

A Tête-à-tête with the Oscar winner actress Jennifer Connelly

Written by Kam Williams

Friday, 13 November 2015 18:55



Academy Award-winner [Jennifer Connelly](#) continues to prove her versatility as an actress with each new project she undertakes. She made her big screen debut in 1984 in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in America*, although her big break arrived a couple years later when she landed the role of Sarah in *Labyrinth* opposite David Bowie.

Jennifer subsequently earned an Independent Spirit Award nomination for her critically-acclaimed portrayal of a drug addict in *Requiem for a Dream* before winning an

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Academy Award for
Beautiful Mind

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where she co-starred with Russell Crowe.

Here, she talks about her latest outing in *Shelter*, a picture directed by her husband, Paul Bettany. In the film, she plays a homeless heroin-addict who falls in love with an African immigrant [Anthony Mackie] also surviving by his wits on the streets of New York City.

Kam Williams: Hi Jennifer [Connelly], thanks for the interview.

Jennifer Connelly: Thank you, Kam [Williams] .

KW: I live in Princeton, which is where you shot much of *A Beautiful Mind*. What are your memories of filming here?

JC: Oh, gosh. It's a really nice town... The campus was beautiful... and we had a really nice time. That whole shoot was great. I also remember sitting in the lobby of the hotel, the Nassau Inn and thinking to myself, "Huh, I like this guy Paul," [Laughs] although we didn't get together until a long time after the movie wrapped. We hadn't spent much time on the film before then.

KW: I interviewed Paul [Bettany] back then and found him refreshingly real and down-to-earth, so I'm not entirely surprised to find him making a movie revolving around homeless people.

JC: Yes, there's a little irreverence about him, for sure.

KW: The picture touches on several very timely themes: heroin addiction, homelessness, which is exploding in New York City, and to a lesser extent, tolerance in terms of Islam as well as the notion that black lives matter. Was this a coincidence, or does Paul [Bettany] h

ave his finger on the pulse?

JC: This is stuff that he's been looking at and thinking about. It's all around us in New York City. We became aware of the record number of people sleeping in shelters every night, about 60,000. And 25,000 of them were children. He noticed that and the fact that the first apartment in Manhattan sold for \$100 million. so, he just started writing about the things he was observing and reflecting upon.

KW: Even though you're married to the director, you didn't have to take the role. What interested you in playing Hannah?

JC: [Chuckles] I loved the story. I thought it was a beautiful love story. And besides this moving tale about these two fascinating characters, I thought it was an interesting exploration of judgment that struck me as very important and worthwhile. Although I didn't really understand the choices that my character, Hannah, made, I felt great compassion for her, and I was very excited about having an opportunity to play someone so complex.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier [of www.megadiversities.com] asks: How did you prepare to play a heroin addict? And how did you prepare to play a homeless person?

JC: In terms of the drug addiction, a lot of people helped by spending time with me and sharing their stories with me. I went through the entire script with a woman who had used heroin for many years, but had recovered, and is now okay talking about her experiences. We went through everything and broke down the whole script. Where is Hannah now? How many bags is she doing a day? How much money does she have to make? What is she doing for it? How long is she out on the street to make that money? What does a heroin kit look like? What's in it? What gauge needle is she using? she did a bag an hour ago. So, what is she feeling now? She really helped me break everything down, technically. She was an enormous help. I also spent a lot of time at the Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center which has a needle exchange program. I accompanied counsellors on outreach missions in Tompkins Square Park at night. I would just observe people. I watched footage of addicts, too, and spoke to a doctor working with patients with substance abuse problems. He was very helpful in terms of physical indicators, like what Hannah's track marks would look like. I also lost a lot of weight for the role, because I felt that's what would happen to her, given what she went through. As far as homelessness, I worked with an extraordinary organization with some wonderful people called The Coalition for the Homeless which had already helped Paul when he was writing the script. They helped him

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make sure everything was real and accurate. And they helped me a lot, too. I went over the script with them and I went on food runs with them. They deliver meals every night. They helped me understand what it would be like in a shelter as well as living on the street. I'm very grateful that people were so generous with me when I was researching the role.

KW: How was it being directed by your husband?

JC: It was terrific, especially since he and we had to work so quickly. Our mutual level of trust was really an asset in these circumstances. His presence was also useful for me to feel so safe and protected, especially given the nature of some of the scenes we shot.

KW: What message do you think people will take away from Shelter?

JC: I'd like to think that the movie might encourage a discussion about homelessness, about the way we dismiss and marginalize people, and about how we judge one another. Everyone has a story, and a lot of times those stories are surprising.

KW: I give Paul [Bettany] a lot of credit for taking the risk to make a movie about homeless, and thereby shed light on people who live in the shadows and who everybody ordinarily ignores. The Harriet Pakula-Tewele question: With so many classic films being redone, is there a remake you'd like to star in?

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JC: Omigosh! [Chuckles] I can't think of one right now.

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

JC: For just myself, a big tray of roasted vegetables. But I love cooking, and if we're having friends over, I like having a lot of people in the kitchen.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

JC: I have a lot of memories growing up from living in our house up in the Catskills, like playing with little Matchbox cars with my cousins, Glen and Sean, on the floor of my parents' bedroom. And playing with baseball cards. They were really into baseball cards. And I remember crawling under a big forsythia bush with bright yellow flowers. It was like a fort and we used to play in there. And the light would stream in, and it was all yellow. My cousins were like my brothers growing up.

KW: Sherry Gillam would like to know, what is the most important life lesson you've learned so far?"

JC: That people are really important. And, for me, the connections we have to one another are more important than anything. And looking for and finding the joy in things is important, too.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

JC: Different things on different days. [Giggles]

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KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

JC: Not really. [Laughs some more]

KW: This question is from your co-star, Anthony Mackie. Is there anything that you promised yourself you'd do if you became famous, that you still haven't done yet?

JC: No, because I never thought about becoming famous.

KW: Larry Greenberg asks: Do you have a favorite movie monster?

JC: Frankenstein and Dracula are both pretty cool monsters.

KW: The Uduak Oduok question: Who is your favorite clothes designer?

JC: Nicolas Ghesquiere, who designs for Louis Vuitton. He's a dear friend of mine. I've worn him a lot. Yeah, he's my favorite.

KW: The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

JC: For the most part, the successful people I've met aren't followers. They're not concerned about looking over their shoulder. They're directed from within, somehow.

KW: What advice do you have for anyone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

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JC: I don't think you can really follow in someone's footsteps. I believe everyone has something genius about them and something beautiful about them. I think it's a matter of discovering what makes each of us unique and special and nurturing that.

KW: The Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

JC: By whom. The answer at depends on whom you're talking about. Most importantly, I'd like my kids to feel like I've been a good mom.

KW: Finally, what's in your wallet?

JC: Pretty much practical stuff. cash... cards... insurance cards... But I also have an Avengers membership card that was drawn by [son] Stellan for [his little sister] Agnes. It was supposed to be an ID card. She really got into the film. so, he made this card for her. But then she decided she didn't want to be an Avengers superhero, so he switched it, and drew a little portrait of me on it. So, that's in my wallet, too.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Jennifer [Connelly], and best of luck with *Shelter*.

JC: Thank you so much, Kam [Williams].

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Will Smith won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for portraying Muhammad Ali in the 2001 film 'Ali'. Jennifer Connelly won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for portraying Rose in the 1997 film 'The English Patient'.
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