

Film Close-Up: Helena Bonham Carter

by Joey_Berlin

British actress Helena Bonham Carter has collaborated with director Tim Burton seven times. Five of their creations are films, and two are human beings.

HELENA BONHAM CARTER - In 'Sweeney Todd,' a musical bloodbath set in 19th century London, British actress Helena Bonham Carter co-stars with Johnny Depp. CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Mountain. The couple, who have been together since they met on the set of 2001's "Planet of the Apes," have been very productive lately. Their latest film, "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," arrived in theaters less than a week after Carter delivered their second child.

In "Sweeney Todd," a musical bloodbath set in 19th century London, Carter co-stars with Johnny Depp. He plays a barber seeking murderous vengeance, and she plays his partner in crime with a useful talent for making meat pies.

A bona fide blue blood whose great-grandfather was Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, Carter's early career nearly typecast her as a specialist in stuffy period dramas, after she appeared in such films as "A Room with a View," "Howards End" and "The Wings of the Dove," for which she was Oscar nominated. But her career has branched out considerably in recent years. In February, Carter will film her role as Bellatrix Lestrange in "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," which is scheduled for a November release.

Q: Was Tim Burton easily convinced that you were the right choice to co-star in "Sweeney Todd" with Johnny Depp? Did you even have to audition?

A: I definitely had to audition. Physically I was right, I think I was always going to be right with Johnny. We have the same frown line and there are certain similarities, Tim's always said, between the two of us. We both like to camouflage ourselves to the hilt when it comes to playing parts. And we both loathe watching ourselves. That's why Tim likes working with us, apparently. We just say, "You do whatever. You do what you want with us." And we're both pale and big-eyed, you know. And Tim's also said, "You both would have been great in a silent movie." He definitely thinks that I should have been in a silent movie because I talk too much, ha-ha! And actually, you know what, Mrs. Lovett is a chat-aholic. On stage, she talks nonstop. So,

where were we?

Q: Auditioning.

A: Oh yeah, yeah! So Tim asked me to audition. He said, "I just don't know if you can sing, so you're going to have to audition just like everybody else." So I went and learned to sing, which I always wanted to do because I always wanted to be in a musical. And I've also loved Sondheim. The whole of this was just powered by my complete love and infatuation with whatever Sondheim's written. And I've loved "Sweeney Todd," I've known it for years, although actually, frankly, the men's songs more than the women's songs. They get all the pretty tunes, all the melodies.

Q: After you had auditioned, were things normal between you and Tim back at home?

A: Well that was the hard thing. That's when it started getting harder, because I auditioned and then he didn't say anything for five weeks. It was like the elephant in the room you don't mention. And then I thought it was like being unfaithful. He went off to New York and he was seeing other women audition, you know, then he came back and went, "Don't ask me. Two weeks, you'll know." And he was absolutely impeccable and horribly impartial, ha-ha! But I knew that I would never want to be cast because I was, you know, his girlfriend - on that basis. And also, I didn't want to have the pressure of being cast and not being qualified to do it. It would have been horrendous, it would have been a disaster for the whole movie and for him.

Q: What was Johnny Depp like on set, considering that in the film he is usually angry and getting vengeance. Did he ever break character and laugh?

A: Oh yeah. Johnny's not Method. He's very concentrated and very disciplined, but there's a lot of laughs. In fact, actually it was quite difficult to keep a straight face when he was coming at me during one song. He was very patient with me. And Tim and him have lots of laughs. One basis of the relationship is a lot of jokes, pretty stupid jokes I have to admit. I knew how stressful it was for Tim, and I get distressed because I'm the girlfriend, you know, back at home. But Tim did laugh a lot. There was a great sense of levity and excitement

on the set because no one there had done a musical before.

Q: What about dancing with Johnny? Is he a good dancer?

A: You know, the man's ridiculously overstuffed with talent in every direction, but he can't dance, I can tell you that, ha-ha! And that was a surprise. Well, waltz - he can't waltz. It was kind of unfortunate because I was really pregnant by then and we had to get on a spinning machine. It was the only way we had worked out to spin.

Q: Looking back now, how do you feel about the experience of making this film?

A: A lot of it was hard, actually, but really enjoyable and really taxing. And it was a real risk, which was exciting, exhilarating and terrifying. And fun. Because it's so beautifully written, it was so creatively fulfilling and stimulating. Yeah, it was great. Definitely it was the most satisfying part that I've done, yeah. I think this was the best part I've had.

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