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The Examiner



How 'New Moon's' Anna Kendrick took flight in Jason Reitman's 'Up in the Air'

Jorge Carreon
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Photo: Samir Hussein/Getty Images

Come every awards season, a new face is destined to breakthrough with a singular performance that captures audiences off guard. This year, Anna Kendrick is edging closer to that spotlight.

It seemed Kendrick was the perfect candidate for the "Glee/High School Musical" generation. At the age of 12, she became one of the youngest actresses to be nominated for a Tony Award (1998's "High Society"). She later transitioned to film with inspired performances in the indie films "Camp" and Todd Louiso's "The Marc Pease Experience," where she was the love interest of Ben Stiller and Jason Schwartzman. While Kendrick would eventually earn pop culture cred by being cast in the "The Twilight Saga" films as one of Bella Swan's mortal friends, it is her performance in "Up in the Air" that has catapulted the 24-year-old Maine native into orbit.

Already named this week by the National Board of Review as Best Supporting Actress, Kendrick's win caught many film critics by surprise. Mo'Nique's harrowing turn in "Precious" has been already leading the pack for many film writers, which have cited her performance as the one to beat this season. (For the record, the "Precious" backlash being cited by some reporters is unfounded and designed to merely stir the pot of faux controversy.)

Kendrick truly delivers one of the most intelligent, nuanced performances this film year as the rigid Natalie Keener, a youthful invasion that threatens the comfortable corporate existence of Ryan Bingham (a career best role for George Clooney). Embodying the cerebral sexuality of Diane Keaton in "Annie Hall," Kendrick is one of the reasons "Up in the Air" takes flight as one of the most engaging American films in a while.

It is hard to believe that this is just the third effort from director-writer Jason Reitman. If "Thank You for Smoking" and "Juno" reflected a man still defining his vision with youthful zeal, "Up in the Air" finds the 32-year-Reitman contemplating mature themes with a sharp and honest perspective. And like those films, Reitman's casting elevates the material by offering a true actor's piece blended with a timely narrative that gives the film a sobering reality through carefully orchestrated humor.

Reitman gleefully admits he wrote the role of Natalie with Kendrick in mind. After seeing her performance in "Rocket Science," he felt she was different than any actor he'd seen of her age. Once she came to audition for "Up in the Air," his mind was instantly made up. Here are Reitman and Kendrick, as they offer their insights into the making of the film, from the process of adaptation to the power of honesty and why they love George Clooney.

JASON REITMAN: She has a completely unique voice that separates her from her generation. I'm very proud of the character of Natalie. I think she's different from most young female characters. Usually if you have a female character in her twenties, she's some sort of romantic lead. But Natalie is an unromantic, business minded, bull-headed young woman who reminds me of several women I adore, including my wife.

ANNA KENDRICK: When I was first talking to Jason about the role, he said that it was based on several women he knew who feel frustrated because they're always the smartest ones in the room. Natalie is smart, but also uptight, uncomfortable in her own skin and socially awkward. Now, I don't think I'm the smartest person in the room, but I did connect with the control freak aspect of it and I'm really an awkward person.

REITMAN: The book spoke to me on multiple levels, I love Walter's language, which I used a lot. But as I was writing, my own life changed. I met my wife, fell in love and had a child. And in that process, the script grew into being about how imperative connections are in our daily life.

KENDRICK: Natalie is such a funny character, but she doesn't think she's funny and she certainly doesn't know she's funny. She so wants to be in control and she's been thrown in a place where she isn't. This is probably the first time she feels completely lost, and she starts to realize she really can't do this job.

REITMAN: Every day you see news stories about job cuts, but it's usually about a number, so it's easy to forget who these people are. What I'm most proud of is that the movie puts real faces to those numbers.

KENDRICK: I was doing one of the firing scenes and the woman that I sat across from told me that she really had just lost her job. It was uncomfortable and I didn't know what to say to her. It really hit home that this was a reality for so many people.

REITMAN: At a moment's notice, George can jump into any type of scene, be it emotional or comedic. George and I have a very similar comedic sensibility. We both believe comedy should be dealt with honestly, that you shouldn't try to make something funny. The writing needs to be funny, but the acting needs to be honest. He's just the real deal and he makes people comfortable. That was an enormous asset.

KENDRICK: I was terrified, excited and nervous. Not just because it was George Clooney, though obviously that is intimidating. But also I was so excited about the role and so dearly wanted to do well. Then I met him and understood why everyone had tried to calm me by saying, "You'll fine. He's just a great guy."