

She's 21.

She's Australian.

She's the highest-grossing  
actress in Hollywood.

So who is Mia Wasikowska?

*Helena de Bertodano meets the star of  
Alice in Wonderland and the new Jane Eyre*

PORTRAIT Norman Jean Roy



f asked to name the highest-grossing Hollywood actress, who would come up with the name Mia Wasikowska, over, say, Angelina Jolie or Gwyneth Paltrow? But here she was in April named on the *Time* 100, a list of the most influential people in the world, and last year *Forbes* ranked the 21-year-old Australian actress as the second highest-grossing actor of 2010 with \$1.03 billion (£625 million).

The only person who surpassed her, male or female, was Leonardo DiCaprio, a fact that she describes as “bizarre” when we meet to talk about her latest movie, *Jane Eyre*.

The film most responsible for her elevation is Tim Burton’s massive box office hit *Alice in Wonderland*, in which she played Alice, followed by her portrayal of the teenage daughter of a lesbian couple in the quirky indie comedy *The Kids Are All Right*. Both earned her the Hollywood Awards’ Breakthrough Actress Award.

And if you haven’t heard of her from those, you soon most surely will. Directors have been falling over themselves to cast her. The fact that she’s in no fewer than nine upcoming films made by the likes of Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant, and starring the likes of Glenn Close and Nicole Kidman, tells you much of what you need to know about the actress. Here is a gamine young talent who effortlessly slides into roles beloved by the thinking person’s Hollywood.

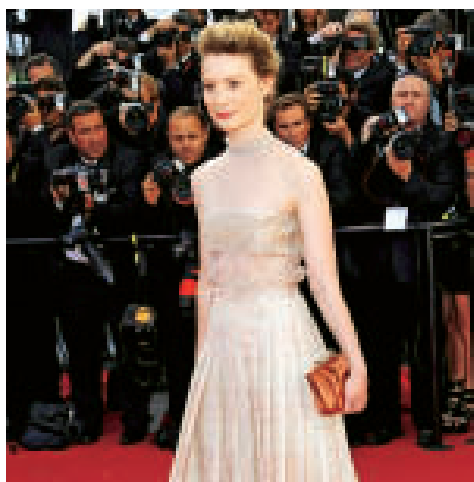
The first of these new movies to hit our screens is *Jane Eyre*, already released in the USA, to an outpouring of superlatives from the critics. “Radiant spirit blossoms in barren land,” gushes *The New York Times*. “Wasikowska beautifully captures Jane’s watchful, mature intelligence and wounded spirit,” concurs *USA Today*. “She embodies Jane’s most endearing qualities but not for a moment the moist poignance that many of the umpteen previous versions have inflicted on her,” sighs *The Wall Street Journal*.

Although petite and pretty, true to type Wasikowska wears no make-up and her blonde shoulder-length hair shows an inch of dark roots. She says she prefers to dress casually, and her cover is only partly blown by an admission that today she sports a beige and black Marc Jacobs dress. “I have a lot of access now to beautiful clothing and designer wear, but I try not to take advantage of it,” she protests. “The rest of what I’m wearing is mine – you can tell because it’s so scrappy.” Swigging from a bottle of water, she sits outside on the terrace of her suite at the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles, wearing a grey shapeless cardigan over the dress, black tights and black London Sole ballet pumps, which she kicks off to pull her legs up under her on her chair.

Here is an actress whose appeal is that she’s not Hollywood progeny or the product



Above: Alice in Wonderland. Below: at Cannes this year



‘I’m a total hermit. I’m terrified of parties. Anyway, I don’t know where all these parties are. I’m never invited’

of fame-school grooming or pushy parents. Growing up in Canberra, the middle of three children born to two professional photographers, Wasikowska (whose surname comes from her Polish-born mother) says she was not particularly outgoing. “I didn’t feel confident in getting up in front of the class and goofing around, so it’s always surprised me that I’ve ended up in acting. It’s a misconception that the loud kid or the class clown becomes the actor. The only thing I played was a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

In fact, she spent most of her childhood doing 35 hours a week training as a dancer, but, she says, “Dance is such a contradictory industry. Dancing itself is so liberating, but the industry is quite repressive. So much of it was about achieving physical perfection. I was

watching all these films that I loved and they were exploring the opposite – the imperfections of life.”

So at 14 she quit and set her sights on becoming an actress, despite having no knowledge of the industry. In her school year book in 2005, when asked where she saw herself in five years’ time, she wrote: “A famous actor, making lots of money.”

“I was always fixated on becoming something,” she agrees. “You have to have a certain amount of self-delusion to get anywhere in the arts... But I do feel really lucky, I don’t feel entitled at all. So much of it is just timing and being in the right place.”

So far, so understated. You do, however, to some extent make your own luck, and there is obviously a steely ambition to Wasikowska. She googled kids’ acting agencies in Sydney, made a list of about 12, then contacted them all. Only one answered, so she hitched a lift with her photographer mum who was going up for an exhibition. Then she “hounded them for a while” until they agreed to take her on, they sent her off for auditions and “slowly things started happening”.

In 2004, she landed her first role in an Australian soap, shortly followed by her film debut in *Suburban Mayhem*, for which she received a nomination for a Young Actor’s Australian Film Institute Award. Her parents, she says, were supportive. “At first they were a little wary, but they were never discouraging. They kind of understand a creative drive. Also I wasn’t in the mood to really struggle for

success. I felt like dance had been a struggle enough, so with acting, I thought I’d try it and if it didn’t work out I’d find something else.”

It wasn’t until 2008 that she received her first break in the United States when she was cast as Sophie, a suicidal gymnast, in the highly successful weekly drama *In Treatment*. Earning widespread critical acclaim for her performance, she was suddenly fielding offers, picking up parts in the movies *Defiance*, *Amelia* and *That Evening Sun*. Then came her big break with *Alice*. The director, Tim Burton, who spent ages searching for the perfect Alice, liked Wasikowska’s “old-soul quality.” “Getting *Alice* was a huge thing for me,” says Wasikowska.

Back in Australia, the actress was halfway through reading *Jane Eyre*, and with the

same determination that got her into films in the first place, “decided I really wanted to do the film of it, so I got in touch with my agent to ask if there was a script around”. There wasn’t, but a couple of months later they e-mailed her with a script from the relatively unknown Cary Fukunaga. It was, she says, “incredible timing”.

Fukunaga, unfamiliar with Wasikowska’s work, sought the advice of director Gus Van Sant, who has cast her in his 2011 movie *Restless* – in which she plays a terminally ill teenager. Van Sant, Fukunaga told *BlackBook* magazine, wrote back, “Cast her.”

“I think if you take away the period setting, the costumes, at the core of it all Jane Eyre is a very modern character,” says Wasikowska. “She’s a young woman who’s trying to find love and a family in a very disconnected world. It’s a timeless story.”

Fukunaga’s version plays it pretty straight, and you have to agree with the critics that, with its big moorland backdrops with grey skies and slanting rain, he pulls it off magnificently. “Think about wearing 20-30lb of clothing, soaking wet in sub-freezing temperatures, and having to fall into puddles while also acting,” says the director. “Those were our first two days of production and Mia never complained once, even though she almost passed out from near-hypothermia.”

For her part, Wasikowska was more traumatised by the corset she was forced to wear. “You’re not comfortable whether you’re sitting down or standing up. It makes physical the mental and emotional repression that women must have felt in that era.”

Her world isn’t just a million miles from the lot of woman in the 19th century: with the limos, the award shows and the 5-star hotels, it’s far removed from that of a normal 21-year-old. “I do get very well looked after,” she agrees. “I get picked up and I get dropped off and people dress me. I find it’s very useful to go home to Australia when I’m not working. It helps me get perspective on this business. I go back and I go, ‘Oh yeah, none of that really matters.’”

Her parents’ house in Canberra has, she says, only two bedrooms. With seven people cramming into it, it is “kind of chaotic. My sister is there with her boyfriend and her six-month-old baby, then there’s my mum and my dad and my brother. And my nanna’s regularly there. My parents sleep in the lounge, but last time I went back they graciously gave me the lounge and they slept in a tent in the garden. So it’s an incredibly simple kind of existence. There’s no fanfare when I’m back.

“I try to live reasonably, because you never know where your next job is coming from.”

Like her parents, she is an avid photographer and is well known on set for her behind-the-scenes documentary-style photographs. She

Wasikowska in her latest role as Jane Eyre



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even had a secret pocket sewn into one of her *Jane Eyre* costumes to conceal a camera she used between takes. A picture she took of Fukunaga and actor Jamie Bell was selected as a finalist in a 2011 competition hosted by Australia’s National Portrait Gallery.

Wasikowska professes not really to enjoy the trappings of celebrity. “I’m a total hermit. I’m terrified of parties. Anyway, I don’t really know where all these parties are. I’m never invited. It’s not my scene. I love having a great conversation or seeing some good friends.”

There is, however, no boyfriend among them. “No,” she says, giggling. “I don’t want to make that the focus of my life or the thing that people are interested in about me. It’s

something I have to learn to balance, but you have to put work and effort into establishing a life outside of film-making. I haven’t quite learnt how to do that yet. This is an initiation by fire. If you are at university or drama school or something, you have the freedom to make mistakes and move on.”

Although there is no particular role that she yearns to tackle, she says she would love to portray someone less than perfect. “It would be awesome to play someone evil for once,” she says angelically. “That’s what I’m really looking for.” ■

*Jane Eyre* is released on September 9. *Brontë mania*, see today’s Saturday Review