

# SHE'S FUNNY THAT WAY

Actress Greta Lee is making her way to the top, one weirdo at a time

BY LISA BUTTERWORTH  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY NATHAN PERKEL



STYLIST: HEATHER NEWBERGER HAIR & MAKEUP: JULIE TEEL ART DIRECTORS: STACIE MCCORMICK AND ERICA CASSANO  
PRODUCTION: GET IT PRODUCTIONS



Jumpsuit by Sködia.

Opposite Page: Jacket by Cacharel, shirt by Alexandra Nam.

“Do you feel like we talked enough about you?” Greta Lee deadpans toward the end of our interview. It’s the type of sardonic aside I’ve become accustomed to during my meal in San Francisco’s Mission District with the 33-year-old actress. Because not only is she hilarious in standout roles on shows like *New Girl*, *High Maintenance*, *Girls*, and *Inside Amy Schumer*, but she’s also legit funny in real life. It’s a warm day with a high sweat level, but she shows up to our lunch looking impossibly refreshed, like a tall drink of water (taller than my 5’ 2”, anyway) wearing white pants, a Rihanna tee, a light denim jacket, and baby-blue leather high-top Converse. “My approach to maternity wear has been I’m just gonna dress like the baby I’m gonna make,” she quips. Oh, by the way she’s seven months pregnant. “It’s like a fun summer project. Like macramé. Or learning to make really good bread.” Lee has just moved to San Francisco with her husband, actor and writer Russ Armstrong, and Batman, her Jack Russell poodle, to star in Hugh Laurie’s new Hulu show, *Chance*—she plays his sassy assistant—and plans to work until she can’t, when she’ll fly back home to New York to give birth. It’s a chain of seemingly stressful events she relays with unfathomable cool. “Behind this screen is just a dark cloud of poop water,” she assures me. “Acting is such a weird job as it is. So this element, it’s basically no weirder than how it is anyway.”

**“I don’t like doing things alone. Even if it goes well—especially if it goes well—you don’t have anyone to celebrate with!” she says, before taking on a sarcastic lilt. “Basically, I’m like an athlete, like in the Olympics. I want to eat orange slices with people, which is what Olympic athletes do. They drink Capri Suns and slice up oranges and give each other high-fives. That’s what I want.”**

Jacket by **Cacharel**.

Opposite Page: Dress by **Cacharel**, vest by **Samantha Pleet**.



It’s fitting that Lee considers acting to be weird, since she’s made a name for herself by acting like a weirdo. On *High Maintenance*, the web series-turned-HBO show (premiering September 16), she plays “homeless” Heidi, a pot enthusiast who dates men more for the temporary living arrangements than the love connection. On *Girls*, she was the memorable uptalking gallery owner Soojin, a part Lena Dunham was inspired to write for her after seeing Lee in a play. (“That was very exciting,” Lee says about hearing from Dunham. “But I also felt like this sort of Make-A-Wish Foundation charity case—‘Look at that poor girl, making less than you would on unemployment at the Lincoln Center, just acting her little heart out. Come to our table read.’”) In perhaps her most mainstream project, Lee played party girl/nail-salon tech Hae Won in legendary *SNL* writer Paula Pell’s movie *Sisters*. In a scene opposite the film’s stars, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, she goes back and forth with Poehler for an inordinate amount of time as they try to properly pronounce one another’s names. It’s a bit that’s both awkward and absurdly funny—though the part did come under fire for being racist; more on that later—and one that cemented Lee as a breakout star of the film. They’re all characters Lee feels a strange affinity for. “They’re these women who, on the one hand, are so unlikable in a lot of ways, but I really kind of love them—and really feel protective over them,” she says, before taking a bite of her prosciutto sandwich.





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Meaning to compliment her comedy chops, I mention that it’s roles like these that have earned her the reputation a scene stealer. “I love that, ’cause it makes me sound, like, so giving, and just, you know, I’m all about listening to the other person...so humble,” she says derisively, before getting genuinely reflective. “I just feel like I’ve been really lucky in that the most successful roles that I’ve had, it’s always been, in my mind, because I’m sharing the same air as someone who was able to give me the gift of contributing,” she says. “Literally Amy [Poehler] was like, ‘Where can we make some space for us to improvise?’ And if she hadn’t done that, it so easily could’ve been a two-line exchange. I’m eternally grateful to her and people like her because it just makes everything better. And it’s always the women who do that! Which is so awesome.”

Those women include some of comedy’s current superstars—Poehler and Schumer among them—and being able to partake in that exchange is one of the things that drew Lee to acting and to the sketch side of comedy (which she got into as a student at Northwestern) in the first place. “I don’t like doing things alone. Even if it goes well—especially if it goes well—you don’t have anyone to celebrate with!” she says, before taking on a sarcastic lilt. “Basically, I’m like an athlete, like in the Olympics, any sport where you have a group, that shared team spirit. I want to eat orange slices with people, which is what Olympic athletes do. They drink Capri Suns and slice up oranges and give each other high-fives. That’s what I want.”

Lee realized this growing up in La Cañada Flintridge, a suburb of L.A., when she was pursuing a classical singing career. (“The Bach Festival, I won that,” she says.) It turned out to be a type of performance that was too lonely for her, though it did pave the way for musical theater, Lee’s entrée into the acting world. And even though she spent time putting on “weird” shows for her family—such as a female version of *Forrest Gump* and an adaptation of *The Baby-Sitters Club*—comedy didn’t seem like a viable path. “I’m an immigrant kid, it’s not like growing up being funny was encouraged by any means. My family’s incredibly funny and everyone has timing, everyone’s a brilliant storyteller, but it’s not something that’s ever acknowledged. You definitely don’t aspire to be a comedian. Like, what is that? Especially as a woman,” she says, leaning back and rubbing her belly. “One of the first things my mom saw me in that was a comedy, I had a pratfall, and she could not wrap her mind around why I would choose to fall. She was so embarrassed for me she was like, ‘Why did you fall? That was so unladylike.’ She would so much rather have me perform as a Disney princess somewhere, literally.”

Being ladylike isn’t something Lee concerns herself with. But being a “woman in comedy” comes up during our chat. When I admit I’m confused about whether differentiating the way we discuss female and male comedians simply lends relevance to the “women aren’t funny”

garbage—does talking about it perpetuate it?—Lee agrees. “On the one hand, I do feel like we’re way past that point, like, ‘Oh, are women funny?’ Way past it. But surprisingly, it comes up all the time still, where we’re finding ourselves in these positions of defending [ourselves],” she says. “But it’s not a coincidence that so much of what I’ve done is because I’ve been collaborating with really excellent women.” For Lee the talk of marginalization goes a step further, since she’s Asian-American, an ethnicity that isn’t exactly leading in pop-culture prominence. When I mention that while prepping for our chat, I came across a really heartfelt blog post written by a female Korean comedian, praising Lee for being one of the most awesome, and only, role models available to her, Lee responds with her standard one-two punch of authenticity and sarcasm. “Well, that’s so nice, and so sad,” she says with a laugh. “I’m like, ‘You’re welcome!’” she adds, spreading her arms with a grandiose air. But all jokes aside, she’s not intentionally paving a way for others. “I don’t come at it from like, ‘Oh, how Asian is this part?’ Like, it’s dope that I can play people who aren’t [in] stereotypical Asian professions, aside from the nail-salon technician, which I had a blast doing. But it’s never like, ‘YESSS, I’m not ‘Asian!’” Of course, when I reflect I feel like, ‘Oh, collectively that’s a cool thing that these characters share.’ They didn’t have to be Asian, or it didn’t even come up, and that does seem noteworthy,” she says, drawing her knee up and placing her foot next to her. “It is significant to me. Just the experience of being a creative person in this field, I get really angry and really upset when I see blatant racism. But I end up not really politicizing my involvement in the moment.”

She has many of those moments now: In addition to *Chance*, Lee has recently wrapped several movies, including *Gemini*, in which she plays Zoë Kravitz’s girlfriend; indie drama *Pottersville*; and *Fits and Starts*, where she flexes her dramatic muscles opposite Wyatt Cynac. “I don’t know, maybe I’m much more optimistic than I even realize,” she says. “I feel really hopeful based on what I’ve gotten to do, and based on how things are feeling right now in terms of opportunity and the stories people want to hear. I’ve always felt like, people really authentically loving these weird characters... that’s great! I’m not sure what more I can ask for.”



Dress by Rachel Comey, model's own ring.