M.S. diagnosis, as well as her experience first meeting the actress ("disarming") and what she was able to capture ("nothing was off-limits").

### **How did you and Selma come together for the documentary?**

We didn't know each other at all. Selma had just done a photo shoot with my friend, Cass [Bird], who's a fashion photographer for *Vanity Fair*. Selma was like, "I want to make a movie about what I'm going through. Do you know anyone that does documentaries?" We started talking with her and Troy [Nankin], her manager, and also the producers on the film, Mickey Liddell and Pete Shilaimon. I first met her on FaceTime and we really hit it off. I have Alopecia Universalis — it's this autoimmune disease where you lose all your hair — and M.S. is also an autoimmune disease. She's like, so you're bald and I have M.S., what are we going to do? She's a disarming person who's not going to beat around the bush. She's just going to tell it like it is. The next month, I was out in Los Angeles and in her house.

### **Because it is a doc about an individual's health, were there any conversations about what should not be included in the doc for privacy?**

It was like a filmmaker's dream come true, because nothing was off-limits. There were bathtubs. There was half-naked getting into bed. In the hospital, we couldn't have an actual crew, so all of that footage was shot on an iPhone. I'm there for the stem-cell transplant, the only person in the room beside the nurses, filming on my iPhone. Because of her generosity and her willingness to share what she was really going through and not sugar coat it, it allowed for a better film.

## **How did you go about finding the central story in the footage?**

A documentary is like a pile of wood until your editor gets started. (*Laughs.*) Selma was going to go through the stem-cell transplant, so that was our natural act two. And then we were wondering what's going to be act three. I had gone to L.A. in February [2020] and I filmed a little bit with Selma to get a sense of her recovery process, and I was like, "I'll see you in April." Then COVID happened, and there was no way that I could get on a plane. It was so inappropriate, and Selma's immune system was completely suppressed. So, we would sit on FaceTime for hours during the pandemic, and that's when I started to realize what this act three would be about. Selma had already been at home for a year. Selma had already had the COVID experience in her own weird way because it was very hard for her to leave the house, so she had already sat at home with herself for a year. And then I was sitting at home with myself for a year really thinking about who I am and what's important and what matters and what I've done wrong and how I want to be a better person. And Selma said that at the beginning of the filming: I just want to be a better person. I started to really see that the end of our film would be about finding peace and joy in the day.

## **What may people not know about Selma that you really wanted audiences to see in the documentary?**

Everyone that I interviewed for the film that knew her would just always say, "This is what Selma would do: Selma would get M.S. and she would take the bull by the horns and figure out a way to [live] with it." She lost her hair during the chemo that is a part of the stem-cell transplant. I have spent my whole life trying to figure out how to be a bald person, and Selma was like, "I'm not going to wear a turban or a wig or a hat or whatever. I'm just going to be bald." I had my own personal transformation in the midst of making this film. I was like, you have to embrace yourself — look at the way Selma is doing it. I wore wigs for years and, now, I haven't worn a wig in 20 years, but have struggled with fully embracing who I am. She taught me so much in this process.

I don't think anyone is fearless, we all have fear. But she's extraordinary and she's really strong. She talks a lot about how she was a supporting actress, but she's a star. It took this illness, honestly, for the world to have an opportunity to see it.

## **This film is about Selma and her journey, but it is also a story about living with a disability. What did you want the doc to say about this?**

I've learned so much about ableism in the process of making this film and I still have a lot to learn as an able-bodied person, but one of the things that was the most illuminating for me is this concept of "getting better." Able-bodied people think, "We want you to get better, so you can be more like us." We want people to look like us, we want people to walk like us, and we want people to talk like us, as an able-bodied person. And that's just not someone's reality. If anything, Selma's message is: "This is where I'm at and that's OK." That's beautiful and that's to be celebrated. I'm hoping disabled people feel that they get seen, on some level, even if their circumstances are different. But then for able-bodied people, I hope that this is eye-opening. That this is just a way of being in the world — this is how Selma is and she's OK. People ask me all the time, "How is Selma doing?" It's coming from a really beautiful and loving place, but I know the subtext of that is the question, "Is she back to quote-unquote normal?"

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/sxsw-introducing-selma-blair-director>