

HOLLYWOOD'S RISING * STAR

By Michael C. Upton



Jenn Gotzon is familiar with the Academy Awards. Her role as Tricia Nixon in *Frost/Nixon* allowed her to work under the mighty auspices of multiple-Oscar winning director Ron Howard, but her part wasn't big enough to get her into the awards' ceremony. That could all change, as buzz for her most recent film, *Doonby*, is generating chatter among watchers and pundits of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In Hollywood, it's all about the buzz. Who's hot? Who's not? The public demands the latest news and views about stars of the screen, whether it is silver or blue. The black-and-white of social media thrives on the ins-and-outs of Hollywood's elite and outcast. Gotzon, raised in a small eastern Pennsylvania community, has embraced the sunny land of California and now lives in the hub of all things filmmaking, Los Angeles.

Her accolades from *Frost/Nixon* director Ron Howard and costar/seasoned actress Patty McCormack (*The Sopranos*, *Dallas*, *Fantasy Island*) detail a young actress ready to burst onto the radar of Hollywood spectators.

"Having *Frost/Nixon* go on and be nominated for five Oscars, that was incredible," she says and laughs with joy. "That may be one of the neatest experiences of my career professionally."

Back east, Wildwood by the Sea Film Festival Director, Paul Russo, says Gotzon "has the acting depth of Kate Winslet and the charisma of Reese Witherspoon."

I caught up with Jenn after a brief jaunt to her native Pennsylvania and spoke to her from her current home in Los Angeles. Of course, her role in *Frost/Nixon* was first on my priority list of subjects, but I soon learned that Jenn had a lot of things going on other than a small role in an Oscar Award winning film.

FROST/NIXON

Frost/Nixon is the dramatic retelling of a post-Watergate interview between Richard Nixon and hotshot talk show host David Frost. The film captures Nixon's attempt to vindicate himself and Frost's attempt to catapult himself to stardom through a high-profile interview. The film is quite savvy, sometimes dark and often hilarious.

"As a career, which role was my most important? I think it would be a combination between *Frost/Nixon* ... and *Doonby*," Jenn tells me as we dive right into the questions.

In *Frost/Nixon*, she found herself reenacting history. She began to empathize with her real-life character,

the daughter of the 37th President of the United States.

"It was one of the most traumatic times in American political history, when Nixon resigned," Jenn explains. "To be able to play, understand and learn what was going on in Nixon's family from [Tricia's] perspective ... [I felt] the pain and the embarrassment and the discouragement and the depression and oppression, all that happened from her point of view in the midst of this experience."

I was eager to hear what it was like to work with Ron Howard. Jenn was more than happy to talk about the man (and former "Happy Days" star) who directed such memorable films as *Cocoon*, *Apollo 13*, and *The Da Vinci Code*.

"He's like family," Jenn says right away. "He's so kind and so warm and so pleasant. It was such an experience to work with some of our best filmmakers."

To prepare for her role, she studied at the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California (Nixon's birthplace). The entire library



Jenn Gotzon sheds shower of tears in *Doonby*
(Photo courtesy of Sure Crossing Films)

and office staff were eager to help with any background information she needed.

“Some of the staff and administration allowed us to go behind the scenes—to the part of the library not open to the public—and go through some of the archived tapes and books and information. They shared intimate stories that are completely off record that I’m not allowed to talk about,” she says. “It allowed me to fully understand the emotional place where Tricia [Nixon] really was.... It allowed me to understand really what was going on.”

Jenn uses the words truthful, accurate and positive to describe her portrayal of Tricia Nixon. She learned the experience was heartbreaking for the Nixon family.

“The people at the Nixon museum did tell us that we were not encouraged to contact Tricia,” Jenn says. “She is a reserved and private individual.” Jenn respected those wishes. However, she’d love to hear from Tricia now, wondering about her portrayal, or if she even saw *Frost/Nixon*. “It would be great to get Tricia’s opinion, because

I think Ron Howard tried very much to create the story in [an] unbiased [manner.] It looked like Ron Howard really tried to tell the story as true as it actually happened.”

TIES TO LANCASTER

“I was born and raised in Northampton and I first moved out of the house when I was 19 and went to school in New York,” says Jenn recalling her formative years. “Since I was fifteen I

was very passionate that I wanted to pursue acting.”

On the advice of her parents, Jenn attended Northampton Community College in order to fulfill a few collegiate basics on a scholarship she earned through high school academics. She quickly left the close-to-home school and headed to the New York Conservatory of the Dramatic Arts. Her ties to Lancaster came through her association with local producer and writer Rick Hansberry.



Doonby's Jenn Gotzon and John Schneider
(Photo courtesy of Sure Crossing Films)

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Jenn Gotzon as victim of Chinese takeover of U.S. in cyber-thriller *Dragon Day* (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Travis)

Continued from previous page

"*Chemistry* was his first film to actually get produced," Jenn says with amazement. "He's been writing for 20 years, constantly writing scripts ... that was the film I played lead on."

In the 9-minute short film *Chemistry*, tagged "speed dating with a twist," Jenn plays the main character Katie. "I'm from Northampton and he's from Lancaster and we shot in Los Angeles with a completely different group of people," Jenn recalls. "It was a huge accomplishment."

Chemistry premiered in Lancaster and even though Jenn's parents and in-laws could attend the event, she had to remain in Los Angeles for filming. In 2008, *Chemistry* and another Gotzon film, *Stained*, caught the attention of members of the Wildwood by the Sea Film Festival. Subsequently, Gotzon was honored with the festival's "Rising Star" Award. "Wildwood was my summer stomping grounds," she says bursting into elation. "I was so excited!"

Because of *Chemistry*, *Stained* and her then-upcoming role in *Frost/Nixon*, the organizers asked her to conduct a special question and answer session during the event.

"That's where the Inspiring Audiences program came from."

INSPIRING AUDIENCES

"I shared my journey as an actor, the obstacles I've overcome," Jenn says about that first Q&A at the Wildwood by the Sea Film Festival. The forty-five minute talk led to Inspiring Audiences, her motivational speaking program.

"I achieved some of the dreams that have been in my heart since I was fifteen," she says fondly. "I turned that Q&A into something that people would get more out of, something to inspire and encourage them."

While on the New Orleans set of another short film, Jenn took time off the set to unite with producer Steve Doherty and expand Inspiring Audiences. The duo talked to nearly seventy percent of the schools in New Orleans.

"I show one of the short films I have done and I tie it all together with the presentation," Jenn explains. "Afterwards I work directly with the kids and talk about

CHEMISTRY: When Josh finally meets Katie, the girl of his dreams at a speed dating event, he knows that these five minutes could change more than just his evening. With instant chemistry developing between them, Josh and Katie venture deep into the game of love, breaking rules along the way only to have fate intervene in this romantic comedy that takes a fun look into our hearts.

— From IMDb.com

DOONBY: Sam Doonby, is a happy-go-lucky drifter who takes up residence in a small Texas town but seems suspiciously immune to the misfortunes that beset the other townsfolk.

— From IMDb.com

whatever dreams they have.” Inspiring Audiences is Jenn’s special way to directly give back to people. The future for the program is wherever and whenever; she’s just glad to help when she can.

DOONBY

“The story is such a fantastic story,” Jenn says while explaining *Doonby*. “It is heartfelt like *It’s a Wonderful Life* combined with the edgy, alcohol-dealing type of world like *Crazy Heart*.”

In this mystery/drama with a romantic edge, Jenn plays Laura Reaper, a wealthy, shrewd alcoholic in a small Texas town. She is running away from her purpose in life and finds pleasure in excessive drinking and partying. She meets Sam Doonby, played by John Schneider (of “Dukes of Hazzard” fame), who becomes her “personal angel,” says Jenn. *Doonby* wrapped principal photography in June 2010 and is now in the editing phase for a 2011 release.

“I’m going to be on a panel at the Charlotte Film Festival showing little clips of *Doonby*,” she adds. Schneider is beginning his appearances on national television.

Mark Joseph, who Jenn noted worked on the marketing for *The Passion of the Christ*, produced *Doonby*. He’s also marketed mainstream films and franchises like *Holes*, *Because of Winn-Dixie* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This is Joseph’s first producing role in a feature length film.

“He’s going to be building and building the interest and the excitement for [*Doonby*,]” Jenn says and adds Joseph has some tricks up his sleeve to get moviegoers’ attention. “There is a surprise cameo that is really going to knock the socks off audiences.”

I pressed for more info.

“Nope. I’m unfortunately not allowed to say anything about it.” 🍷

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