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THE MOVIELINE
INTERVIEW



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Up in the Air's Anna Kendrick on Getting Hired, Not Fired

WRITTEN BY KYLE BUCHANAN | 03 DEC 2009, 7:00 AM | 3 COMMENTS

As the seemingly sure-of-herself Natalie in Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air*, Anna Kendrick strides into George Clooney's office and walks out with the whole picture. You could call it a breakout role, except the 24-year-old has quietly amassed a resume full of them: from a Tony nomination at age 12, to a bravura role in the Sundance hit *Rocket Science*, to a small part in a very big franchise, *Twilight*.

Kendrick's *Up in the Air* character makes her living by firing people, but in Movieline's extensive interview with her, I thought I'd explore the flipside. Over the next few pages, Kendrick takes you on an exploration of how she won every pivotal part in her career, and what each role meant to her as an actress. It's the story of one of Hollywood's brightest new talents.





***High Society* (1998)**

[Note from AnnaKendrickOnline.org: Above picture incorrectly captioned. It's actually "Life Upon the Wicked Stage" from "My Favorite Broadway" TV special in 1998. Anna Kendrick starred in the original cast of *High Society* the same year.]

Something theater fans may know that film buffs haven't realized yet is that you have a theater background — in fact, you're one of the youngest people ever nominated for a Tony, and it was for your very first role in *High Society*. What do you remember about winning that part?

My parents had started driving me to New York when I was 10, and it's a six-hour drive there and a six-hour drive back, so after a while, they started sending me and my brother down on Greyhound buses. So I went down on a Greyhound bus to audition for *High Society* and when they asked me to stay for callbacks, I had to get a hotel room and stay in the city. My parents had to fax a credit card to this hotel room and they told my brother and me not to leave the hotel and to only go out for auditions and then come straight back — of course, we said we would, and then went straight to Bleecker and MacDougal to have breakfast, because we thought we were the coolest kids in the world. [Laughs] We kept having to stay and stay, so my brother and I were alone in New York City, and then we were on a Greyhound bus back when I found out that I got the job. Everyone was sleeping on the midnight bus, and I was trying not to scream because I was 12 and I was going to be on Broadway.

Was that one of your first auditions?

No, no, no. I started auditioning when I was about 10 and I didn't get my first job until I was 12, and two years [without winning a role] at that age is really hard. I went in for *High Society* and I sang and read a scene, like I'd done so many other times before, and I remember the casting director commented on my nail polish being like her nail polish. We had that conversation beforehand and I think that helped relax me a lot.

Tell me about those two years prior where you kept going up for roles and not getting it. That must have been frustrating for a kid wanting to break into acting.

Yeah, it's frustrating. Still, I was so young and the dream of being on Broadway seemed so unobtainable and magical that I just had to do whatever I had to do.

Could you appreciate the enormity of landing this big Broadway musical and a Tony nomination at that age, or did that appreciation come with time?

I definitely was incredibly excited then, but I don't think I really understood all that it meant to so many people. I think that's a good thing in a way, and it's nice to look back on it and know that I enjoyed it in the way a 12-year-old enjoys it. I didn't feel some kind of pressure, and I think I would have felt really guilty about it because the Tony award means so much to people — I would have felt bad about being nominated at 12!



Camp (2003)

After *High Society*, you took a little break from theater, right?

Part of it was that I wanted to go back to school. I remember the show closing and I had really mixed emotions about it — I was really tired and lonely. It was this incredible experience but it was hard work and I really wanted to go home. My mom wasn't living with me at that point, and I wanted to go home and see my mom and brother.

So how did *Camp* come about?

Actually, there was a woman in *High Society* named Randy Graff, and she's cousins with Todd Graff, who directed *Camp*. When I was 13 and the show had just closed, she told me that I should go and audition for her cousin's movie. I went and I read for [the part of] Fritzi and they did a workshop of it when I was 13, and then when he was finally getting it made, I was 16 and he said the job was still mine if I wanted it. It wasn't really an age-specific role.

That led to your first Sundance experience, right?

Sundance was one of the best experiences of my life. It was so beautiful, and seeing the movie with an audience who loved it was just incredible. The reaction was so unbelievable — we got a standing ovation for a film, a film we didn't really realize was ever gonna come out! There was something about it that just felt like we were a bunch of kids and we were making a film that

might go to video someday. Seeing the finished thing made me very emotional — it made all of us really emotional. It was the first film of all the cast members, so it was a really special, bonding experience.

Did you feel at that point like you wanted to commit to either film or theater?

I feel like people want there to be this mystery between film and theater, but I just kind of went where I got jobs, you know? After *Camp*, I got *A Little Night Music* at the New York Opera, so I went and did that. After that, I got this pilot and I went to LA. That didn't work out, but *Camp* came out and it just felt like this was something I should try to do. It certainly wasn't easy — it wasn't like I said, "All right, I'm ending stage and starting my film career" — I just went to LA to try to work. There have definitely been more than a few moments in my life where I'm wondering where the next paycheck will come from and how I'm gonna pay rent.



***Rocket Science* (2007)**

I know *Rocket Science* was an important film for you, and Ginny Ryerson was a pivotal role.

Rocket Science is really where I fell in love with filmmaking, I think. *Camp* was incredible, but it was so bizarre, and I was trying to find my footing in this world where you don't have an audience for immediate validation.

How did you get the role?

I auditioned the old-fashioned way. I went in and read for Jeff Blitz — I went in a bunch of times for that role, actually. They were trying to find the right boy [for the part of Hal], so I went in and read with a ton of potential Hals. You know, it's funny — I've heard Jeff talk about my first audition, how after I finished, he wrote on his little notepad, "Anna Kendrick is Ginny Ryerson."

I never knew that, though. Throughout the entire audition process, I was thinking, “I could lose this at any time.”

Was it a particularly daunting audition? So much of that character hinged on her ability to talk really fast in debate — “spreading,” I think it was called.

They didn’t send me the spreading at first. I just thought it was a fast talker, and people tell me I talk too fast all the time! [Laughs] I thought it was going to be a breeze, and then they showed us videos of what spreading was, and I was like, “How the hell am I gonna do that?”

It’s such an eye-catching performance. Did that movie become a touchstone for casting agents and directors who wanted to meet with you?

I would say that every job I’ve gotten since *Rocket Science* has been because of that movie. I know a lot of people think my big break was *Twilight*, but it was definitely *Rocket Science*. Jason Reitman saw *Rocket Science* and started writing this role for me [in *Up in the Air*], Edgar Wright saw me in *Rocket Science* and asked me to be in *Scott Pilgrim*, and Catherine Hardwicke was on the jury at Sundance and she asked me to come in and read for *Twilight*.



Twilight (2008) and *New Moon* (2009)

You ended up playing Bella’s friend Jessica in the *Twilight* series. Did Catherine ever have you read for any of the vampires?

No. It was always a little strange — I never really knew why she asked me to come in and read for Jessica. If anything, I thought I would read for Angela [played by Christian Serratos], because I just don’t see myself as the sort of girl who has any business pretending to be the most popular person at school. I think that’s where the comedy came from, because I didn’t know how to play up these really confident, catty, alpha female qualities. I had to go in and play all the things those girls are hiding, like the desperation and insecurity and jealousy, and I think that’s what makes Jessica so funny.

Was that your biggest example of going in for a role thinking, “I don’t know if I’m right for this,” but getting it in the end?

I would say so. I definitely am different from that character in *Twilight* and the character in *Up in the Air*, but I enjoy exercising that strong part of myself that I don’t get to use in real life. It was a strange thing to go in for *Twilight* feeling like, “Why am I auditioning for the girl making fun of Bella for being tan when I’m the palest, most awkward kid on the planet?”



The Marc Pease Experience (2009)

You’ve had some big successes since *Rocket Science*, but *The Marc Pease Experience* got a little lost after Paramount shuttered its Vantage division. What can you tell me about it?

I auditioned for that film right after *Rocket Science* came out at Sundance, and that was a little more of a process because it was a film with Jason Schwartzman and Ben Stiller and I wasn’t anybody. [Laughs] I had to go in and read a few times.

Was it disappointing to you that the film got such a bare-bones release? I know the director, Todd Louiso, was pretty upset about it.

It’s always disappointing when a film like that doesn’t work out. The script was great, and so many people in the industry have come up to me and said, “The script was so great, what happened?” I don’t know. I guess that’s part of the mystery of filmmaking.



Up in the Air (2009)

Jason Reitman has said that he wrote the role of Natalie in *Up in the Air* with you in mind, but when the *Hollywood Reporter* announced your casting, the article said that Ellen Page and Emily Blunt had been circling the part. Were you privy to any of that?

I certainly didn't know anything was going on. I mean, I'm not an idiot — it's a George Clooney movie, it's a Jason Reitman movie, probably everyone in the world wanted this role — but I specifically didn't know if they were leaning toward somebody else or who wanted it. To be perfectly honest, I don't know that those reports are true. They printed it, but I haven't talked to Jason about it. [Pause] You know, a bunch of agents from other companies have told me that they're really happy for me, but when they made that announcement, they wanted to kill me.

At what point did Jason tell you he wrote the part for you? Was it when you went in for your audition?

No, no. We had lunch after I was cast and he told me that. I was already trying to act like I wasn't completely out of my depth, so when he told me that, I was like, "Oh, OK. That makes total sense because I'm fabulous, so why wouldn't you." [Laughs]

Did you feel like there was a point where your conception of this character really changed?

Honestly, I think my biggest shift in attitude about who she was happened before my audition. When I first read it, I wanted to feel really bad for her and I wanted to make her seem sympathetic. I wanted to make all the silly things about her feel really real and really tragic. Then, when I was reading the scenes a few more times before the audition, I realized, "This isn't tragic, this is hilarious!" Because I'm playing someone who's around my age and finding out how disappointing it can be to grow up, I wanted to show how tragic that is, but really what I

needed to show is how funny it was. That was the biggest shift for me, to be able to laugh at the foolish things about Natalie, and that essentially meant I had to laugh at the foolish things about myself.

It's interesting that you say that, because you always hear about how studio executives worry that their characters aren't sympathetic enough. Were there ever times when you thought, "Maybe I'm putting myself too far out there?"

There's definitely a sense for me that I want to protect her. I love Natalie, and I love that she's foolish and strong. I love everything about her, even the kind of screwed-up parts, so there were definitely times where I wanted her to hide more than would have been appropriate. There were days when Jason pushed me a little bit, and I'm certainly glad that he did. Ultimately, the parts that I wanted to hide are the parts the audience loves the most. She wants to maintain her dignity, but the audience loves it when she falls apart.



Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010), and beyond...

Your next film coming up is Edgar Wright's action comedy *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, where you play Michael Cera's sister. Like *Twilight*, that's a cast filled with up-and-coming young actors. Did you know many of them before you started shooting?

Not really — I knew Mae Whitman a little, and Aubrey Plaza and I hung out a little bit because we'd met at the Christmas party. The thing I can say that I love most about that cast is how completely un-self-aware and funny all the girls are. They definitely could have just gotten a bunch of little starlets to play all these characters. Because it's a comic book adaptation, they could have gotten a bunch of hot girls with no talent, but every single girl is so on point and so funny.

Speaking of self-awareness, you're about to navigate a lot of awards and events for this film. Are you ready for that? Do you feel you have to put on a suit of armor and march through?

A little bit. It's strange — even doing interviews, I feel really strange about giving up so much of the stories and moments that used to be mine. They're not mine anymore, they belong to everybody else now. I don't know if that sounds really melodramatic, but I care about these films so much that it's strange to talk about it and worry that you're coming off as disingenuous. I'm trying to stay focused and say what I mean, and it's hard. The last thing I want to do is give mechanical answers about a film that I really, really love and I'm really proud of.

[Lead Photo Credit: Jeff Vespa/WireImage, Screen Captures: Anna-Kendrick.net]