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ON HER ROLE  
AS ROMANTIC  
HEROINE



# Hall of fame

You wait ages for a leading role in a film, and then a handful come along all at once. Now, after years on the up-and-coming lists, Rebecca Hall can safely say she has arrived. The actress tells **Helena de Bertodano** what it's like to be Sir Peter Hall's daughter and Woody Allen's romantic heroine

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz

**E**ver since she can remember, Rebecca Hall has wanted a part in a Woody Allen film. Finally last summer Allen called her to audition for a new romantic comedy, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, set in Spain.

She was a bundle of nerves when she was summoned to see the great man. 'He said, "Can you do an American accent?" I said, "Yes," and he just went, "All right. Bye." It was ridiculous. He didn't even ask me to prove it. I left feeling I must have failed on some very fundamental level. So it was the biggest shock in the world when two weeks later I got a phone call saying, "He loves you."'

In the film, which is due to be released in February, Hall plays the part of Vicky alongside Scarlett Johansson (who plays Cristina), Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem. She has just been nominated for a Golden Globe for the role and was hailed as the discovery of the Cannes Film Festival in the summer, where the film premiered, with the *New York Times* affirming that her 'jawline and brittle delivery evoke Katharine Hepburn'.

'I'm always being discovered,' Hall says with a laugh when we meet in a New York hotel. 'I've actually been acting professionally for six years - and each year I'm on the "up and coming" list or the "10 people to watch next year" list.'

Now, it seems, the 26-year-old has finally arrived. When I meet her, she is in the middle of a photo-shoot and is wearing a Christopher Kane chiffon and sequin dress and Stella McCartney wedge heels. She towers over everyone, but her ethereal image is dissipated by her belly laugh and sense of humour. As she sits down on a chaise-longue, the huge sequins on the dress scrunch underneath her. 'It feels like I'm sitting on a crisp packet,' she says, bursting into giggles.

'I used to have the most visceral response to having my photo taken,' she tells me later. 'I felt like instantly bursting into tears and running out of the room. I hated all the attention, which is such



Dress by Chloé. Stylist: Michelle Cameron. Hair: Mark Townsend. Make-up: Jeanine Lobell





a stupid thing for an actor to say. Now I am getting a bit more confident and I realise there are ways of still looking like yourself in pictures; you don't have to get vomited on by a lot of make-up artists.'

As the daughter of the theatre director Sir Peter Hall, who founded the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the opera singer Maria Ewing, Rebecca Hall grew up near the spotlight. 'I remember when my parents got divorced [when she was five] people were camping outside the house to get photos. But I was always kept in the background - which I'm grateful for. I wasn't brought up being some sort of show pony.'

Nevertheless, at the age of eight she starred in her father's television adaptation of Mary Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn* - almost by accident. Her father was auditioning girls for the role of Sophy, and Rebecca wandered into the production office from school one day and caught the eye of the producer. Sir Peter was uneasy about casting his own daughter. 'I was worried at the position I was putting her in,' he said afterwards. 'But she was quite remarkable and stole the show.'

Afterwards, despite receiving offers of other roles, her parents insisted she have a 'normal' childhood, living between her mother's home in Sussex and her father's in London, although much of it was spent backstage at their rehearsals. She has vivid memories of her mother's portrayal of Salome at the Royal Opera House (directed by her father), in which Ewing undressed completely and passionately kissed the head of John the Baptist before being killed herself. 'I said to my dad, "I really like the opera but I don't see why Salome can't go off with the head at the end and live happily ever after."'

Although she is an only child, she has several half siblings by her father's other marriages and her parents have always remained on good terms. 'It's quite wacky - there are a lot of us, a lot of marriages, a lot of children, a lot of

divorce but everybody just gets on with it. No family is sane, is it?'

She attended Roedean, where she says she went from being 'desperately shy' to very outspoken. To her embarrassment, she was made head girl. 'I cannot state enough what an awful, chaotic, cocky, stupid head girl I was. I was elected by the students, who thought it would be funny if I was head girl. The headmistress



IN 'THE PRESTIGE' (2006) WITH CHRISTIAN BALE BELOW AGED EIGHT WITH HER FATHER ON THE SET OF 'THE CAMOMILE LAWN' AND, LEFT, IN HIS PRODUCTION OF 'AS YOU LIKE IT', 2003



hated me so much that after me she stopped students being allowed to vote for the head girl. So I pretty much ceased democracy at Roedean!'

Hall speaks in a strong, confident voice and has a habit of dropping consonants, perhaps as a means of masking her background. For example, when I ask her if she is staying at the hotel where we meet, she replies, 'No way, I'm not stayin' ere - it would be a li'l decadent.'

From Roedean she went on to read English at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, but left at the end of her second year. 'I walked out. I was fed up, so I said, "F— this," and left.' I ask if she

has ever regretted it. 'No, never,' she says absolutely. 'For all the student arrogance and stupid reasons that only a 20-year-old could come up with, it still remains the thing that I am most proud of in my life, of owning that decision and doing it.'

Her parents, inevitably, were far from impressed. 'They were devastated. My mother less so because my mum is American and didn't really get the whole

Cambridge thing anyway, but my dad went to Cambridge himself and he was heartbroken.'

In what would have been her final year in Cambridge she tried to launch herself as an actress. 'I wandered around for a while, going to auditions and not succeeding.' She didn't want her father's help, and when he offered

**'My parents kept me in the background - which I am grateful for. I wasn't brought up being some sort of show pony'**



her the part of Vivie in *Mrs Warren's Profession* her instinct was to say no: 'But then I thought, "Whatever my first job is I'm going to be criticised. And if I'm good I'll have a career and I won't be plagued by the

whole being Peter Hall's daughter thing. And if I f— it up I'll never work again." So I did it. But I was terrified.'

She was, of course, superb and won the Ian Charleson Award in 2003 for her performance. A couple of years later she won even more plaudits as Rosalind in her father's production of *As You Like It*. Then she stopped working for him. 'He understood that I had to spread my wings,' she says.

Funnily enough, most people in the film world do not even know about her

connection with Sir Peter Hall. 'Whenever I'm in theatre situations I will go out of my way not to talk about my father, but in the film world I can be really proud of my family and say, "You know what: my dad's a really, really famous theatre director," because nobody has any idea.'

So far, Hall has only two other film credits under her belt but both were major releases: *Starter for 10* (2006), an English romantic comedy set in Bristol University, and *The Prestige* (2006), Christopher Nolan's sci-fi fantasy also starring Sir Michael Caine, Scarlett Johansson and Christian Bale. But *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, in which Hall and Johansson star as American students falling prey to the sexual charms of Bardem and Cruz's characters, is her first lead role. And, immediately after wrapping filming as Vicky (a 'desperately conflicted and introspective and complicated' character) Hall flew to Los Angeles to take up the part of Caroline Cushing, the glamorous girlfriend of David Frost in the forthcoming Oscar-tipped Ron Howard film *Frost/Nixon*. ('I'm a thinking man's totty,' she says of the part. 'I just swan around in nice outfits. I think if I'd spent my whole career playing women like that, I would be a little bit more critical [of the role]. But it was so refreshing to have a change from playing women who have the moral high ground.')

Now, just as her film career is looking unstoppable, Hall is in New York for six months rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Winter's Tale* in preparation for a return to the stage. The plays form part of Sam Mendes' and Kevin Spacey's the Bridge Project, a collaboration between the Old Vic in London and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. 'A lot of people might accuse me of committing career suicide – the moment that things are getting exciting for me in the film world I'm disappearing off to do theatre – but I think it's just perfect.'

She is often described as a workaholic, like her father, and I ask her what it is that drives her. 'It sounds trite but I like telling

stories. I've always been so interested in people and behaviour – who isn't, really? – and if you're able to do that for a living then what better way to spend your life? I think that's why I'm attracted to diverse, complicated characters that show lots of different sides of the psyche.'

In the long term, she thinks she might direct. 'Maybe it's vanity to think I can do anything other than acting,' she says. 'I'd love to direct a film. I instinctively

have a sense of how things could get cut together. Theatre directing doesn't interest me in the slightest.' Perhaps she doesn't want to set herself up for comparisons with her father, I suggest. 'I'm sure that's part of it unconsciously,' she agrees.

**'It is so refreshing to have a change from playing women who have the moral high ground'**

HALL, LEFT, WITH SCARLETT JOHANSSON IN WOODY ALLEN'S 'VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA'



For the moment, she says, she's happy acting. But she insists her life is not the glamorous round of 'champagne for breakfast, facials at four and parties all evening' that one might imagine. In fact, she says, she's 'a terrible party person. On an average day I grab a coffee, go to work, go home, watch a DVD box set, read a book and go to sleep. I'm really one of the world's most boring people.'

Hall proves her down-to-earth credentials by refusing her assistant's

repeated attempts to fetch her a takeaway lunch from Cipriani, the famously swanky restaurant whose prices were branded 'highway robbery' by the *New York Times*. 'No way. It'll cost \$600. I'll just have a bag of nuts,' she says, taking a packet of almonds out of her bag and offering me some. And the moment the photographer leaves, she changes into her own clothes – 'an old scraggy jumper, old scraggy jeans and some vintage boots'. The boots are covered in mud and the beige shapeless jumper is distinctly unflattering. Hall says she deliberately tries not to stand out. 'I think if you want to it's possible to disappear and I have a hunch that I might be quite good at that. Having said that, I do notice the difference in the States. In England it's fine because *Vicky Cristina* has not come out yet, but it's been out for two months here in America. The other day I was standing in a coffee queue and someone went, "Hey, you look just like

that girl in *Vicky Cristina*," and I said, "Yeah, yeah." That definitely threw me.'

It is something she will just have to get used to, I say. Not necessarily, she maintains. 'I think working with Woody Allen was the pinnacle. It's all downhill from here.' With three more films due out next year – and lead roles in all of them – Hall must be joking. ●

*'Frost/Nixon'* is out on 23 January. *'Vicky Cristina Barcelona'* is out on 6 February