Film Close-Up: Christina Ricci

by Joey_Berlin

Christina Ricci has always been artistically adventurous. She wanders off the beaten path once again as the star of the new oddity "Penelope." It is a whimsical and offbeat romantic fairy tale starring Ricci as a woman with a nose like a pig's snout. She is a warm-hearted young heiress who lives in seclusion under a family curse that can only be broken by finding true romance. Her co-stars in this contemporary fable include Reese Witherspoon and James McAvoy.

CHRISTINA RICCI - Christina Ricci stars as a young aristocratic heiress born under a curse in the romantic tale 'Penelope.' CNS Photo courtesy of Nick Wall. Ricci was born in Santa Monica, Calif., but raised in Montclair, N.J. Now 28, she has succeeded without formal acting training, having launched into the movie business at age 9 with a co-starring role in Cher's film "Mermaids." Next up for the actress is a role that may be the biggest of her career so far, in a movie that is sure to attract fanatical and curious legions to the box office this May. She will play Trixie in "Speed Racer," the first film from the Wachowski brothers since their "Matrix" trilogy.

Q: You wear a prosthetic snout in "Penelope." What was it like the first time you looked in the mirror and saw your nose like that?

A: It was funny. But I had no big reaction. It's a prosthetic, it's going to come off, you know. I thought it'd be smaller, but whatever.

Q: After seeing yourself in the mirror for the first time with the prosthesis on, was it easier to get into the fantasy of the film and the way it blends a fairy tale with reality?

A: I mean, I always thought we were making a fairy tale, but it was a modern-day fairy tale because her Prince Charming doesn't come and save her. But I felt that this movie was actually an excellent opportunity for me to sort of do a different kind of acting than I had really done before. We did the table read through, and it kind of struck me that this could easily be an animated film. And so then I sort of thought, well maybe I'll have the same physicality that you would see in Disney animation. And because half my face is something else, and with the scarf and everything, I found that using that sort of style really worked and was really fun

and it made everything else fall into line for me.

Q: How do you play someone who has been locked away her entire life and totally disconnected from the world?

A: Well I think it's addressed in her naivete. And I always feel like a jerk saying "nah ee vuh TAY," but I understand that if I said "nie EE vuh tee" you'd be like, "You're an idiot!" So I think that sort of addresses it. And I think that with her innocence and her awe, you kind of get that, oh yeah, she's never been outside before.

Q: What was it like to have the nose put on and wear it all day? Did it constrict your movement or your breathing, or start melting in the hot lights?

A: Yeah, it would bubble up a little bit, which I know is just gross. But the plastic part would get little air bubbles and they would constantly have to be popped. And you couldn't sneeze. There were certain expressions that if I did them, the top would probably have come unattached. But you try to be helpful and not do that.

Q: There is a scene with you riding on the back of a Vespa with Reese Witherspoon. What was that like?

A: Well it was sort of odd. She flew in the day after she won her Oscar, and then maybe two days after that we were on the back of the Vespa and I'm wearing this out-of-context, somewhat ridiculous coat and scarf and she's got the dorky helmet on and the whole gear. We're not really driving the Vespa, we're just riding on the back of it, on a trailer. And we were going through London streets and people all over were just yelling, "Reese! That's Reese Witherspoon!" and they were honking. It was hilarious. I was just saying, "This is amazing. You know, 72 hours ago you were dressed in a gown and holding a gorgeous golden Oscar, and now you're being totally made fun of, on a Vespa in the streets of London." It was kind of hysterical.

Q: This film has some interesting things to say about the notion of celebrity, and the popularity of gossip.

A: Yeah, I liked how - and it felt very real to me - when she does reveal herself that everybody responds in this very warm way. They like her and they approve of her. And I do feel that people respond to the warmth and goodness they see in people. Like, you'll see the most awful gossip columnist all of a sudden like somebody, and merely because they always look happy or they're always polite or something like that. So I thought that was a great element in there, so it wasn't just like, "Eww, the evil newspapers!"

Q: What is the live-action "Speed Racer" movie going to be like?

A: "Speed Racer" is awesome. I mean, we saw 15 minutes of it at the end of shooting, and everybody was so excited. It looks like nothing I've ever seen before, and it's emotionally resonant. It has this very strong story line about family and about integrity. And it was the most fun movie to make, just so much fun. We were playing all day.

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