

BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD

Rediscovering Tennessee Williams

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Actress Bryce Dallas Howard never imagined that she would be cast as the lead in a new Tennessee Williams screenplay, but that's what is happening now, as she's starring in the famed writer's long-lost *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*.

Originally penned for director Elia Kazan after the two had worked on "A Streetcar Named Desire" and *Pretty Baby*, the script got lost in the shuffle and never was produced. Enter young film student, Jodie Markell, an actress-turned-director making her feature-length directing debut with the Williams screenplay.

"For Fisher Willow, Bryce Dallas Howard was always my first and only choice," the filmmaker says of casting the plum role of a Tennessee Williams heroine. "I believe she is the greatest actress of her generation. When we initially approached her, she was not taking any jobs due to her pregnancy. So we did the only thing we could do: We waited until she was ready. I've never seen an actress her age with so much presence, so grounded in reality. She's just so hungry for the truth."

For Howard, daughter of actor/director Ron Howard, being cast as the feisty and determined Fisher Willow is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "To be the first actor to play a new Tennessee Williams character is literally the opportunity of a lifetime. There are only a handful of women who have done that in the history of theater and cinema. He's one of our most cherished playwrights. That alone totally sold me on the movie."

Raised outside of Hollywood in Greenwich, Connecticut, the 28-year-old actress didn't have dreams of acting, but once she was bitten by the acting bug, she opted to study her craft at NYU before being cast in a leading role in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004), followed by his *Lady in the Water* (2006). Other roles include *Manderlay* for filmmaker Lars von Trier, as well as *Spider-Man 3* for Sam Raimi. This summer Howard will join the *Twilight* phenomenon in *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*.

An actress/wife/mother, Howard is now adding producer to her resume as she teams up with her dad and his Imagine company on the new and still untitled Gus Van Sant film, currently shooting in Portland. The New Year is indeed looking bright for this star on the rise.

Venice: Congratulations on *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*.

Bryce Dallas Howard: Thank you so much.

Jodie Markell, the film's director, has said of Tennessee Williams' characters that "his people are so unusual, so idiosyncratic, and his syntax so specific." Is that helpful as an actor or too limiting in its specificity?

It's very freeing. I feel that his specificity and the details always free you the most because it grounds you. The thing that is so glorious about Tennessee Williams as a writer is that his text really grounds you and then you can emotionally explore things that you couldn't if the writing was general. That's limiting! But because of his specificity you feel free to approach things in a variety of ways. I know it may seem counterintuitive but in life, the more specific you get with an issue, the more free you feel; the same goes for acting.

What did you think when you first read the screenplay? Your character, Fisher Willow, is a real firecracker.

She's absolutely an incredible character, and the idea of getting to act in a Tennessee Williams piece is so amazing, let alone the idea of getting to originate a Tennessee Williams heroine, I never thought that would be a remote possibility. She's a very exciting character for a number of reasons, one of which is that she's very different from me. [laughs] In the past I've played a lot of people that I understood, but with her, it took me a while to understand her approach to life and why she did things. And what I realized is that she's entirely unapologetic, which is the opposite of me. I'm a people-pleaser and she's totally, across-the-board unapologetic and that realization really clarified everything for me. That was an important lesson for me to learn.

Were you nervous at all in the lead role?

I don't really get nervous. I just get very focused and intense. I feel a responsibility to do the best that I can. And I feel that nervousness sometimes gets in the way of that, because you get wrapped up in your own neurosis. I felt very protected, as well, because this was such a thoroughly written character that I could obviously trust the writing enormously.





Jodie calls you “the greatest actor of your generation...”

Ha! That's what I have to say about that. [laughs] I find that to be probably...definitely not true. [laughs] That's a ridiculously enormous compliment and I can't even begin to absorb a compliment like that. I'm delighted that she feels that way because I know how strong she feels for that character, and this is such an expansive role, so I'm glad she found an actress that she at least believed in, but I definitely know that I'm not the best actress of my generation. [laughs] I've worked with innumerable actors who are my age and are way better.

You were raised not allowed to watch TV. Did you ever feel that you missed out on things?

I actually do feel that I missed out on some stuff, because there are a lot of cultural references that people will make that leave a vacant look on my face. But it's funny because I'm doing the same thing with my son, so I guess I wasn't so devastated by that.

You were raised with Henry Winkler, Fonzie, as your godfather. It doesn't get cooler than that. Were you aware of what “celebrity” was growing up?

I thought about that. I had an understanding of the business that my dad and grandparents and uncle were working in; that the nature of it was creative and collaborative and public as well. But I don't think I saw any of the repercussions of fame. Whenever people recognized my dad, they were always quite lovely to him, so it was almost like living in a small town where they said “hi” on the street. That was the extent to which I felt my dad's celebrity.

You never felt, “He's mine, leave us alone”?

No, no, it was always really nice. Also, I think it was the product of not being raised in Los Angeles.

You did extra work on your dad's films, but you really seemed to click with M. Night Shyamalan. What is it about you two that works?

I've never worked with my dad. He has this superstition about our family that we need to be extras way in the background, and it was usually second unit stuff, so I've never had the experience of working with my dad. Working with Night, that was my first role. It was an amazing thing that he cast me in *The Village* and, subsequently, *Lady in the Water*. He's an extraordinary storyteller and one of the most compelling individuals I've ever known. I have an enormous amount of admiration for him. I don't know what the heck he sees in me [laughs], but I feel lucky to have been on a bit of a journey with him. I would love to work with him again.

Did you always want to act?

I didn't always want to act. My passion was writing, and it still is one of my primary passions to this day, but it wasn't until high school when I started acting in plays that it became a thought of something I might want to do. And when I applied to colleges, at NYU, I was able to study both writing and acting.

You never dreamed of being a child actor?

Oh no. I'm one of four children and if somebody is going to be a professional child actor, it's incredibly consuming as a parent, and with my dad's career and four little critters running around, there wasn't enough room for another career in the family. I think they made a wise choice. Also, I don't think I had talent. My dad was really showing clear signs, of honestly, being a prodigy. His dad, my grandfather, is an actor and at the age of two he was mimicking my granddad when he was preparing for auditions and saying all the lines and acting everything out and begging, begging



PHOTO: Nathaniel Hayholm



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PHOTOGRAPHER PATRICK FRASER CREATED THIS PICTURE WITH BRYCE AS AN HOMAGE TO MAN RAY'S "TEARS" AND TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *THE LOSS OF A TEARDROP DIAMOND*

for work. And that was not anything that my grandparents had ever anticipated, and that's what happened, and they dealt with it really well. That requires a lot of energy. There's no way I was going to act.

You studied acting and now know the craft of it. How important was it to gain that skill and not just try to land roles based on your name?

If I had tried to start acting when I was 18, I wouldn't have gotten any work because I don't think I was any good. I had a natural passion for it but school is around for people like me. I think my natural gift in life is not that I have a natural ability, but that I have an insatiable curiosity and I that I love to be taught. School was great and really important and very critical. And when I started working I did theater because you get immediate feedback from the audience, and I could see when something was landing and when something wasn't.

You directed a short of your own. Is that something you want to do more of?

Honestly, I would love to. Education, and fully getting things before I try them, is so

important to me. So doing the short film was an exercise in studying my strengths and weaknesses, and that's exactly what came to light when I did that short film. And the last three years I've been doing a lot of work to hopefully come to a better understanding of those strengths and weaknesses, and hopefully [improve in my weak areas]. I've continued writing and I'm co-writing a screenplay for Universal right now, and I'm producing a film.

What's that about?

That's amazing. That's a script that I developed over the course of two years. It's a Gus Van Sant film. He's directing, which is amazing, and it's written by Jason Lew, a first-time screenwriter, and one of my closest friends from NYU. And he's also a brilliant actor who happens to be an extraordinary writer as well.

Did you take it to Gus Van Sant?

Yes, I developed it with Jason for two years, and then was looking for a place that was protective of writers and has enormous integrity and has great relationships with filmmakers, and a lot of people were

really enthusiastic and wanted to work on it. And the folks that I thought were the best were Imagine, which is my dad's company. So this is actually the first time that I'm working with my dad, which is incredible. So now it's at Sony.

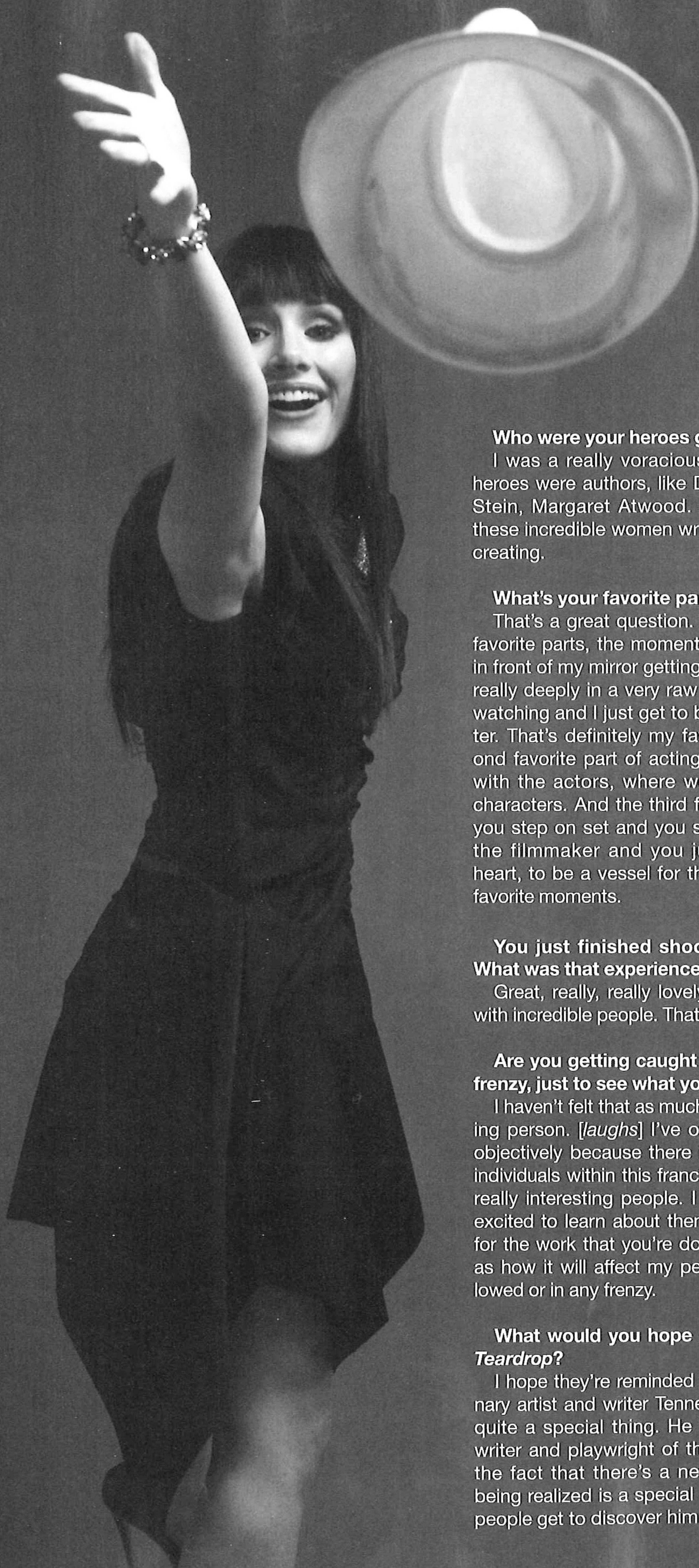
What's it like working with your dad as his peer?

It's wild! But for whatever reason it's really working. It is strange, even though it feels natural. In a way, he's my mentor and it's a larger sort of apprenticeship and it's happening in a very natural, organic way. I'm so grateful to work with Imagine. It's such an incredible production company and Brian Grazer is astonishing. I have so much respect for them.

Which actors inspire you?

Oh gosh, there are so many. Television is actually going through an incredible renaissance right now, but in terms of consistent performances, there are the obvious ones: Cate Blanchett, Meryl Streep, Kate Winslet, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Daniel Day-Lewis. I don't even begin to understand how they're doing what they're doing.





Who were your heroes growing up?

I was a really voracious reader so a lot of my heroes were authors, like Dorothy Parker, Gertrude Stein, Margaret Atwood. I really connected with these incredible women writers and what they were creating.

What's your favorite part of acting?

That's a great question. I would say I have three favorite parts, the moment alone in my hotel room in front of my mirror getting to explore the character really deeply in a very raw way, because no one is watching and I just get to be there with the character. That's definitely my favorite moment. My second favorite part of acting is the private rehearsal with the actors, where we talk and work on the characters. And the third favorite moment is when you step on set and you see the individual who is the filmmaker and you just want, with all your heart, to be a vessel for their vision. Those are my favorite moments.

You just finished shooting *Twilight: Eclipse*. What was that experience like?

Great, really, really lovely. It's an incredible story with incredible people. That'll be out in June.

Are you getting caught up with all this *Twilight* frenzy, just to see what you're in for?

I haven't felt that as much. I guess I'm a really boring person. *[laughs]* I've observed all of that quite objectively because there is a lot of interest in the individuals within this franchise because they all are really interesting people. I think the fans are really excited to learn about them. It's incredibly inspiring for the work that you're doing every day. But as far as how it will affect my personal life, I'm never followed or in any frenzy.

What would you hope people take away from *Teardrop*?

I hope they're reminded about what an extraordinary artist and writer Tennessee Williams is. This is quite a special thing. He is arguably the greatest writer and playwright of the 20th century, and just the fact that there's a new work from him that's being realized is a special and unique thing. I hope people get to discover him all over again. ▼