

NATASHA HENSTRIDGE

SPECIES' SEXY SEDUCTRESS

THE CANADIAN ACTRESS WHO DEBUTED AS THE GENRE'S REIGNING BOMBSHELL TURNS TO SCIENCE FICTION FOR ANOTHER ROLE.

BY DAN SCAPPEROTTI

Not since Jessica Lange was literally carried away by KING KONG has an actress experienced such a celebrated "monster movie" debut. Cast as an alluring alien in MGM's SPECIES, Natasha Henstridge effortlessly eclipsed the presence of even veteran actors Ben Kingsley and Marg Helgenberger. And, not unlike Ms. Lange, the ingenue launched her career by striking poses.

A native of Canada, Henstridge won a beauty photo contest at the tender age of 14. She received a modeling contract and, within a year, found herself packed for the City of Lights.

"I was almost 15 when I moved to Paris," said Henstridge. "My mom is terrified to travel and I have a younger brother too, so she didn't go to Paris with me."

A series of live television commercials in France and Germany, as well as a plethora of print media assignments, greeted the young model. "It was very exciting," she said. "A great



Above: Henstridge was critical to SPECIES' campaign, including Japanese posters. Facing: Posing with H.R. Giger's Harkonnen Capo chair, composed of cast aluminum, metal and rubber (180x100x55cm. Work #443b ©1993).

way to travel and see the world. I think it's a great way to experience life. The toughest part of modeling was leaving home at such a young age. When you leave so young, you leave your roots. You're just developing relationships in your life. It's hard to do that when you're running around the world. And traveling so much, you can't be with your loved ones."

One of the young actress' few regrets is that her formal education has suffered from her early entry into a successful career. "I was doing correspondence and getting tutored for a little while, but I never finished," she said a bit wistfully. "I have not yet graduated. So I'm a high school dropout. I am getting ready to get a tutor and get my high school diploma."

After two years in Europe, Henstridge returned to America where her career picked up without missing a beat. "I did a lot of TV commercials," she explained, "including assignments for Old Spice, Oil of Olay, and Lady Stetson.



When I started to do commercials I really liked it. I became more interested in doing that than modeling."

Commercials sparked a latent interest in acting and the young model was ready to make another career move. And along came SPECIES; producers Frank Mancuso Jr. and Dennis Feldman had persuaded H.R. Giger to design the title character for their upcoming film. The creature was conceptualized as a hybrid of human DNA and an alien entity. The resultant female mutation would develop, in a short period of time, from an embryo to a full-grown adult. The producers preferred the creation—christened as "Sil"—to be "scary," but without the risk of losing her sensuous appeal even when transformed into an anarchic parasite.

"I was with a commercial agent," related Henstridge, "and when he moved up into the legit division, he decided to send me out on some things. I went through the whole audition process for the role of Sil. I met the casting director and then the director, and the producers. They gave me a couple of screen tests. The process took three to four months

B: Henstridge shot ADRENALINE: FEEL THE RUSH in Slovakia. She plays a U.N. officer, circa 2007 AD.





Insuring the longevity of her SPECIES, Henstridge's "Sil" mates with Whip Hubley, prompting her physical mutation (left).



before I got SPECIES."

Being thrust into the central role in a major film was a little intimidating for the fledgling actress, but she was supported by both director Roger Donaldson and the producers.

"It was all very new to me," said the stunning blonde. "I didn't even live in California, so I didn't even know the whole process of what happens. The first time I went on the set they set it up so I was doing easier things in the beginning,

and making it a little bit more difficult throughout the film. It was all shot out of sequence. The first day I was a little nervous, but I had already gotten the role so I wasn't too inhibited. I'm not a very inhibited person. I trusted the director a lot. The first day I just followed his lead. The first scene I did was walking across the street and going up to the wedding shop and noticing these beautiful wedding dresses. We filmed in and around Los Angeles."

By the time he shot Henstridge's second screen test, Donaldson realized that he had found his Sil. "He was the one pushing for me the whole time," the actress smiled. "The producers and the studio were sort of leery to use me. I had worked with him so I knew what he was looking for from me and the character."

Henstridge was worried about preconceived notions on the part of cast and crew.

"I was expecting everybody to give me a really hard time. Being a model first you usually get that: 'Models can't act. Models are to be looked at and not heard from.' That whole stigma attached to modeling. I was really happy that people looked past it a bit and were nice to me."

Henstridge's modeling boosted her confidence; after all, she was trained to

professionally oscillate from a sour to sultry demeanor. Nevertheless, the obligations of an animate performance introduced her to a, well, very alien medium.

"The modeling helped," she notes. "It's a very different job in the sense that you're more or less skilled to be very aware of yourself in front of a still camera. Then, when you do movies, you

ADRENALINE: "My role was very difficult because conditions weren't that good. The director looked for someone who could put up with that part of it"



really have to let go of that in a lot of ways. You also have to realize how you're coming across to other people. So, in some ways, modeling helped me—and, in some ways, it didn't."

Upon subsequent screenings of SPECIES, Henstridge perceives more nuances percolating within her character. It's likely she can at least identify with Sil as a stranger in a strange land: "For a long time I was thinking she's really naive and lost in this world. Anybody can understand what that's like. Her feeling of having no parents, no family, that sort of thing. She's naive, and out there in the world just running on instinct because she's this half-alien character.

"I started to realize that she's not that good. After a while, she begins to feel human behavior in a way. Like the scene where the woman walks into the bathroom, and she gets pissed off about it. Starting to feel these human emotions, she sees this woman as someone stepping into her territory. She's very instinctual, which I thought was kind of interesting about the character, and was the most fun part to play. But it changes every time I see it in a way."

Sil's alien alter ego was computer generated, and Henstridge inquisitively dropped by Steve Johnson's effect studio to "check out the creature." But all of her visits weren't social. The actress had to endure full body casts to enhance the design of the creature. Giger, himself, would fax copies of his design drawings to Henstridge.

"I had very little prosthetic makeup," she recounted. "I didn't interact with H.R. Giger before then, but I've since met him in Zurich, and been to his house, and we met over in Cannes."

Nonetheless, Henstridge was intimately involved in two effects sequences. In one, Sil fabricates her own fiery death. To leave evi-

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Henstridge adjusted to ADRENALINE's time/budget constraints: "Albert Pyun, the director, never wanted to finish work. I pulled the ham string in my leg."

dence at the scene, she severs her thumb.

"Actors who play aged people, and have to go through serious makeup, would be laughing at me when I say I had a prosthetic thumb," grinned Henstridge. "The thumb was the longest makeup period because they kept testing for the color. They make a mold, a cast of my thumb in the position that it will be shot in. They then recreate my thumb, and make it into a

plastic rubbery material thumb. Then they put it on with spirit gum and match the color of your skin with airbrushes. They pull my thumb behind and attach the fake thumb. I cut it off. I had to cut it right too! I didn't want to have to spend four more hours to have that put on again."

The young actress had one of the most unique screen entrances in film history; her naked body smeared with gelatin, she

emerges from a cocoon. "That was my biggest effect, I guess," said the actress. "I was wet and cold and slimed up. It was kind of difficult."

The production designer built the cocoon on a stage representing the rest room on a train. The set was built upside down, with the cocoon on the ground and the toilet on the ceiling. Gel was affixed to the wall to give it an organic slime appearance. Wires were run to the cocoon to create a pulsating effect.

Henstridge would have to squeeze into the bottom of the cocoon. "My whole body wouldn't fit in there so I had to go in one leg at a time, sort of doing a split. It looks like I'm falling out, but I was actually coming up out of it. I would grab onto a trapeze bar and it pulled me up. I pulled my legs up so it looks like I make that fall. It was a very clever technique, I thought.

"It was very cold. They were heating up this jelly and stuff that they put on me for the slime in crock pots, but it was still very cold."

The most provocative aspect of SPECIES, certainly the catalyst for surplus publicity, was Henstridge's frequent nudity. Because Sil's libido expands as she matures, the stunning actress was required to strip at the drop of an innuendo.

"I didn't have a problem with the nudity," she candidly admitted. "I knew in advance that there was going to be nudity in it. I also knew why there was going to be nudity in it, and I agreed with the reasons and really didn't have a problem with it. I think that in a way it would be kind of ridiculous if there wasn't any nudity in this picture. Sil has this childlike quality about her—a naive. And it sets the character within context. She starts to realize that showing your body is suggestive of sex, and she begins to have the urge to procreate.

"I've done nudity while modeling for art pictures

and editorials, but it's very different. You take your robe off and you sit, or do whatever you're going to do, and then you cover yourself a lot while they fix the lighting. It's different than running around nude.

"They were very sensitive on the set. The director, Roger Donaldson, was so good about that. So good, in fact, that he would not only close off the set to everybody else, but close off the set to himself; he'd only look through the monitor. It could be a little awkward in the beginning and he wanted to get the best out of it. There is one scene where I come running out nude behind some cars at a supermarket. They had the whole block blocked off, so no one would come around there. So they were really very sensitive to that."

Henstridge was promptly snatched up for a role in another science fiction film, *ADRENALINE: FEEL THE RUSH*. Set in the year 2007, the film's bleak prophecy was shot in Slovakia. Henstridge plays a UN officer who is trapped in a rapidly declining, disease-ridden environment.

"It's a very surreal environment," said Henstridge. "All the countries are falling apart. I have this son and a husband and they catch this disease. They set up refugee camps in the United States because of the wars and destruction going on everywhere. These people form their own language and their own culture. When my son gets sick and my partner gets killed, I steal a passport and try to get out of being a cop.

"I meet up with Christopher Lambert, who goes through a mission with me. We hunt down this killer who not only murdered my partner, but is preoccupied with his own killing vengeance spree. He's like a monster because he's radioactive, and crazy. There's a lot of scary action."

Director Albert Pyun, who had heard about Hen-

"ADRENALINE, my other sci-fi film, was a much shorter but much harder shoot than SPECIES...only about 3 weeks. We were freezing our asses off."



SPECIES: "Sil is naive and Just running on instinct, because she's this half-alien character. After a while, she begins to feel human behavior in a way."

stridge, offered her the role. "It was a very difficult role to do," the actress said, "because the conditions weren't that good for what we would be doing and where we were shooting. The director was looking for someone who could put up with that part of it. We were filming in underground caves and old buildings, some that we weren't even allowed to be in they were so dangerous. Some of the floors were falling down. I'm on the floor, in the mud, crawling around, getting beat up, doing the stunts."

The young actress was exposed to an education in low-budget filmmaking. Henstridge learned that an action-packed film called for a great deal of physical activity. Walking down streets, browsing and looking at wedding gowns was *out*. Hanging from ledges was *in*.

"It was a much shorter shoot," said Henstridge. "Only about three weeks. It was a lot of hard work and long hours. I had to hang from this grate 20 feet in

the air. I had to climb down wearing all this wiring. I got hung from the ceiling. It was much harder than *SPECIES*."

Her co-star, Christopher Lambert, offered encouragement. "I had a great time with Christopher," she said. "He's great guy, a great actor who gives a lot. I was kind of shocked that I had such a great time, because I had heard rumors about him [laughing]. He was a total gentleman."

The glamorous blonde was amused by her first meeting with Lambert. The actor had been filming for awhile before Henstridge arrived in makeup. "When I came on the set," she continued, "and I first met him, I was covered in mud and dripping wet. He told me that he had heard, only a couple of days ago, about Natasha who had been in *SPECIES* and she was this beautiful girl. Then I came in and I was slimed down with mud. He said he looked at me and couldn't understand what they were talking about."

One of the lessons learned on the shoot was that tight schedules are inherently a consequence of low budgets; *gone* are the luxuries of a corporate financing. "Albert Pyun never wanted to finish work," Henstridge said. "Every day on *ADRENALINE* was crazy because of the things we were doing and the conditions. We were freezing our asses off! It wasn't even that cold at that time of year, but we were under castles and thick stone walls, and wet and moist and damp. We were running and I pulled the hamstring in my leg. I'd never pulled a muscle before."

Henstridge feels that an actor's career and celebrity can be constructively applied to influence social changes: "I think it gives you a little bit of leverage. If you feel strongly about

"ADRENALINE: FEEL THE RUSH is speculative science fiction. Refugee camps are set up in the U.S. because wars and destruction are everywhere."



certain things, you can make differences. I think, in some ways, you're a little more responsible than other people for making those changes if you have the power to do that. You can say a lot through art and filmmaking and things like that."

With two films under her belt, and a third waiting in the wings, does Henstridge plan to continue her modeling career? "I enjoy acting so much and I get paid to do it. I don't really need to model. So unless it's a really interesting assignment that I want to do, or it's something to promote a movie I'm doing, I don't really care about it too much. I did it for such a long time and I was getting tired of it at the end."

Unspoiled by her success, Henstridge is friendly and charming, with a distinct sense of humor. In the spring of 1994, just before the opening of SPECIES, Henstridge was asked to pose for some pictures in a baroque chair designed by H. R. Giger. The actress agreed and two separate shoots were scheduled. The first was set in the Mary Anthony Galleries in New York.

"This woman, Robin Perine, photographed me," related Henstridge. "She photographed me with a flashlight in the dark. That was very neat. The pictures of those turned out very interesting."

Perine uses a technique by which she shoots in total darkness, necessitating a nighttime sitting. Using a flashlight covered with various colored gels, the photographer trains the light beam on her subject and the camera picks up the exposed area and the color generated by the light.

During the session, Les Barany made a phone call and handed the receiver to Henstridge. On the other end was H.R. Giger himself.

"I was speaking to him on the phone a little bit during the photo shoot," said Henstridge. "So we kind of



SPECIES: Gauging a pick-up (Anthony Guidera) as incompatible, Sil violently derails their sexual union. Regarding her nudity, Henstridge says, "The director closed the set to everybody, including himself. He only looked through a monitor

got to know each other a little bit. The chair was a pretty interesting piece of work. It's 100% Gigeresque. Only a select number of people have been photographed in the chair, so it was an honor for me. It's heavy and big and kind of scary."

Impressed with the young actress, Giger presented her with a solid silver replicate of a tongue that had been originally tailored for SPECIES as one of Sil's appendages. "There are only three of them so it was a great honor," said the actress. "It's been made into a really beautiful necklace. I have it hanging in my house as a piece of art rather than wearing it as a necklace, because it's quite large."

She was also invited to Giger's home in Switzerland during a publicity junket. "We had a wonderful time," said Henstridge. "His house is a pretty trippy place. He's lived there, I think, about 25 years. When you walk in, you wouldn't have any idea what was going on inside the house. It's the strangest thing. There are drawings and statues and things of his everywhere.

"He has knocked a wall

out and has a train going through the backyard. In the backyard he has dummies hanging upside down, and all laid out in these different positions. But he's such a gentle person. I was curious as to why he draws all these things and does this kind of art. He told me it was because he has nightmares. So it's his way of expressing his nightmares. After that I felt a little better about being there, and that he wasn't going to axe me or something."

Henstridge was even granted an invitation to be a passenger on The Ghost Train. "You start off in a section inside of his house," she explained. "And then you go out these 'door flap' things. The front of the train comes to a kind of point. You go through the flaps and you go around the garden and around some circles. It's not a huge garden, but the way he has it set up it's a long ride. There are things dangling everywhere. There's always something to look at. I think two or three people can sit in the train. It's very cool. There is an engine and a car."

Dealing with the illustrator's work took a little getting used to for Henstridge,

who wasn't quite sure what to expect when she met Giger.

"He's a very nice guy," she said. "He's not bizarre like I thought he would be. In a lot of ways I think he is very humble, but serious about his art. He's not overly strange. He has this painting in his house that is really gruesome. He said 'Gee, that's really gross!' Meanwhile, I was thinking to myself, look at your art. People might say the same thing about your art. He has these human emotions that recognizes that things are weird. If something is weird or strange or whatever, he still feels those things. It kind of shocked me—because of his art I thought he would be somewhat oblivious to it."

Henstridge has decided not only to settle into her new career, but a whole new life-style as well. She recently moved to California and was married last year.

But her acting hasn't taken a back seat. Just after our last meeting she was rushing off to jet to the south of France to begin shooting her new film, BLOODSTONE, with Jean-Claude Van Damme. •