

Shekhar-ed Past



All "The Four Feathers"
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The award-winning director of 'Elizabeth' takes on the classic East-West adventure 'The Four Feathers.' by Deborah Baxtrom

Shekhar Kapur has grown comfortable in the role of diplomat.

"I seem to have become one of the pivotal people helping the West to understand the East, and vice versa," says the India-born director. "But since I've always believed there would be less conflict in the world if there was more understanding between East and West, I'm really enjoying my part."

One of the growing number of Eastern filmmakers finding enormous acclaim in the West, the director saw his first English-language film, 1998's "Elizabeth," rocket Cate Blanchett to stardom and garner seven Academy Award nominations, including one for Best Picture. Some might even be tempted to mislabel the 57-year-old Kapur an overnight success.

Trained as an accountant, he was quick to decide he didn't particularly want to spend the rest of his life hovering over balance ledgers. "I was 23 when I said, 'No, this is not what I want to do,'" he remembers. "I wanted a job where I could truly express myself. I was attracted to the arts, so I went home and broke the news to my parents that I was going into the film business. They were horrified. To their generation making movies was not a job, it was just silly. My father said to me, 'How will

you contribute to society if you make movies?' I'll never forget that question."

Kapur moved to London where he found work as an actor. He later hosted his own talk show on Channel 4 called "On the Other Hand" while hustling for his first directing job. "I had a script in one hand and a budget in the other and any person who looked anything like a producer would suddenly get accosted by me," Kapur admits. "I think somebody gave up in the end and said, 'Oh shit, just give him a job so he'll quit telling us his stories.' So I directed my first film. I made it for \$40,000."

That film was 1983's "Masoom," a critical and commercial hit about a family torn apart by a husband's infidelity. More movies in "Bollywood" (the nickname for India's thriving film community) followed, but it wasn't until the 1994 release of "Bandit Queen" that Kapur really hit his stride.

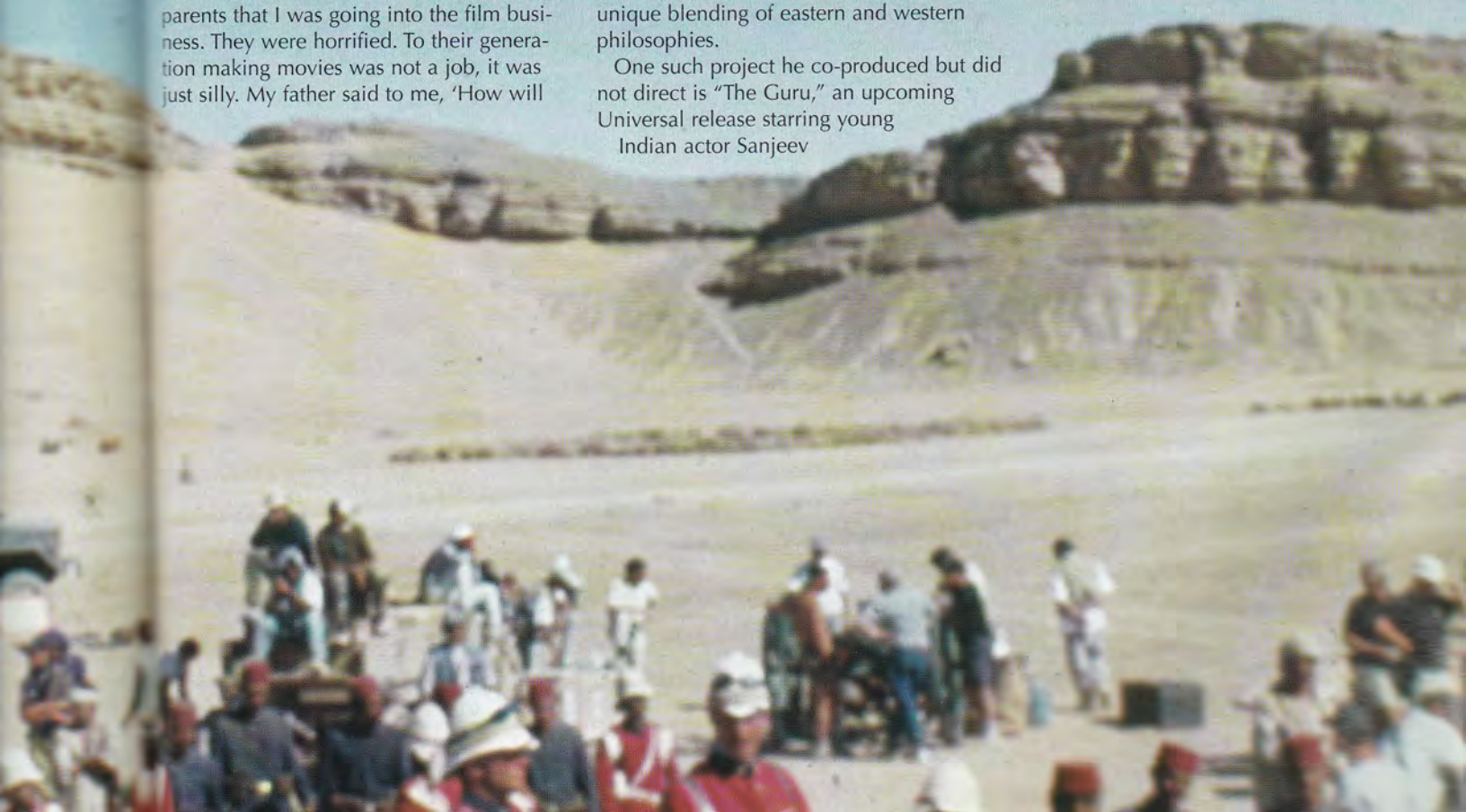
"Bandit Queen" told the tale of Phoolan Devi (1963-2001), a kind of real-life female Robin Hood who became a legend in India. The film was a smash at Cannes and Kapur was soon recruited to direct "Elizabeth." He's been busy ever since, developing projects that incorporate his unique blending of eastern and western philosophies.

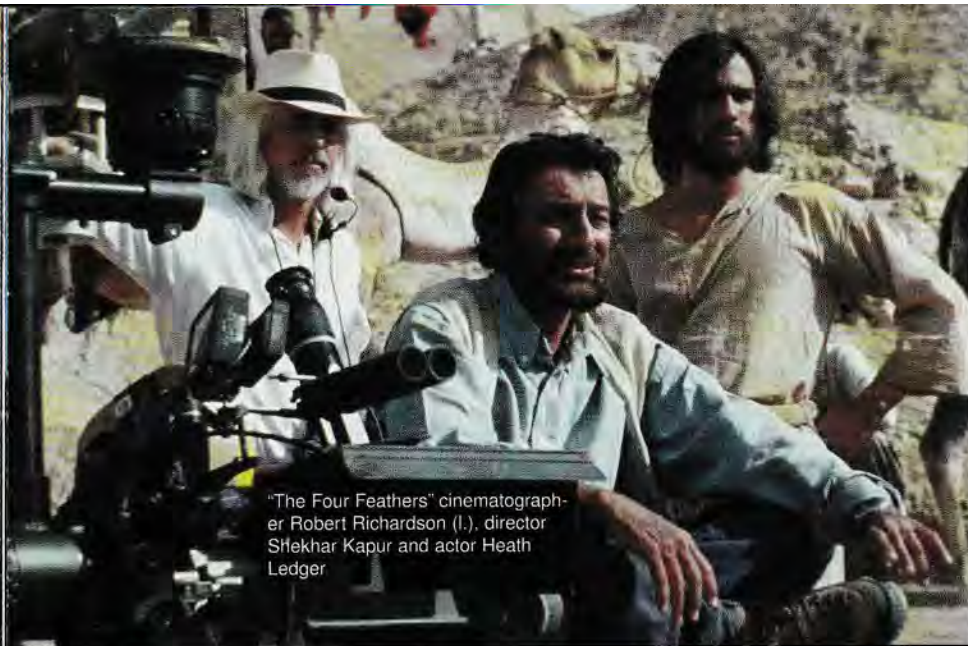
One such project he co-produced but did not direct is "The Guru," an upcoming Universal release starring young Indian actor Sanjeev

Bhaskar opposite American stars like Heather Graham and Marisa Tomei. Kapur also conceived and served as associate producer on the theatrical musical "Bombay Dreams," currently playing on London's West End.

Kapur's second English-language directorial effort, Paramount's "The Four Feathers," stars Heath Ledger, Wes Bentley, Djimon Hounsou and Kate Hudson, and hits U.S. screens Sept. 20. Based on A.E.W. Mason's 1903 novel, Kapur's version is the sixth cinematic adaptation of the tome, set in 1898 England and the Sudan. The story focuses on a young British officer, Harry Faversham (Ledger), who resigns his post when he learns he'll be sent to the Sudan to fight native rebels. His fiancée and three fellow officers give him four white feathers, symbolizing what they see as his cowardice. After those fellow officers are captured by the enemy, his disgrace drives him to singlehandedly undertake a grueling rescue effort.

Even Kapur's dad can no longer deny his son's contributions to the greater good. Says the filmmaker, "My father came to me and said, 'You've done so much more than you would have ever done as an accountant.'"





"The Four Feathers" cinematographer Robert Richardson (l.), director Shekhar Kapur and actor Heath Ledger

What attracted you to "The Four Feathers"?

Part of it is destiny. I have a great belief that we are destined to do what we do and this film found me. Another reason I chose it was a very childlike one. Ever since I was a kid I wanted to film a battle sequence, but not a high-tech battle. I've always wondered what it would be like to be in the middle of a charge, in the kind of battles they used to have, and this film had that. Also, on a more serious level, when I read the script I asked myself whether Harry Faversham was indeed a coward or not. I decided he wasn't because you have to have a lot of courage to face your fears. Harry was actually the bravest of them all because he faced his demons and examined them. I've always believed that if you have the courage to do that you come out stronger. It's easier to face bullets than to go into yourself and find out who you are. If you can survive that, then you have wisdom, which is ultimately strength. That was what I was attracted to.

You've been quoted as saying that you find female characters more interesting than male characters, and your two most successful films to date, "Bandit Queen" and "Elizabeth," have strong female protagonists. What is it about female characters that intrigues you and how does Harry Faversham fit in?

The reason I find women more interesting as characters is that in cinematic culture today when a man is confronted with danger he fights his way out with just his muscles. I don't find that interesting. That's why I'm attracted to female

characters. In "Elizabeth" the character succeeds because of the resilience and strength of the human spirit. That's also why I was so attracted to Harry Faversham. I picked a male character who fights back with the resilience of the spirit, not the size of his biceps. He doesn't say, "Here's a problem and I can solve it by beating the shit out of everybody." That has nothing to do with the spirit. My films are about people in situations where the spirit has to become stronger than the body.

Heath Ledger was a relative newcomer when you cast him as Faversham. What convinced you that he could handle the role?

I met Heath once, just after he made "10 Things I Hate About You." We had breakfast and I thought, "My God, what an interesting person." So I remembered him. When "Four Feathers" came along I screen tested him and I was looking for one thing. The film is about boys who grow into men, because that's what war does. Sometimes they come back damaged men; sometimes they come back wise men. It was important for Harry Faversham to come back with wisdom. I sat down and talked with Heath about this. What does maturity and wisdom and love mean? It means having the capacity to give. I wanted to test whether this actor could be a boy, then have the strength to give when I required it of him, and when I tested him I was quite stunned. I made him do scenes in the beginning and scenes at the end, and I found that when I spoke to him – he was all of 22 at that time – he understood when I said, "Heath,

strength is about the capacity to give, it's not about the capacity to kill. It's about how much strength and love you can give to other people. That's growing up." He totally got that. I think he's an old soul, because if he was not an old soul I don't think he could have given the performance he gave in this film.

You cast Kate Hudson as Ethne, Harry's love interest. What led you to her?

I had a call from Tom Cruise. He heard I was casting and said I should look at this girl in "Almost Famous," which was directed by his friend Cameron Crowe. At the time I was struggling a lot with the "Four Feathers" script because it's such a man's story and I was finding that the girl was getting left behind. I was worried because the female role is the vessel that contains the whole film. I don't know if people will understand this, but I believe there is a female aspect to spirituality. If spirituality is what the soul is about then [for this film] it had to be contained in a female who could bring that to the screen, but the part wasn't written that way. It was subsidiary to the male parts. I saw "Almost Famous" and thought Kate was absolutely brilliant, but the character she played in that film was so different from the character she needed to play in "Four Feathers." But I met her and as we talked I realized she could do it; and I have to say, rarely have I worked with someone who has gone so far beyond the written part. Much of what she brought to the character was not on the page. She pitched it so right.

Obviously you have a good eye for emerging talent. Cate Blanchett wasn't a big star when you cast her in "Elizabeth." Do you like working with new talent?

I do. I've done that throughout my career in India. There are two reasons I like it. First, it makes filmmaking easier for me. New talents don't come with a lot of star baggage. They haven't become overly aware of their own personalities. It's easier to break new talent down and make them malleable so they can reconstruct themselves in the context of the part. Established stars find it more difficult to break themselves down because the memories of what they've done in the past, what has failed and what has succeeded, are so strongly embedded in their minds. They keep going back and

“I was attracted to the arts, so I went home and broke the news to my parents that I was going into the film business. They were horrified.”

responding to something that happened a while ago, so sometimes it's harder to

get them to respond to something organic that's happening now.

The novel and the previous film versions of “Four Feathers” were all pro-colonial, but you’ve stated that you wanted your version to be anti-colonial. How did you accomplish this?

Well, first of all I come from a country that was colonized, so I have a natural rebellion against anything like that. I tried to give the film an anti-colonial stance, but it's done visually in order to preserve what the film is actually about. The movie isn't about colonization but about friendship and honor and dignity and love, about betrayal in the context

of friendship. So the challenge was keeping the integrity of these themes, yet trying to find a way of giving it a subtext of anti-colonization. One way we did this, we put people in red costumes in the desert and visually what I was trying to say was, “Look how out of place they look,” to question whether it was right for them to be there. This raised the question, was Harry Faversham right about not wanting to go to war? He does ask this question, but he ends up going because his friends are in danger.

You shot the film in Morocco and had to make script changes due to the harsh climate, correct?

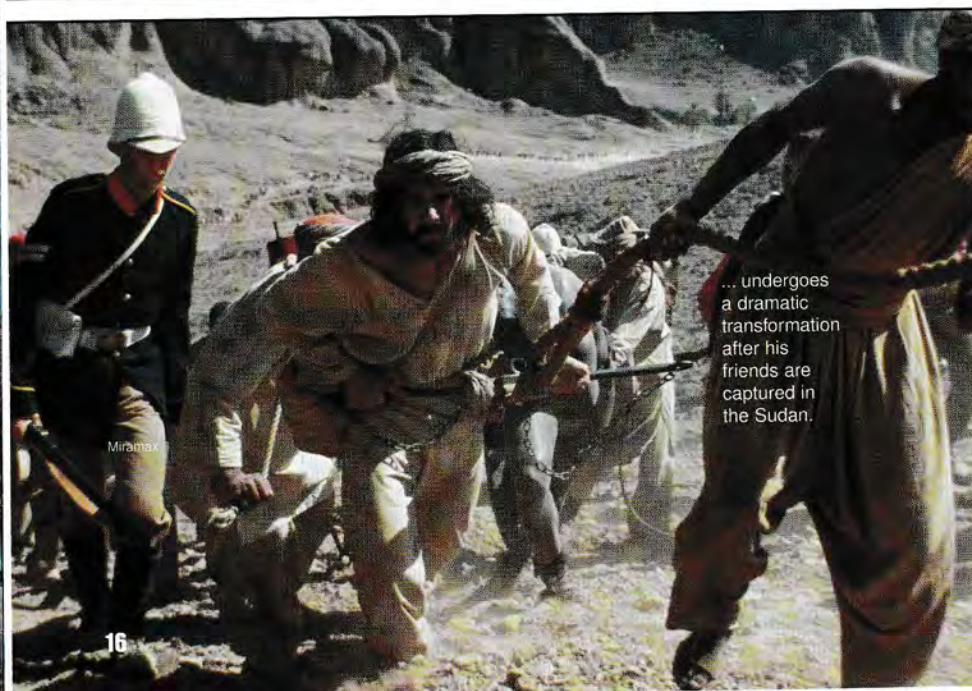
Yes. Morocco had such a severe drought that we couldn't get any water anywhere, so at the last minute we had to change the script. The journey that happens in the desert was originally supposed to take place on the Nile. There were wonderful sequences – 25 British gunboats traveling down the Nile with little Egyptian fishermen going by wondering “What the hell is going on?” The boats were supposed to reach the rapids and in those days they would make the laborers get out and drag these huge gunboats across the rocks and whip them along. We couldn't shoot those scenes because there was no water.

In addition to drought you faced windstorms and sandstorms. How did you handle these setbacks?

I'm a bit mad. At one point we were hit by this huge dust storm and I said “Let's shoot. Where else will we get a dust storm?” There are four or five shots in the film that are actual dust storms. There was one shot in which [horses] come galloping at us and we were there at the center of the camera. In a dust storm the basic visibility is down to about 10 or 15 feet, and a horse going at full gallop at 15 feet can't really see where he's going. Basically the horses would have galloped over [the director of photography, the assistant director and me] and we'd have all been martyred to the cause of epic filmmaking. [laughs] But I didn't find this out until later. There is also a scene where Harry is shot off his horse by his best friend in the middle of a battle and he leaps onto the back of another horse in the middle of fifty galloping horses. Heath did that

(see “Four Feathers” on page 38)

Harry Faversham (Heath Ledger, far right) ...



... undergoes a dramatic transformation after his friends are captured in the Sudan.

Four Feathers

(continued from page 16)

himself. Most stuntmen wouldn't do it. We didn't tell the producers or the insurance [people].

The stuntmen wouldn't do it and Heath Ledger did?

The stuntmen said to just cut into that scene, but I didn't want to. Heath was only supposed to run with the horse. He and I talked about it and he said, "Shekhar, what if I jump on?" I said, "You'll do it?" And he said, "Yeah." I remember we heard a gasp from the whole crew when he jumped on that horse. Of course we only got one take. He wanted to do a second take. He said, "I can do that better." I said, "Don't push it, Heath." [laughs]

So not only did Heath Ledger do his own stunts, but the battle scenes were shot using extras as opposed to CGI, right?

That's right. We can still do epic cinema without having to go to the computer. People don't make films on this epic scale anymore, and when they do it's all to do with post production. We just went out and shot it. It just looks so much more real.

The scenes in the Sudan are told primarily through visuals. There's very little dialogue.

Let me tell you a story. On the first movie I ever made, "Masoom," the writer on the project just disappeared, so I was left to my own devices. I wasn't a trained filmmaker at that time and I wasn't comfortable writing lines, so out of necessity I had to write the screenplay using very little dialogue. I found I really enjoyed telling stories through – not the picture so much as the way the camera moves, and the choreography between the actor and the camera. When I was making films in India I used to bring my friends in after I'd finished a movie and I'd shut off all the sound and show the movie and ask them to tell me what they understood. Did they know what was going on? What I was trying to say? What story did they get out of the film? If I found I needed lines for them to understand I felt I had failed. I believe that when people talk, when they face each other, a lot of what they are really saying is in the subtext, their body language, more than in what they actually

say.

"Elizabeth" was very visual as well. Was it overwhelming taking on such a larger-than-life Western historical figure for your first English-language film?

Not for me because I knew nothing about her. [laughs] I just came in and said, "What's the story?" I called my crew together and said, "This is not a historical film, it's science fiction." And if you look at the production design of "Elizabeth" it could have been science fiction. All history is interpretation anyway. So I told the story in a very Eastern way. I did it like I was doing a film in Bombay.

How so?

Eastern films tend to examine the edge of emotions, the edge of life. To us life is melodramatic. Death is melodramatic. Western philosophy is about man being in control of his own destiny. They are very committed to cause and effect – whatever you achieve happens because you have worked hard for it. In the East we're not so committed to cause and effect. We often say, "It was supposed to happen, therefore it did." When I shot "Elizabeth" I saw the character as a woman moving towards her destiny. For all her power, I often shot her looking very small with a lot of stone around her. Stone to me represented continuity. She was organic and would die, but stone would continue.

Were you surprised when "Elizabeth" was nominated for seven Oscars?

Yeah, I was really surprised, because when I make a movie I don't see what I've done, I only see what I didn't do. And I didn't think that with my first English-language film I'd be on the same red carpet with ... when I arrived [at the Oscars] there was Steven Spielberg in front of me and Gwyneth Paltrow behind me. I thought, "This cannot just happen."

Were you upset that you didn't receive a Best Director nomination?

No, no, no. I was just so surprised that we were nominated in seven categories. Other people were upset and I kept asking them, "Why are you so upset?" There is a point where greed sets in if you let it. At the start of a film you say "I hope I can complete it." Later you say, "I hope people don't laugh me out." Then when they don't laugh at you, you say, "I hope

it has reasonable box office." Then if that happens you say, "It's time I got great reviews." Then you get great reviews and you say, "Well, how about a few nominations." You get a few nominations – then you want to win. When you win you want people to say – what? That this was the greatest film ever made? It never stops. There is no limit to greed. I was just happy to have what I got.

How does directing in Hollywood differ from directing in "Bollywood"?

In the East we're all guerilla filmmakers. If the scene's not working you just rewrite it on the set and shoot it. It's done in 10 minutes. In studio filmmaking there are levels of decision, so I can't be as decisive right there and then. Of course I would never get \$50 million to shoot a film in India, so it's the trade-off. Making a film in the West is like going to a supermarket. You pick things off the shelf, you mix and match, and then you go to the counter. In India when you make a film it's like going to a thieves market. You could come back with nothing or you could come back with a bargain. Filmmaking in India is more adventurous, while in the West it's more organized. Somewhere in between is where true creativity lies.

What kind of film would you like to make next?

I want to make a musical. I've made musicals in India, but I want to do ... like what I try to do with historical figures, where the main characters come out in contemporary ways and become totally accessible to anybody who watches them, and emotionally connecting. If I can't make a musical in the West I'll go back and make one in the East.

You were attached to the film version of the Broadway musical "Phantom of the Opera" at one time. What's happening with that?

I'm not so much involved with it right now. I think Andrew Lloyd Webber is very convinced that he wants to film the show as it is. There's one rule that I've followed whenever I've made a musical – that you cannot sing the plot. The plot has to go forward traditionally with dialogue. What the songs do is accentuate the emotions. I saw "Evita" and, although I personally liked the film, I didn't think I would be happy making a film in which the characters are always singing. [Lloyd Webber] will either have

to agree with me or find a director who's willing to do it, maybe quite successfully, but I'm a little insecure about doing that.

You were also involved with "Steinbeck's Point of View."

I was, but we never came to a script all of us could agree on so I backed out of that one. I did like it. I like anything that has some spiritual content.

How about "Long Walk to Freedom," the film about Nelson Mandela, is that still happening?

Yes, I'm working on Mandela. I'm also working on "Foundation" for Fox, "Foundation" being the Isaac Asimov science fiction series [of novels]. They're probably the most widely read science fiction books ever. And I'm going back to my "Elizabeth" producers to work on a film called "Hippy-Hippy-Shake," based in the wild days of the '60s. The base theme is: In the context of free love how do you find true love?

Finally, the publication *India Times* voted you one of the "100 Most Handsome Indian Men of the Century." How did you feel about that honor?

[big laugh] I saw that, too. The truth is it's down to the 100 most well-known faces, but it got girls looking at me, so I guess that's good. ☉

Kate Hudson

(continued from page 15)

making a difficult decision. It wasn't something malicious – it could have been somewhat malicious. Or it could have been very passive, but Shekhar and I wanted it to be a difficult decision for her.

Since you had to choose between two men, it couldn't have hurt that those two men were Heath Ledger and Wes Bentley.

(Laughs.) No, those boys aren't too bad to look at. That was the easy part.

Were they fun to work with?

They were. I really enjoyed it, but it was a very serious movie. We were all working so hard and it was a very emotional piece. We had our fun in the most professional way. It was a good

experience; a hard experience but a good one.

The shoot was plagued with disastrous weather. How did you survive the storms?

Oh, man. Oh, my God, the weather was terrible! Actually I was fine, but I felt bad for everybody who had to shoot around it. And I felt bad for the people in wardrobe who had to figure out how – we used a lot of original shoes and [the wardrobe people] didn't want them to get muddy, so they put garbage bags on my feet, under my dress, to try to protect the shoes. They had to lengthen the dresses and let them get dirty instead. That kind of stuff was a real pain.

Did you enjoy wearing the period costumes?

Yeah, it was fun. The costumes definitely helped me with the character. About a month before the movie started shooting my dialogue coach came from London and brought a corset with her. I had to put it on every time we worked together, so I got used to working in a corset. She would make me go out in public with it on, which was kind of embarrassing. We had tea at Tea and Sympathy in New York. It was fun. I think it was the corset that put me into the character's mindset. It made me immediately understand the constraints of being a female living in that time period. Also I wore very high-necked outfits, so when I wore anything that was somewhat revealing of the chest it felt almost risqué. I loved it.

You're currently shooting "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days," a romantic comedy with Matthew McConaughey, correct?

Yeah, and we're having tons and tons of fun. There's lots of laughter on this set.

What else do you have coming up?

I did "Le Divorce" a Merchant/Ivory film, with Naomi Watts and Glenn Close. That was an unbelievable experience.

Why is that?

Because I got to live in Paris for three months and it was one of the greatest experiences I've had so far in my short life. I worked with some wonderful actors. I got to work with Stephen Fry. I just love him. And working with Glenn, I really enjoyed that. Naomi and I had

the best time. We truly became sisters. I got to work with some wonderful French actors and experience the French film scene. It was just great.

When does "Le Divorce" come out?

I'm not sure. I believe sometime next year.

Do you have anything lined up after "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days"?

After this I do Rob Reiner's picture. It's called "Alex and Emma," with Luke Wilson. That'll be fun. Luke's a friend of mine and we've always wanted to work together.

Is that a comedy also?

Well, it's a love story with some comedy. It's smart and different. There's a lot happening right now. I took a year off and now I'm just working a lot until I can take another year off.

What did you do during that year?

I decided I wanted to be a wife for the first year that Chris and I were married. After all that stuff with "Almost Famous" I was really tired and I thought it was a good time to reevaluate and just be with Chris and have fun. I think it's important to rejuvenate once in a while. I'm so young. I don't want to feel like I'm in a rush. I don't ever want to feel like I'm in a rush.

Speaking of "Almost Famous," was it overwhelming to receive an Oscar nomination so early in your career?

Yeah, it was overwhelming, but at the same time it was an incredible experience. I felt really blessed and lucky, but also I think a good way to start off a career is to get nominated and lose. You get an interesting perspective on what's important.

So you weren't at all disappointed that you didn't win?

I wouldn't say I was disappointed because there's a part of me that is kind of ... I believe there's a reason for everything, but I'd lie if I didn't say that when you're sitting in that seat you're thinking "I wanna win this damn thing!" That's the soccer player in me, but that's what I mean by it's great to get that perspective so young. It doesn't mean anything. What means something is that people enjoy your work, and hopefully they'll continue to enjoy it. – Deborah Baxtrom ☉