

## Just a Jewish mum (no corset, cauldron) Bonham Carter embraces her roots in 'Sixty Six' role

By Lynda Gorov, Globe Correspondent | August 17, 2008

Helena Bonham Carter is in bed, propped up against the pillows, covered from ankle to neck by a Victorian dressing gown.

OK, that last part isn't true. It's just the image I have of her over the telephone from Albuquerque, where she's filming the latest installment in the "Terminator" franchise. That is, it's the image until she gets comfy and gets going.

Unexpected new information about the Oscar-nominated actress ("The Wings of the Dove," 1997): She's crazy for scrap-booking, a hobby mostly unknown in England; she's got a bit of a mouth on her; and, translucent skin and Merchant Ivory movie credentials aside, she's no corset queen. Turns out she's Jewish on her mother's side.

That last bit is actually relevant, in that her latest movie, "Sixty Six," has her playing a classic Jewish mother (well, in this case, mum). Initial reaction (mine) aside, it's in fact not the most against-type casting since Melanie Griffith pretended to be a Jewish/Irish secretary/spy in 1992's "Shining Through." Bonham Carter actually describes her own heritage as "Jewish, Catholic, mongrels, paradoxical."

"My mother was triumphant: 'You're finally playing your roots instead of the English rose,' " she said. "Still, it was a very fine line not to go completely over the top."

The "true . . . ish" story of "Sixty Six," as both the background notes and Bonham Carter describe it, belongs to director Paul Weiland who, presumably, was an impossibly geeky boy on the cusp of his bar mitzvah in 1966. In the movie, his alter ego is 12-year-old Bernie Reubens, who decides that the only way to make his presence known and to stop being the local punching bag is to have the biggest, best coming-of-age party possible.

There's a catch, of course. Bernie's bar mitzvah is scheduled for the same day as the World Cup Final. England starts playing better than ever. Bernie's parents, Manny and Esther, insist the team will never make it through. They refuse to reschedule. But as any soccer fanatic can tell you, England has won the cup exactly once - in 1966. The entire country was riveted. Bernie undergoes his rite of passage with nary a guest in sight.

Bonham Carter, 42, came naturally to the role of mom. She's got two kids herself - a little boy, almost 5, and a girl who turns one in December - with writer/producer/director/fantastical filmmaker Tim Burton. Yes, they do have an Oompa Loompa or two in their house ("Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," 2005). Not surprisingly, it's the most fun house on their London block, even if it's actually two houses connected by a bridge.

"[Our son] is now into monsters, thank god, so they're kind of on the same level now," Bonham Carter said. "There are the usual elements of fantasy, plus we have all the props. The psychiatrist's oversized chair, dead Oompa Loompas. The night nannies were freaked out by them. It's . . . different. We've got daddy's toys, mummy's toys, a very delicate animatronic squirrel. The kids do like to come over."

For his part, Gregg Sulkin, making his film debut as the woebegone Bernie, could not believe he was being cast opposite the witch Bellatrix Lestrange from "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," or the hot anti-heroine from "Fight Club." He grew up on Bonham Carter, so to speak, and there he was, having been talked into the tryout by a cousin just two months after his own bar mitzvah at Israel's Wailing Wall, about to perform alongside someone who has been a staple of British film since before he was born. (He was so green that he had to ask what that thing hanging over his head was. It was a microphone.)

"When I knew she was doing it, it was a big shock, basically," said Sulkin "In England, she's a very big actress, and when I found out she was playing my mum, I thought that such a big actress wouldn't talk to me. But she was very friendly. She gave me a lot of advice. She and Eddie [Marsan], who plays my dad, were like my parents on set.

Sulkin offered that he is Jewish, "like Helena. . . . Well, she's half. I don't think a lot of critics knew when she was getting the part and didn't believe she could pull it off. But we both had to put it on a little bit."

In real life, at least from her hotel bed, where she lets slip some details about her "Terminator" character, then lets loose with some choice words about her lapse, she doesn't seem to be putting it on at all. She's registered under her own name. She's thrilled to have located an Anthropologie clothing store. And she's hoping to find a local store that sells scrapbook supplies. ("I'm mad on it," she says of her hobby, and diligently writes down and repeats back the name of a website as devoted to it as she is.) She's also hoping to track down something called Z-Coil shoes, since she's "a big fan of shoes that give you some height with comfort."

That's her current life, and she's a bit beyond the "Sixty Six" Esther Reubens character, as the film debuted in England in 2006. Since then there's been another "Harry Potter" and now a third in post production. She did Burton's "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

And now there's "Terminator Salvation," scheduled for spring 2009 release, a relatively short shoot in which she has a small role as Serena, a villain. And then, "They just called me for this. It's a bit worrying, I guess, just to be asked to play a sociopath. It's s interesting to be called a bit off. It's sort of natural casting."

She's equally unvarnished on the subject of how "Sixty Six" came about. Director Weiland, at his 50th birthday party, told the story of another party that he had given 37 years prior that no one attended. Eighteen months later, Bonham Carter was asked to play Esther. She immediately hired a voice coach and went about meeting the actual Esther, now in her 80s.

Even though she's a mother herself, the mum role did surprise Bonham Carter a wee bit, although she doesn't sound at all upset about playing her age. Her fan club, after all, now spans several generations. Depending on which movie they've seen when, people either consider her aloof in a period piece sort of way, sexy-charming in a bad girl kind of way, or just plain scary in a played-a-witch-in-the-wildly-popular-Potter-series way.

"With a movie like 'Sixty Six,' you're like, 'This is the way to go,' " she said. "There are fewer leads, but I'm definitely having more fun. I always wanted to be a character actor. It suits me given what has happened in my life. I wouldn't want to be working like I did the first 20 years. I can be with my babies. It's just a discovery of a different self, which is the living bit, which I didn't do from 18 on when I was working pretty consistently."

Plus, there's the end to that phony could-this-corset-be-any-tighter image.

"It's always puzzled me anyway," Bonham Carter said. "I couldn't look less English. I've got dark, curly hair. And now I'm 42; god knows that English rose has definitely wilted." ■