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411 Movies Interview: Patricia Rae of P.J. and Maria Full of Grace

Posted by Tony Farinella on 03.18.2008

411's Tony Farinella sits down with Patricia Rae for an exclusive interview!

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a working actor? Yes, a working actor. Personally, I've always been fascinated by the working actor, because they have to compete against celebrities and big-time movie stars. You might not hear about them in the tabloids every day, but that's OK with them. You see, for the working actor, it's all about the craft. And that is certainly the case with the lovely Patricia Rae. In my interview with Patricia Rae, we talked about her new film, P.J., Maria Full of Grace, her acting career, and a whole lot more.



TONY: How did you end up getting involved in P.J.? Did the film find you, or did you find the film?

Patricia Rae: The film found me. I was cast to do this film called *Absolute Tangerine* that Howard Nash was producing, and that film, the financing eventually fell through, and then I didn't hear from Howard for a year or so. And then he called me up out of the blue one day, and he was like, "I have a script for you that I'm producing, which I'm really excited about, and I would love for you to be in it." So he sent me the script, and I read it and was like, "Oh, wow." He never mentioned the role that he had me in mind for, so I read through the script, and I was like, "Wow, the girlfriend character, she's amazing. That would be really cool to play." But I didn't know that that's the role he had intended for me, so when I called him back, I was like, "Well, I really love the script, and the character of Shelly, that's a really cool character." And he was like, "Well, that's the one I want you to play." And I was like, "That's the role you're offering me? I'd love to play her."

TONY: What were your first impressions of first-time filmmaker Russ Emanuel?

Patricia Rae: Well, funny enough, I had already known him, socially, through my boyfriend, and they had been involved in a project called Million Dollar Movie.com, so I had some familiarity with him. But I was very surprised and delighted to learn that he was actually directing the film. I was like, "Oh, my god, I know Russ!" And he was just really gracious. I mean, he was a first-time director and there were a lot of things he had to learn and stuff, but he was so open to any suggestions that we had. And he was very gracious and very accommodating and thankful. So it was a lovely experience, because he had his own ideas but always welcomed mine.

TONY: Your character in the film goes through so many different emotions and so many highs and lows. For you, personally, as an actress, how do you prepare? Do you visualize a lot of it, or do you just go for it?

Patricia Rae: Well, part of my preparation is to really do an extensive character background for each character that I work with. So, I will construct a whole life, because you're just catching a glimpse of the character in that moment. You're catching them in that time, and the camera happens to be on, but what happens to them before and after, you know what I'm saying? I construct that. Why does she speak like this? Why did she choose this job? How did she get there? How many brothers and sisters did she have? Were her mother and father divorced? Was she the youngest child? Did she have a good education? That informs the way you dress, the way you speak, the way you interact with people. So when I get to the set, I can be affected by the other characters, because I've already done my work. I don't have to think about it anymore, and I can just go and be in the moment. Because when I act, I really want to just react to the characters, to listen, to react to how they're informing me as a character and a person and a human being, and be in the moment. What is this character going through in her life?

TONY: Did you change anything around in terms of the script? Or did you stay pretty close to their vision?

Patricia Rae: It depends on if I feel that the character is not layered enough. I always look for a character arch, like a beginning, a middle, and an end to every character, because, in order for me to be honest in a film, they need to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Why did you introduce this character? You introduce them because they affect the other characters how? That's not always in the script, and sometimes you have to question the director, if you can. And I had the pleasure of actually meeting Mark McQuown, who wrote the original play, and I asked him, "What drives her? What motivates her?" So that you keep adding layers to the character and adding more truth. It's just more information, and the more information you have, the more details you have and the more honest you can be with bringing someone to life.

TONY: You mentioned earlier in this interview how you prepare in terms of the character arch and back-story. But how do you prepare physically for a role like this?

Patricia Rae: Well, I like to do some kind of relaxation preparation and warm up, so I can let go of any tension so I can be free to work and experiment. Very similar to how an athlete warms up before doing any kind of **exercise**. So I'm limber, and my mind is limber. In film you don't shoot in sequence, so you really have to know where your character is emotionally at that point. So, for me, I think of what happened the moment before, what happened after, and where is she going. And now you're in the middle, which is the scene that you're filming at the time, and then you do a preparation. If I was this character and this was my situation and this was happening to me, how would I react with all the information that I have as this human being?

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TONY: What was it like working with the talented cast of *P.J.*?

Patricia Rae: Well, first of all, being able to work with a legend like John Heard is so rewarding and inspiring. He's a man that's been in the business for so many years and has had such longevity in his career. He just knows how to command the camera. He always know where the camera is, and he really knows stillness, to just be in front of the camera without having to do anything. Know your lighting, he knows where he's lit best, and he knows how to open himself up to the lens. He's very detailed like that. So, as an actress, being able to watch someone like that work is just like being able to study with great teachers.

TONY: I want to backtrack a little bit and talk about the early years. Did you have a moment where a light bulb went on in your head and you said to yourself, "This is what I want to do?"

Patricia Rae: I had a light bulb not in terms of really whether I wanted to be an actor or not, because I don't think I had a choice. I was very driven to perform and take on characters, because, like a lot of actors, I came from a broken home and a very dysfunctional family, and I was constantly trying to simulate myself into whatever new environment I was in. So I kind of got thrust into pretending to be many different people. When the light bulb went on for me was when I realized I could do it as a profession, that I can make money at it. And that happened right when I was in high school, in drama school, and our drama teacher was very aggressive about progressive thinking for high school, and he had us compete nationwide with other schools. So, once I got out there and started seeing that there were a lot of actors and that it was regarded as a profession, that's when I realized, "Wow, I want to study this and make it a career."

TONY: You mentioned earlier in this interview how you came from a broken home. As an actress, is it somewhat cathartic to play characters such as Shelly in *P.J.* and Carla in *Maria Full of Grace*?

Patricia Rae: Yes, it is, because you learn so much about yourself. I always tend to gravitate towards characters that do have some kind of ... whether they have an addiction. In *P.J.*, I felt like everybody had some form of addiction. The John Heard character was an alcoholic. My character was a sexaholic. The main character, his motivation was that he was an egomaniac and a workaholic. Vincent Pastore's character was a gambler. So, it was about a bunch of addicts and how they affect each other, and what happens when a circumstance changes their path and how they're affected by it.

TONY: I want to ask you a couple of questions about *Maria Full of Grace*, which I thought was one of the best films of 2004. When you first read the script for that film, did you know it was going to be something special?

Patricia Rae: Oh my god, I was so fortunate to have that come my way, and it was in a really roundabout way, because I had just moved from New York to Los Angeles, and they were actually casting this film out of New York, and a friend of mine, a very dear friend of mine, Marlene Forte, who is a wonderful actress, she recommend me for the movie to the casting directors, who she was very familiar with, because they had cast her in a film called *Real Women Have Curves*. And I went and did my auditions. But when I read the script, I didn't have any idea about Joshua Marston, I didn't know he was a first-time director or anything, but I read the script, and I said, "This is gonna be such a wonderful movie." And my character in the film, Carla, I just knew her. I knew her, because I was telling my ancestor's story. That's how my grandma got to America. It was retelling my story: How you come, how you leave your family behind, your sisters, your brothers, sometimes your husband and children, and you work and start putting money away and then you send back for them.

TONY: Even though it was a foreign film, the film really caught on in America. Why do you think that is?

Patricia Rae: I think the reason why the film resonated so much was because we're all so vulnerable in this world and this life to being put in a situation where we'll have to risk everything and anything to survive. Because America is a melting pot of nationalities, it wasn't just a Colombian story ... I think it was the story of how every nationality had to get here and the sacrifices they had to make to be here.



TONY: What was it like working with Catalina Sandino Moreno on that film? Personally, I was so impressed by her strength and honesty in the film.

Patricia Rae: She was a natural. She was incredibly gifted. I mean, she was carrying a feature film; this was like the first thing she'd ever done, film-wise. It was such an honest portrayal, and she didn't force anything. And she was fearless. And to be still, which is so hard for an actor to do in front of a camera, to just be still and let the camera see who you are, and that's a really terrifying thing for a person to do, never mind a young girl who's carrying the weight of a very big film that was being backed by HBO. So I really commend her. And she was very lovely and very gracious, and I wish her the best. She's doing very well. She got nominated for an Oscar.

TONY: In terms of your career, do you have a singular goal in mind, or are you kind of riding the wave and seeing where it takes you?

Patricia Rae: I would like to start producing and doing more material that offers more opportunities for ethnic people telling stories. I'm doing a film right now called *Los Angeles*, and it's about an interracial Mexican/Cuban couple who have been running a car wash for twenty years and their daughter's now in college. And the place is kind of run down and needs to be brought up to modern technology, but the Cuban husband,

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who's very old-fashioned, and then the Mexican mom, who I play, is very stuck in tradition, and they don't like to change things. The phrase if it's not broke, don't fix it. But the daughter who's going to college and studying business administration, she wants to jazz it up, because the place isn't doing so well anymore. And she's got a lot of cool ideas. She wants to make it more contemporary, but they're so resistant to the whole idea, because they identify, the parents, with what the car wash is to them.

TONY: As an actress, how hard is it to get paid for doing good work?

Patricia Rae: It's incredibly difficult. With the accessibility of HD cameras and the new SAG ultra-low budget and low-budget actors agreement, anybody can make a film now. It's a lot easier to get work, because there's more product that's being able to be put out there and made available. You can have a first-time director now doing a two-hundred thousand dollar film. The problem is that we don't get paid; we're going to get 100 dollars a day. So the opportunity for work is there, but it's now more difficult to make the kind of money that actors used to make. I mean, if we do a television show and we're a guest star on a series, we can make six thousand dollars an episode. But now you have things like big-time celebrities going to television doing guest-starring work, so it's a very difficult road to travel for the working actor, the layman actor that's not necessarily famous or a celebrity. The actor that used to work constantly on television now has to compete with, say, a big-time movie star for a role on a TV show. So it's hard, it's hard to get paid, and it's hard to find work that's worth doing.

TONY: As a film fan, I've always been fascinated by the audition process. As a working actress in Hollywood, have you gotten used to it yet?

Patricia Rae: I don't think actors get used to it, we just get better at it. (laughs) Because it's a very strange process to go in front of a bunch of strangers, and most of the time, you're not in costume, you're not on set, you're not in make-up, and you don't have the help of creating this uber-reality with a set and stuff like that. You're imaging everything, and most of the time, you're reading with a casting director who is not an actor, and they're not gonna give you the same emotional level that you would get if you were really doing it on a set. So you have to go in there so prepared; that's the one thing that I would advise actors. If you go in there and do your homework and understand your character and you give a performance, not an audition, you go in there and you give a performance, it doesn't matter who's in the room, because you're already doing that job. You're already performing that character. They can put a camera on, and you're ready to shoot that. That's how you have to walk into an audition: It has to be camera ready.




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