

Arts and Leisure: Account of young Austen results in a sometimes 'unbecoming Jane'

by Norma Meyer

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. - Wide-smiling "Becoming Jane" star Anne Hathaway will soon describe how she once threw a jar of Chanel anti-cellulite cream against her bathroom wall to relieve work-related stress.

'BECOMING JANE' - Anne Hathaway spent a month in England immersing herself in the country in preparation for her role in 'Becoming Jane.' CNS Photo courtesy of Colm Hogan/Miramax Films. But right now, the ivory-skinned 24-year-old chatterbox is reliving the emotional drain of playing beloved English novelist Jane Austen in the new period drama. Austen's 200-year-old books have been adapted for both the big and small screen, but this is the first time the "Pride and Prejudice" author herself gets the Hollywood treatment.

"This is going to sound really self-important and bull---ty, but it took me a long time to get my strength back after playing Jane Austen. I really gave it everything I had. When the movie was done, I crawled into bed for a week. I wasn't sick. I just literally could not get out of bed, I was so exhausted."

Hathaway swapped couture from "The Devil Wears Prada" for simple Empire-waist cotton frocks and torturous undergarments in "Becoming Jane."

"Corsets suck," she says, rolling her big brown eyes. "You can't run in it. You can't really breathe. You can't eat. It cuts off your circulation. It basically gave me an ulcer. I was so stressed out making the movie. So at the end of every day, I'd eat and my stomach would be - it was bad news. After wearing the corset, I literally could not keep food down for a month."

This day, the spunky brunette who once wanted to be a nun but grabbed notice in a tiara ("The Princess Diaries") and as a gay cowboy's wife ("Brokeback Mountain"), looks very "Prada." She's clad in Chanel jeans, black Chanel cardigan, Sergio Rossi pumps and a large gold medallion pendant inscribed with a fairy "that normally I wouldn't like, but she's a naked nymph fairy."

When she first walks into the posh hotel suite for an interview, she sticks out her hand and chirps, "Hi, I'm Annie." She'd been downing VitaminWater and apologizes that she's "a little flighty" from recently crisscrossing the globe and doesn't "exist in a time zone right now."

And she's homesick for her 3-year-old chocolate Lab, Esmeralda, whom she cares for with longtime boyfriend and Italian real estate developer Raffaello Follieri in New York.

"My dog is very angry with me right now," says Hathaway, who recently wrapped production playing Agent 99 opposite Steve Carell in the upcoming "Get Smart." "I just turned down a meeting tomorrow because I have to go home to be with her. She just wants her mommy and daddy."

A young Hollywood do-gooder, Hathaway is also on the board of her beau's humanitarian Follieri Foundation, and she trekked last year to Nicaragua to help vaccinate kids against hepatitis A.

"Becoming Jane" is a fictional take on an unproven romance between pre-fame 20-year-old Austen and Irish lawyer Tom Lefroy (James McAvoy). Hathaway says working with the largely British cast, which includes McAvoy and Maggie Smith, hiked up the pressure to get her accent right.

Before filming began in Dublin, Ireland, she practiced with a dialect coach six hours a day and moved to England for a month to immerse herself in the country.

"And then weather conditions were awful on the film, so it made doing the accent even harder. You'd be freezing, and when you'd get cold, the pitch of your voice changes. So suddenly I'd be out in the middle of nowhere and I would sound like a Muppet doing an English accent," she says with a self-deprecating laugh.

After all that, some of her dialogue, as well as her co-stars, had to be re-recorded and dubbed after the shoot because of sound problems.

"The costumes were noisy. Jane Austen's (on-screen) house was apparently the crow mating ground. Almost every single shot, you just hear ... " and then Hathaway loudly screeches twice like a crow.

"In a couple cases, it was nice to go in and get another crack at my accent, because I hadn't quite gotten it the first time."

If her curtsies look good, credit "Brokeback Mountain" director Ang Lee. He gave her pointers at their table during a 2006 awards show commercial break.

"I was at the Golden Globes, you know, a stone's throw away from George Clooney and Renee Zellweger, and all these fabulous, very famous beautiful people," Hathaway says. "I told Ang that I was going to play Jane Austen. He said, 'You know, the most important part of your character is the curtsy.' I said, 'Oh, I've been practicing.' He goes, 'Well, show me.' So I did, and he said, 'No, it's all wrong.' "

Lee knew about bowing since he'd helmed the Oscar-winning 1995 "Sense and Sensibility," based on Austen's book. The director showed Hathaway how to slowly bend the knees with head forward and return to position, lastly raising the eyes. "Then he pulled me up and we did curtsies."

Way before that, the Vassar-educated Hathaway had read Austen's six novels. To prepare for the movie role, she also perused letters the never-married scribe wrote and studied ballroom dancing, piano and calligraphy. (In the movie, that's a hand double penning Austen's words.) Still, she worried she'd "ruin Jane Austen."

Her doubts about playing a literary giant might be understandable, but then Hathaway notes, "I cried when playing Agent 99 was done because she's so naturally confident and I'm so naturally insecure."

But wait, she's not insecure.

"No, I'm normal. I have moments. I used to be very, very interested in my own insecurities and how I felt and despaired. Now I don't really see it as having a point anymore."

Besides, she has a means to cope with stress. "Throwing things helps for me."

She recalls a day when she came home, upset after a bad photo shoot, and couldn't unwind.

"I tried to breathe. I tried to collect my thoughts. I tried running. I exercised. I tried everything and nothing was working. I was in my bathroom and I didn't want to throw my cell phone because it would just be a pain in the (rear) . . . but I knew I needed to throw something.

"So I looked down and I just picked up the first thing I knew I wasn't going to miss and wasn't glass, and I just hurled it against the wall, and it shattered. It was anti-cellulite cream," she says, busting up. "And there was something that was so right about that and so poetic, I just burst out laughing, and it made me feel better."

The cream, she says, had been a gift from Chanel. And no, at 24, she says she doesn't use it, "but you never know what's coming."

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