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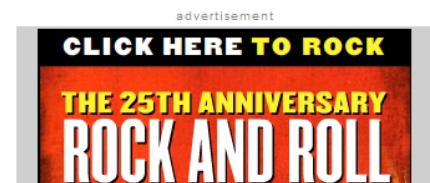
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The Contender Q&A: Anna Kendrick

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A veteran performer from the age of 12, when her turn in a Broadway production of "High Society" earned her a Tony Award nomination in 1998, Anna Kendrick has steadily built an impressive resume on film with confident, eye-catching performances in indies like "Camp" and "Rocket Science," both of which earned her Independent Spirit Award nominations. Her profile raised considerably with a supporting turn as Jessica Stanley in "Twilight" and "New Moon," but it's Jason Reitman's "Up in the Air" that has critics and audiences finally taking full notice of Kendrick's talents. As an aggressive corporate downsizer who has streamlined the industry's method of eliminating employees via video conference, Kendrick is both arresting and heartbreakingly vulnerable. Her performance has netted considerable acclaim from the press, who've dubbed her one of the season's breakout talents, and from the Palm Springs International Film Festival, which will honor her with its Rising Star Award on Jan. 5.

Kendrick spoke with The Circuit from Los Angeles, where she discussed working with "Air" co-star George Clooney and director Reitman, as well as her take on the "Twilight" phenomenon.

You've said that the idea of being cast in "Up in the Air" was somewhat daunting.

Yes. Being in a movie directed by Jason Reitman and starring George Clooney would probably be daunting for anyone, but when I was cast, I kept thinking for whatever reason, "They know I'm from Maine, right?"

What does that mean?

It's just the strangest thing to come from a place that couldn't be further away from this whole world, and to wind up in a movie like this just made me feel like "How can I be the same person who went to Deering High School in Portland, Maine, and be in a movie like this?"

So how did you get past those thoughts?

I met George and Jason, and they were the coolest human beings on Earth. It was such an incredibly supportive set and environment. I couldn't have done it without either of them.

George Clooney has a reputation for being a world-class prankster when the cameras aren't rolling -- is that your experience with him?

No pranks, but he's definitely a joker. He was playing Nerf football around my head when I would try to prepare for a scene. He has a teenager's energy, and it made me feel like the on-set mom, like "C'mon, you guys, focus..."

Do you know people like your character, Natalie, in real life?

It's almost like I know a bunch of girls, myself included, who are almost like Natalie. There's a frustration that comes along with being female, and there's a sense that if you can swim with the sharks and be one of the boys -- if you can conquer that -- that's where a lot of her personality comes from. I don't know anyone who's gone fully into that world, but there is a temptation, I think, in every girl's life to do so at some point.

In learning to swim with the sharks, do you think that people like Natalie have to sacrifice something of themselves to achieve that goal?

Yes. At the end of the day, she has it all wrong, and she finds that out over the course of the film. She believes that because she's worked harder than the person next to her for her entire life, her entire life will fall into place. And eventually, there comes a moment in her life when she's accepting the idea of compromise for the first time ever.

You included yourself in that bunch of girls who are almost like Natalie. In what way are you similar?

I'm a control freak, but I react to being out of control in an entirely different way. I get more awkward and fumble more. I fall apart very quickly. Natalie, on the other hand, her rigidity and self-awareness increases exponentially.

There are some who might perceive Natalie as simply the film's villain, so to speak. Can you talk about the challenges of making her a more complex character?

There was definitely part of me that didn't want her to reveal as much as she does. She really falls apart, and falls hard, and I wanted to protect her, in a sense, and let her maintain some level of dignity, but she completely falls apart and lets go. That was tricky for me, because I felt that she wanted to hide more. But Jason really pushed me to let go, and I'm glad that he did.

How would you describe working with Jason?

He's so intuitive and brilliant. It was really nice to be challenged by someone like that every day. The day that I did the firing over the video conference was a really hard day for me, and he and George were both so attentive in the most subtle and quiet and creative ways. That made feel like they were there for me without ever having to say it. There were times when Jason would be in the room with me, and he would read lines with me, just because it was a vulnerable day. And to be surrounded by that kind of big-brother feeling made it a lot easier.

There are a lot of people who are calling you a contender for the upcoming awards season. What is your reaction to the response to your performance?

I'm beyond thrilled that people like the movie and my performance. But as far as that "buzz" word, it's really strange. It's that same feeling -- don't you know I'm from Maine? It almost feels like if people saw how often I'm on the verge of falling apart, there's no way they'd be using my name in the same sentence as "Oscar."

I feel really out of place in gowns and walking down the red carpet and mingling with people whom I perceive as being so polished and good at everything. Logically, I realize that it's a ridiculous thing to think, but part of me can't help but feel that I'd get kicked out of parties like that.

How does the response to "Up in the Air" compare to the global fascination with "New Moon"?

It's quieter [laughs], in the best way. The "Twilight" thing is strange -- I'm absolutely bewildered by the whole thing, but really grateful to be a small part of it. So many people have had to give up their privacy for it, really, and I've been really lucky so far. It's also nice to play my own age and a more serious role -- it feels really rewarding.

If given the choice, would you rather work on more indie-minded projects like "Up in the Air" or event pictures like "New Moon"?

You hit the nail on the head with "Up in the Air" -- it felt like an indie. I would love to work again with a small cast like this and build a real relationship with the cast, both on and off-screen, as opposed to the proverbial town-meeting feeling of the "Twilight" saga.

Photo: Anna Kendrick in "Up in the Air." Credit: Dale Robinette. Copyright 2009 DW Studios L.L.C. and Cold Spring Pictures. All rights reserved.