

# JODIE WHITTAKER

The actress makes her screen debut — and Peter O'Toole's day — in the excellently named *Venus*

By Jessica George Firger · Photo by Jason Bell

Brandishing the kind of veteran flair and goddess appeal that belie the fact she's just out of drama school, Jodie Whittaker makes her feature debut in December in the title role of *Venus*, starring opposite the legendary Peter O'Toole. Whittaker plays Jessie, a provincial 18-year-old Northern England girl with a thick brogue, who subsists on a wholesome diet of junk food, trashy magazines, and bad TV. Jessie has come to London to escape her neglectful family, only to be thrust into the geriatric world of her great-uncle Ian (played by Leslie Phillips) and his best friend Maurice (O'Toole), a pair of rapidly aging actors. While she quickly gets on Ian's nerves, Jessie bewitches Maurice, who takes to calling her Venus. A sweet, often strange relationship ensues between the two. Though largely platonic, it also has its dirty-old-man-dubious-moments.

"My dad saw [the film] and he said he was getting ready to put his hands over his eyes at some points," Whittaker, 24, says of the scenes in which Maurice beckons to one of her body parts (a hand, a shoulder) and things progress until Jessie decides he's being fresh and gives him a whack.

Whittaker has no illusions about playing opposite a character who could quite reasonably be called an ancient lech. "He is!" says Whittaker. "From the outset Jessie is a young, inexperienced girl, so on a basic level what does he have to lose?" Yet, for Whittaker, the film is about much more than an old man trying to cop a feel. *Venus*, she says, is about "two people finding each other and the possibilities of a life-changing experience at the beginning of adulthood or the end of one's life. Especially for Maurice, who's never met anyone like Jessie, but he finds a soul mate in her."

Whittaker, who hails from small-town life in Huddersfield, near Yorkshire, left home at 18 to pursue her childhood dream of acting, an aspiration that took her traveling for a year and then to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, where she earned a gold medal for acting. For Whittaker, this is the only work she's ever aspired to: "As a kid I used it as my excuse: 'I want to be an actor, I don't want to be a scientist,'" she says.

Whittaker was just three months out of drama school when the screenplay for *Venus*

and the prospect of working with larger-than-life figures such as Peter O'Toole, Leslie Phillips, and Vanessa Redgrave was presented to her. "At the final audition, I walked in and I've seen him so many times in films," Whittaker says. "But *oh my god* when you're in the same room with someone like Peter O'Toole, it's pretty terrifying. I felt he was a bit like royalty."

To add to the challenge, Whittaker, whose formal training was mostly as a stage actress, also had to adapt to the demands of the big screen. "I didn't know what 'hitting your mark' was. I was rubbish!" she says with a laugh. But if her next role, starring opposite Viggo Mortensen in the screen version of the C.P. Taylor Nazi-era play *Good*, is any indication, then she's certainly hitting her mark now.

