

Weisz Woman

Oscar-winning actress Rachel Weisz talks ageism, sexism and her love of complicated women with **Scarlett Russell**

Rachel Weisz isn't like other actresses. Despite being one of the most bankable stars in Hollywood, throughout her 20-year career she's never succumbed to playing the secondary sidekick or ditzy love interest. She has an Oscar, Olivier Award and an action franchise under her belt but has stayed, largely, well away from rom-coms. At a time when the industry is tarnished with sexism, at the age of 46 her career is the busiest it's ever been. Oh, and she's married to the former James Bond.

Born in 1970 to Jewish parents – Hungarian George and Austrian Edith – Weisz grew up in Hampstead Garden Suburb. She studied at Cambridge University along with Sacha Baron Cohen, Alexander Armstrong, Ben Miller, Sue Perkins and Mel Giedroyc (leaving with a 2:1 in English). It was here she fell in love with acting and formed a theatre group that performed at Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Her career began in 1992 but broke through in 1996 with a major role in thriller *Chain Reaction* alongside Keanu Reeves.

Two decades, 43 films

and various stints on Broadway later, Weisz is talking to me from Manhattan, where she lives with husband Daniel Craig. The two are US citizens, but Weisz isn't ruling out a return to the UK. "I spend half my time in north London anyway," she says. "My favourite place ever is Regent's Park. And now, with everything that's happening, I definitely think I'd consider moving back to the UK." By 'everything that's happening,' she – of course – means, 'Donald Trump becoming the imminent leader of the free world.' And, like a true north London liberal, Weisz is uncomfortable with the idea. "I didn't think either Brexit or Trump were possible," she says. "I was in London the day the [Brexit] vote was counted and I couldn't believe it, but in London we were inside our own little bubble, not really hearing the stories from people who we didn't

agree with, and that's the same in America. People that lived outside of the East Coast and West Coast weren't being heard. There's a lot of anger."

To many, like Weisz, a Trump victory seemed implausible, which gives extra potency to her latest film, *Denial*, based on the ►

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RACHEL WEISZ ATTENDING THE YOUTH PREMIERE
DURING THE 68TH ANNUAL CANNES FILM FESTIVAL, 2015
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THIS IMAGE AND BELOW:
RACHEL WEISZ AS DEBORAH
LIPSTADT IN DENIAL



WEISZ IN THE MUMMY, 1999,
IMAGE CREDIT: THE MOVIESTORE
COLLECTION



STARRING ALONGSIDE RALPH
FIENNES IN THE CONSTANT
GARDENER, 2005, IMAGE CREDIT:
THE MOVIESTORE COLLECTION



► landmark court case in 1996 between Jewish scholar Deborah Lipstadt and notorious Holocaust denier David Irving. Irving, a British author and self-proclaimed historian, sued Lipstadt and her publisher, Penguin Books, asserting that Lipstadt had libelled him in her book, *Denying the Holocaust*. “I thought it was such a bizarre thing that this trial even occurred,” says Weisz. “It was such a strange pocket of history, but very relevant, more and more, to the world that we find ourselves living in. He sued her for saying he was an anti-Semite, which he clearly was. I thought it was something that not a lot of people knew about. I knew almost nothing about it, but was really fascinated in what the underlying theme of the film was: that not all opinions are equal and some things are simply fact.”

In doing her research for the role, as well as perfecting Lipstadt’s Queens accent (“I’d recite a few random sentences out loud to myself before coming on set, just to get into character”), Weisz discovered that Holocaust deniers are still active. “If you go online now, particularly in America, there are huge communities of people who think it’s a hoax. Of course it is terrifying but, as the election in America has shown, there are a lot of people who don’t think like us.”

Weisz gained worldwide acclaim as English Egyptologist Evelyn Carnahan in monster hits *The Mummy* (1999) and *The Mummy Returns* (2001), though her career has been built on political thrillers, intense dramas and quirky indies. In 2006 she won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for political thriller *The Constant Gardener*. Her role straight after *Denial* is in drama *Disobedience* based on Naomi Alderman’s novel.

Weisz plays a woman who returns to her Orthodox Jewish family after the death of her rabbi father. Filming is currently underway in Hendon and, having secured the rights herself three years ago, Weisz is a producer on the film, which co-stars Rachel McAdams. The fact that Weisz’s next two roles centre firmly on Jewish women is coincidence rather than any sort of nod to her own roots, which she describes as, “culturally Jewish but not religiously”.

Also this year, she’ll star in drama *The Mercy* about yachtsman Donald Crowhurst and an adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s novel, *My Cousin Rachel*. What attracts her to a role? “Something that will surprise me. I go in with a completely open mind, but I want to be seduced by a story. I want to play women who have appetites, who have contradictions, who are textured, layered and multi-dimensional. I love complicated women.”

Clearly, Weisz is a woman who knows her mind. She is intelligent and engaging, considering her response to our questions for a few moments before answering – and often reflecting the question back (“Wait, so where did you grow up?” “What did you think of the film?”). In fact, the only time she seems to tense up is when I bring up that oh-so-famous husband of hers. Note: If you’ve ever wondered if there could be a female Bond and, if so, whether Weisz would be up for playing it, the answer is a flat “no” and you’ll be signalled to move the conversation on immediately.

Venturing onto the subject of ageism in Hollywood, Weisz speaks with passion again. Film may be one of the most ageist and pressured industries for women, but the actress insists that she’s embracing this time in her life. “The Betty Davis/Barbara Stanwyck era was when there were really powerful and complicated roles for women, then everything went tits up. But I think that’s changing again and there are better roles out there. Twenty years ago, I was just a girl and there were certain parts being offered to me. I am a woman now and those roles are therefore more complex. I’m enjoying them a lot and this time in my career, for sure.” With seven major movies in the pipeline, we can’t argue with her. ■

Denial is released on 27 January