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This page: Ellie Kemper wears a Shoshanna dress, Cloverpost earrings & bracelet, and a Lady Grey ring. Page 48: She wears a Sachin & Babi dress, Jean-Michele Cazabat shoes, Lady Grey earrings, and Robert Lee Morris & Cloverpost rings.

Sunny Girl

Ellie Kemper Talks
Motherhood,
Comedy &
“Kimmy Schmidt”—
And, Yes, It’s As
Delightful
As It Sounds!

By Mia Weber

Photos by
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Photography

In the age of #TBT and #SelfieSaturday, it’s safe to assume that many of us have let a hyperbolic “Blessing” or “Blessed” (or, more likely, #Blessed) slip into our vocabulary here and there. If you catch yourself laughing good-naturedly at your own on-trendness, you’re in good company, because Ellie Kemper—human sunbeam, new mom, and star of “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt”—is right there with you!

It’s the eve of Winter Storm Stella in mid-March and the temperature is hovering at a very low number that would cause even the ever-optimistic Kimmy Schmidt to lose some of her signature sunshine, but Kemper has dressed for the weather in a Canada Goose parka (though, she takes issue with those who say you can “wear nothing under it and still be warm”) and cozy beanie. She drops the B-bomb on me as we’re in the midst of discussing how much she genuinely loves working with her “Kimmy” cast-mates and crew, and specifically, the joys of working

alongside the series’ creator, Tina Fey.

“She’s so hands-on and involved with every aspect of the show and she does it so gracefully. It’s a blessing to work with her,” Kemper starts, before catching herself in the social media-age cliché and laughing: “I keep saying that! That’s the second time I’ve used ‘blessing’ today! I’m like an old gospel woman...*BLESSED!*”

For all the endearing fun that Kemper is game for poking at herself, she’s also being sincere about her blessings, and with good reason. The 37-year-old actress and writer has a book of essays on the horizon, has been relishing the past nine months as a new mother, and is looking forward to Netflix dropping the eagerly anticipated third season of “Kimmy”—a series for which the titular role has garnered her two SAG nominations and an Emmy nomination—on May 19.

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Like her character Kimmy—an Indiana native—Kemper is also a Midwestern transplant to the Big Apple. She originally hails from St. Louis, MO (where she grew up very happily, she says, with “a backyard and school buses”), and got her first taste of performing by doing school plays in elementary, middle, and high school. Fun fact: Jon Hamm, who plays the Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne on “Kimmy,” is an alum of her high school, and also a former theater teacher of hers. “When he first appeared on the show at the end of season one, I was so nervous,” Kemper recounts. “You cannot find a nicer person than he is, but, at the same time, I felt like: ‘Okay! Gotta pass the test!’ And of course, the first line I said in rehearsal, I completely messed it up!”

Kemper went to Princeton to undergrad, where she majored in English; she also found confirmation that she wanted pursue comedy when she joined a collegiate improv group called Quipfire! (“All college improv groups have hilarious names—there’s no end to them,” she notes).

“In college, that’s when I did improv comedy for the first time and I really, really loved it. I felt like: ‘This is something that I enjoy, and I’m good at it, and I want to get better at it.’ That was really what sparked my interest in trying to pursue [acting] after college,” she recalls.

The role that brought Kemper her first dose of widespread acclaim was as the sweet, silly, and ever-perky Erin Hannon on “The Office” (where she also had the fun experience of working with her sister, Carrie Kemper, who was a writer on the show at the time). It’s a part that means as much to her as it likely does to Dunder-Mifflin devotees—in fact, her face literally lights up when I ask her about it.

“‘The Office’? Oh my God—you just said that and a wave of nostalgia washed over me! That was *such* a wonderful time in my life! I sound so old, but that was my big break, so on a professional level, it was just thrilling to be able to have that job. I had been a fan of the show before being on it, but then personally, I made friendships on that show that remain in effect,” she reflects. “When Steve Carell was leaving the show, Rainn Wilson turned to me because I was crying and he’s like: ‘Why are you sad? You’ve only been on this show for a year!’ It was *funny*. I was like: ‘You’re right! Okay, *Dwight!* Big brother!’ But talk about a family—that *really* felt like a family.”

Kemper has a brightness that, not surprisingly, gets her compared to her smiley-est characters (in addition to Erin and Kimmy, she also made an on-screen splash as notably cheerful Becca in 2011’s “Bridesmaids”). Because of her own infectious smile and kind spirit, it’s an apt comparison in many ways, but it’s also one that only scratches the surface.

“I’ll just say that I *do* enjoy playing that [kind of part] because there’s truth in that and I *can* relate to that,” she says in reference to Erin and Kimmy. “Though, personally, I’m not always as great an optimist as those characters are, but I try to be.”

In her personal life, Kemper’s efforts at optimism have been serving her well as she settles in to the new experience of motherhood. Her first child, James, is now 9 months old and, thus far, adjusting to life with a baby has brought many life-changing joys and challenges.

“Everything is different from what I expected, because I, weirdly, only thought about being pregnant. I didn’t fully wrap my head around the fact that there would be a person at the end of it. I read endlessly about pregnancy and what to eat and what not to eat... And then I sort of prepared *not at all* for the actual baby,” she says, with a laugh, of James, who was

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born last July. “So, every day I learn something new about how to take care of him and what he responds to—and he’s changing every day.”

Of course, she’s happy to gush about the fun stuff: “Everything that a baby does, when it’s your baby, is amazing to you... He does something new every day that I never thought before that I would find completely fascinating. He looks at his hand and I’m like: ‘How is he understanding what his hand is?’”

But she’s also not hesitant to be real about the tough stuff: “The biggest surprise to me was the sleep deprivation. I had heard about it but I did not understand how intense it was. It was very difficult because you can’t really operate—or I can’t really operate—on such fragmented sleep, but you *have* to.”

Fortunately, she has a solid and loving parenting partnership with her husband, TV writer Michael Koman. The pair, who married in 2012, originally met while working for “Late Night with Conan O’Brien”—which puts them in the unique position of being able to credit Team Coco for their happy family.

“[James] sort of looks like Conan—he’s very pale and has red hair. But Michael’s the father, I promise! *I’m* pale and have red hair!” Kemper jokes. “I do sometimes think: ‘Conan is responsible for all of this—for my marriage and now for my son!’”

Since the jury is still out on whether Conan will offer up babysitting services, Kemper and Koman have settled into a nice rhythm as new parents. They stagger their work schedules the best they can, split up baby-related chores, and both love bonding with their son.

“Spending time with the baby is a joy for both of us. I feel very lucky that my husband is such a good father,” Kemper says. “We’re very good at taking turns with chores, like diaper changing, etc., but also in terms of—okay, let’s be honest, I still do most of the household stuff, ha-ha—divvying up time [taking care of the baby]. That’s pretty evenly distributed between the two of us.”

Case in point: Kemper went back to work to shoot season three of “Kimmy” just 11 weeks after giving birth to James while Koman made a point not to take on new work in order to take care of the baby; but now that the show has wrapped, the couple will be swapping with Kemper spending more time at home and Koman at work.

“Being in this industry has been very lucky because you do have the ability to take on jobs—not *always* when you want them because they’re not always there—but when they present themselves, there are better times to take them than others.”

Kemper’s choice to dive into the role of Kimmy Schmidt—a young woman on a journey to rebuild her life

in NYC after being held captive for 15 years in an underground bunker with the leader of an apocalypse cult (Hamm’s character) and three other abducted women—is one that’s proved to be very fulfilling. “Kimmy” is the story of extreme resilience in the face of tough circumstances, uniquely shown through a smart, humorous lens, and it gives Kemper the opportunity to show her comedic side while also giving life to her character’s complexity.

“This is going to sound corny, but I really admire Kimmy. ‘Admire’ is a mild word—I wish I had her tenacity and strength, because she went through this horrific, unimaginable thing, and didn’t emerge *unscathed*, but did emerge thinking the best of people and trying to be optimistic about the world. I think that would be very hard for anyone who had been exposed the circumstances that she was exposed to. So I am just in awe—perhaps that’s a better word—of her strength,” Kemper notes. “I try to adopt some of that to my own life. I like playing the silly things about her... But it’s also that there’s so much depth to her, and I find it almost cathartic in a way—and now I *really* sound like an actress—to access those pieces as well.”

Kemper wasn’t at liberty to divulge much about what we can expect from “Kimmy” in season three, but she teases that we can expect plenty of fun celeb cameos (there have been whispers on the interwebs that stars like Daveed Diggs and Laura Dern may be in the mix). And one thing she could confirm was that fan-fave guest stars like Fred Armisen, Amy Poehler, and Hamm would all be making repeat appearances.

Now that she’s in the zone of post-production on “Kimmy,” but still ahead of the mass-binge watch that’s sure to commence amongst Netflix users on May 19, Kemper, in fact, does not have any new film projects coming up (with the exception of season four of “Kimmy”), and she’s darn happy about it! Presently, she’s enjoying an abundance of quality time with her son and, hopefully, time to work on her forthcoming book of humorist essays (in case, for some reason, you thought her resume was light: In her spare time, Kemper has also been a noted contributor to *McSweeney’s* and *The Onion*).

“I did think that while I was filming I’d be able to get a lot more writing done, but between being a new mom and filming, it was much harder than I thought,” she says. “Now that we’ve wrapped, it’s time to dive into the book...I’m very excited to get to work on it.”

Aside from reveling in writing and mother-son bonding this spring, Kemper also has her sights set on the warmer months to come—though, not in terms of a packed social agenda or slate of exotic family travel ambitions. Just the opposite, in fact. “Besides putting tons of sunblock on that pale, pale skin, we don’t have any plans yet,” she says, smiling widely. “I suspect that our big trip will be to St. Louis to see cousins and grandparents, and the rest of the summer, we’ll probably be sticking close to home... I’m excited because James will be about 1, so I feel like we’ll be taking in more of the city.” Fun in the sun, family time, and a blissfully wide-open calendar? Sounds like a #Blessed-worthy plan indeed!

TO WATCH SEASON 3 OF
“UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT”
ON MAY 19, VISIT NETFLIX.COM!