Film Close-Up: Jennifer Connelly

by Joey_Berlin

Jennifer Connelly is a beautiful Academy Award-winning actress with a special talent for projecting profound vulnerability. She is terrifically affecting in the drama "Reservation Road," a guaranteed tear-jerker starring Connelly and Joaquin Phoenix as loving parents who are shattered by an awful tragedy.

JENNIFER CONNELLY - Jennifer Connelly stars in Terry Gordon's hard-hitting drama 'Reservation Road.' CNS Photo courtesy of Macall Polay. On a drive home, they pause at a rest stop. Their 10-year-old son gets out of the car and is promptly killed by a hit-and-run driver. Afterward, Connelly grieves while Phoenix, a mild-mannered college professor, is driven to thoughts of justice and, ultimately, revenge.

"Reservation Road" is powerfully performed and has the honest ring of real life, but it is not exactly a feel-good movie. For Connelly, 36, it is another in her long series of serious films. The former child model was once a bouncy dream girl in mindless romps like "Career Opportunities." But her recent work in films such as "House of Sand and Fog," "Blood Diamond" and "Little Children" is decidedly more mature.

Connelly, who met and married British actor Paul Bettany when they worked together on "A Beautiful Mind," is ready to return to lighter fare. Her next role is in the star-studded comedy "He's Just Not That Into You."

Q: The subject matter of "Reservation Road" must be every parent's worst nightmare. How did you, as a mother, deal with portraying that?

A: I never consciously considered my own children when I was working on the movie. It was too frightening, too repugnant of an idea to exploit. I couldn't consider that. But that said, I did do a lot of research to make that fictional reality as convincing as possible to me so that I could surrender to those scenes. What comes out is probably, on a gut level, stuff that I'm made of. I'm a mom, and I have a lot of love for my kids. And that informs what I do every day and what I do in this movie.

Q: Is this the type of film where you need to discard the character once you leave the set? You cannot possibly bring her problems home with you at night.

A: Absolutely! That's what my life requires. I live in New York and we shot in Connecticut, so I didn't go home all the time, but for the most part, that's what I did do. And that's a great comfort at the end of the day. But much to the chagrin of the people who live with me, I'm kind of obsessive about work. I have a hard time not thinking about it. I think about what I did today and what I'll do tomorrow, and next week. But with this kind of subject matter it's always under my skin, right up until we finish.

Q: What did your research involve?

A: As dry as it sounds, I just did a lot of reading. This kind of tragedy is like nothing else you can go through in life. These people must experience things that I cannot imagine. So I wanted to read about the different stages of grief, about case studies, about people's emotional and physical reactions. And I thought about my character, Grace, and how she might respond. I thought about where she might be in this grieving process at different points in the script. I also looked at Web sites and chat rooms where people wrote down their thoughts, wrote about their kids or to their kids.

Q: Did you feel like an intruder in those online chat rooms?

A: It was devastating, but I thought it was probably a good thing to look at. But I also quickly felt like I had no business trespassing. It was something sacred and personal that I shouldn't be exploiting at a conscious level. After I got a sense of it, I had to leave it alone.

Q: Nine-year-old Elle Fanning, the younger sister of Dakota Fanning, plays your daughter in the film. What is she like?

A: Have you met her? She's really bright. I don't know what's going on in that family, but those kids are really something. She's a far better actress than I ever was as a kid. And she's watching all the time. It's slightly disconcerting. You turn around and there she is, watching, taking everything in. She really listens. In the scene where she plays the piano, she really played piano! She plays beautifully. Her technique is so flawless that they had to get her to make mistakes. She's very accomplished.

Q: So what is Joaquin Phoenix like? It is said that he is quite a prankster.

A: He never played any practical jokes on me. We had very different kinds of scenes together. Maybe he doesn't think I'm funny. Maybe he just doesn't like me! That said, we all really got along. I adore Joaquin. He's an extraordinary actor. It makes my job a joy to work with someone so present and available. And neither of us tries to create an atmosphere of suffering on the set.

Q: You have taken on some pretty emotionally heavy-duty films recently. Has that been a deliberate decision on your part?

A: I'm doing a comedy right now. It's called "He's Just Not That Into You." I'm actually flying out right after this to work on it. But I've certainly done more dramas. I like drama, and I've picked the things that I wanted to. It's a combination of what I've responded to and what they respond to me for. It's also what people will let me do.

Q: You won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for "A Beautiful Mind." So after winning it, does the little gold man seem to follow you everywhere?

A: I think you have to go back to work, don't you? That little gold man is no guarantee you'll be good in the

scene you're about to do. It didn't let me off the hook in any way. If I thought about it too much, I'd probably never work again.

Â© Copley News Service

Film Close-Up: Jennifer Connelly by Joey_Berlin