

## Rachel Weisz, 2001

WITH EMMA FORREST

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JUERGEN TELLER

The first time I saw Rachel Weisz was on a street in Edinburgh during the theater festival. A student at Cambridge University, she was wearing dungarees and handing out leaflets for her play. I hid behind a lamppost and stared because I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I thought she looked like the ghost of a Russian princess (in fact, her parents are Hungarian). When, a few years later, she became a star of the British stage and screen, in Noël Coward's play *Design for Living* and films like *Swept from the Sea* and *I Want You*, one newspaper labeled her "disturbingly exotic" which is polite code for "she doesn't look British."

Hollywood soon came calling and she took the role of Keanu Reeves' brainy love interest in the stinky *Chain Reaction*. Creating her own sub-genre, she again played the intellectual sex bomb in an action movie in *The Mummy*, the sequel to which appears this summer. In the coming months, she also stars in *Beautiful Creatures*, which has been called a Scottish *Thelma and Louise*, and Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Enemy at the Gates*, co-starring Joe Fiennes, Jude Law, and Ed Harris.

Like her heroine, Liz Taylor, she has eyes of such blazing intensity that they seem almost alien. When I became friends with her, I realized she is almost alien — at least within her chosen profession: Rachel is a fiercely intelligent and lateral thinker whose greatest pleasure is to ask questions of others, whether cab driver, student, politician or sales lady at the cosmetics counter. She has found an equal in boyfriend Sam Mendes, award-winning director of *Cabaret* and *American Beauty*. I suspect that what binds them is, no matter how revered and "in" they become, both retain the sensibility of outsiders.

**EMMA: When we were at the drugstore you innocently opened up *Talk Magazine* and I heard a shriek of dismay.**

**RACHEL:** Yeah, I literally saw not only the most disgusting, but the most ridiculous photograph I've ever seen of any woman.

**EMMA: And who was it of?**

**RACHEL:** It was me. [laughs] It was me photographed by David Bailey, who had some kind of concept that because it was for a Russian film, I would be wearing a Russian hat. But you can't really see the hat, just fur everywhere. And my nose looks like it's ... just a really outsized nose, you know.

**EMMA: But, you see, you're holding back from saying what you said at the store, which was that you thought you looked too Jewish. Is it limiting as an actress to be perceived as being too ethnic in any way?**

**RACHEL:** Well, I think you and I have always felt the same way — that we're Jewish but we can get away with just being exotic. We're kind of Jews in disguise. Those cultural stereotypes about the Jew with the big hooky nose and the fleshy face rub off on you. That's terrible to admit, isn't it.

**EMMA: Well, it's that Jackie Mason joke about how no Jewish woman wants to look Jewish: "You think I look maybe a little Italian, I look a little Russian, perhaps I can be Spanish?" ... "You look Jewish!"**

**RACHEL:** Hollywood's run by Jews. I was advised by an American agent when I was about 19 to change my surname. And I said "Why? Jews run Hollywood." He said "Exactly." He had a theory that all the executives think acting's a job for shiksas.

**EMMA: Of all the self-loathing Jews in the world, the most self-loathing are the Hollywood Jews. They don't want to see images of themselves on screen. That's why Lauren Bacall had to hide her identity, and Winona Ryder changed her name from Horowitz.**

**RACHEL:** In some way acting is prostitution, and Hollywood Jews don't want their own women to participate. Also, there's an element of Portnoy's Complaint — they all fancy Aryan blondes.

**EMMA: For *Beautiful Creatures*, in which you play a battered woman and trophy girlfriend, you had to go blonde. You're such an über-brunette; did you find you lost your sense of self?**

**RACHEL:** Completely. The last day of shooting, I went home to see my father and stepmother. She rang me the next day and said, "I never want to see that girl ever again. The girl who came to our house was like a horrendous, vulgar Spice Girl."

**EMMA: Who are you a big fan of?**

**RACHEL:** Denis Leary.

**EMMA: Why are comedians so sexy?**

**RACHEL:** They just are.

**EMMA: I think it's because laughing is an allegory for orgasms. It's something you can't help doing.**

**RACHEL:** You can't stop yourself coming. Not once you start. It's also that comedians don't have the kind of narcissism that actors have. They're writers who perform their own material. It's more interesting. And they're sexy because they risk more. Stand-up comedians risk more than anyone.

**EMMA: When you were at Cambridge, you started your own theater company. How was that?**

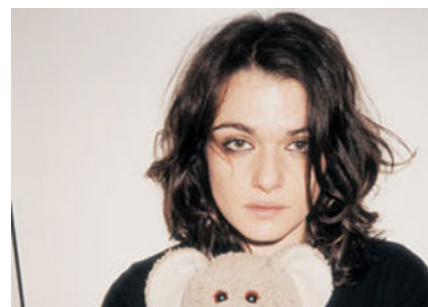
**RACHEL:** Amazing. We went to the Edinburgh Festival three times. Just me and another girl, Sasha Hales were the performers. We wrote about eight plays together, we went through the whole gamut of what two people can do onstage with each other. That was the happiest time of my life creatively. The best one we did was called *Slight Possession*.

**EMMA: I remember it. I remember being ... I have to say, very intimidated by how you look. Are you aware that you intimidate women sometimes?**

**RACHEL:** If I'm just in dungarees, I don't think I would intimidate anyone. If I went out in killer heels and full makeup, blow dry the whole thing — anyone dressed up like that could be



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heads and full makeup, even dry, and those things — anyone dressed up like that could be intimidating to men and women, really. It's so, look at me. Do you know what I mean? But I love women.

**EMMA: What is it? The sound of their voice, how they look?**

RACHEL: I like their heads, I like the way they think.

**EMMA: Women think like jazz.**

RACHEL: They're stream-of-consciousness. They'll improvise, and they're happy if someone brings in a new beat. Whereas men are very point-A-to-point-B. They just want to get there.

**EMMA: I think that's the reason you never survived in Los Angeles, why you had to go home. The driving thing. You'd never have an adventure along the way. If you were going to point B ...**

RACHEL: Yeah.

**EMMA: You had to leave from point A, and nothing could happen in between. Whereas in New York or in London, you're walking somewhere and crazy shit happens on the way. Tell me about those months in L.A.**

RACHEL: I went into quite a major depression. I was watching so many daytime TV shows. And then I would get in my car and drive to these auditions listening to the radio. I feel sick now when I listen to the radio, all these commercials for different car dealers. I just felt like the world was so desperate and lonely and sad and people were trying to sell cars and no one wanted to buy them.

**EMMA: [question about LA]**

RACHEL: My friend was saying that no one flirts there. Like at the traffic light when you're stopped. People are very focused on their own thing. I don't mean just sexual flirting, but verbal flirting. In L.A., unless you've just won an Oscar or you're Mr. Studio Head, no one talks to you. Even at parties. I was at this big Hollywood party; no one looked. Everyone is blinkered and they just kind of scan the room for anyone important. L.A. makes you feel ugly.

**EMMA: Really?**

RACHEL: Because if you're an actress, no one pays you any attention. And you immediately start thinking, God, I must have a nose job. [laughs] Or, I must get that boob job, or I must get that lipo ... whatever it is.

**EMMA: You have these two parallel careers going on where you do these strange, wonderful, bizarre art films and then you have this big breakout with The Mummy.**

RACHEL: Breakout sounds like coming out with acne. [laughs]

**EMMA: When I was in London, I went to visit you on the set of The Mummy II.**

RACHEL: In my Fleetwood Mac outfit.

**EMMA: You looked like Stevie Nicks. And I remember you were having a hard time caring about the person who played your character's child.**

RACHEL: Yeah, I didn't feel emotionally connected to him.

**EMMA: You were trying to method-act your way into giving a damn whether he lived or died. [laughs]**

RACHEL: It was very hard because we were up against that blue screen.

**EMMA: There's a lot of jiggery-pokery and special effects. Is working with all those effects a little de-humanizing?**

RACHEL: It can certainly feel quite mechanical. You have to talk into thin air and imagine that there are 10,000 Pygmies running at you. But you have to remember how you used your imagination as a child.

**EMMA: You told me that you think the best you've ever been was when you did Suddenly, Last Summer on stage in London, which was last year?**

RACHEL: Yeah. That's the best acting I've ever done.

**EMMA: Why?**

RACHEL: Because I completely connected with the character. This is really terrible to say, because Catherine is a woman who's a little bit unstable and hysterical. She's been pimping for her cousin Sebastian, attracting boys on the beach in Tunisia.

**EMMA: Tennessee Williams had to hide any hints whatsoever of homosexuality.**

RACHEL: It's not explicit because it was written in the '30s. No one ever says he was homosexual. It's completely obvious, but no one actually spells it out. She's kind of in love with him actually. That's the real tragedy of it. I've been in love with gay men.

**EMMA: Is that because you get to be admired without having sex?**

RACHEL: Definitely. You develop this incredible intimacy that isn't going to lead to sex, but can be very sexual. That's something I find liberating. Also, because gay men don't fit into any received notions of family, they have to rethink everything. I find that they are often completely original.

**EMMA: Isn't it funny that the currency of Hollywood is sex, but the people there are mostly so unsexy?**

RACHEL: Right. False tits, collagen lips, people dressing very sexually, but it's a completely sanitized sexuality. It's boring and unreal. There's not much room for eccentricity in Hollywood, and eccentricity is what's sexy in people. I think London's sexy because it's so full of eccentrics.

**EMMA: Brendan Fraser, who stars with you in The Mummy, seemed very nice. And you said a really funny thing. You said, "He's just like pornography."**

RACHEL: He's got a pornographic body. He's so massive — he doesn't look that big on screen. I don't mean fat, I mean muscular. He's six-foot-three and his thighs ...

**EMMA: Tell me about Brendan Fraser's thighs. [laughs]**

RACHEL: They're enormous. He wears tight, jodphur-y trousers with big boots and his costumes are all really sexy. And that big back rippling under the shirt.

**EMMA: It was just before I saw you that you filmed Enemy at the Gates, the new Jean-Jacques Annaud movie. What's it about?**

RACHEL: The seizure of Stalingrad. The civilians and soldiers got together and defended the city against the Nazis, against all odds. Jude Law and Joe Fiennes play two Russians who both fall in love with me. I pick Jude, and we end up together.

**EMMA: Good choice. Who did you click with the most on that film?**

RACHEL: I really clicked as an actor with Jude. We both come from theater, and in theater you have to give as much as you take. Movie actors get used to close-ups and it all becomes monologue. But Jude is right there with you every second of the way.

**EMMA: Can we say — just because it's bizarre — where we're doing this interview?**

RACHEL: Yeah, I think we should.

**EMMA: Okay. We're in Los Angeles. Last time you were having such an awful time here. Now you're with Sam. Is it weird? I mean, he is the fucking daddy at the moment. Do people get on bended knee at his feet?**

RACHEL: Well, I don't know, because he works all day. The other night we were at a bar and these people were turned around staring at him, whispering and pointing, really going overboard. Then as we were leaving, we looked back at the table behind us, and it was Michelle Pfeiffer and her husband David E. Kelley.

**EMMA: (Question....)**

RACHEL: Yeah, and we were like, "that's L.A." They weren't looking at Sam at all, they were looking at Michelle Pfeiffer at the table behind us.



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looking at michelle Pfeiffer at the table behind us.

**EMMA: (Question....)**

RACHEL: The thing that happens is, if Sam pays, the waiters will see his name on the card and they'll just say, "I loved that movie." It's quite earnest and nice. He doesn't go in for that big Hollywood scene.

**EMMA: So what kind of cowboy boots are you gonna buy on Monday?**

RACHEL: I like the idea of the short ones because they're so unusual, like ankle length. And either black with red tips or the camel color with brown tips.

**EMMA: They're very Angelina Jolie.**

RACHEL: She's gorgeous. They wanted me to go and meet her to play her sister.

**EMMA: What does your family think of all this? Are they disappointed you haven't had a more academic career?**

RACHEL: No. Although my mother would have liked it if I was a doctor and a movie star at the same time because mum's greedy. Dad always says that my personality has been irrevocably malformed by acting, so that I'm now unsuitable to anything else. He's sort of joking and sort of not.

**EMMA: Your dad's an inventor?**

RACHEL: Yeah.

**EMMA: And your stepmum's a psychiatrist?**

RACHEL: And my mum's a psychiatrist.

**EMMA: Do you think you're more or less well-adjusted for having grown up around all this psychoanalysis?**

RACHEL: The thing is, I feel like I'm more well-adjusted, but I think that's an illusion.



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