

# Sense of direction

Bryce Dallas Howard's career is heading one way – up. After a crop of powerful acting roles, she's already turned her hand to producing, and now plans to follow in her father's directing footsteps

BY MATT MUELLER

A bright, beaming presence with a noticeable pregnancy bump, Bryce Dallas Howard strolls into a hotel suite in Toronto with her publicist in tow and greets us with a giddy “Hello!”. With her copper hair swept back in a ponytail and sporting a loose grey-green top and blue trousers, she is so instantly warm, engaging and outwardly confident, you wonder why she feels the need to have a minder present. Perhaps she's not as robust as she appears, or maybe being the high-profile offspring of one of Hollywood's most powerful men brings with it an ingrained sense of caution. During our chat, Howard does reveal a hint of insecurity, but it only makes us more predisposed to like her. She might be the progeny of movie royalty, but there's no air of self-entitlement to her – merely the impression that she does indeed want to be liked.

“Defining who you are is a big deal,” muses Howard, who's been known for many things in her career. One was for being the go-to replacement for other actresses after they stepped away from projects late in the day (Nicole Kidman in *Manderlay*, Kirsten Dunst in *The Village*, Charlotte Gainsbourg in *Terminator Salvation*). The other, of course, is being the daughter of Ron Howard, onetime American sitcom superstar (*Happy Days*) turned filmmaking titan.

This has been a good year for her. She's one of a strong female ensemble (along with Emma Stone and Viola Davis) who helped turn *The Help* – an adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's bestseller about African-American maids and their white employers in Mississippi at the dawn of the civil rights era – into one of the year's surprise box-office hits in the US. Her first project as a producer, *Restless*, starring Mia Wasikowska and Dennis Hopper's son Henry as a pair of death-obsessed adolescents, debuted at the Cannes Film Festival. And in *50/50*, the tale of a twentysomething writer's battle with cancer, she plays a small but juicy part as the artist

girlfriend who tries to rise to the challenge that her partner's diagnosis poses to their relationship.

“She's not a nice girl,” says Howard of her character, Rachael. “She's dealing with something she wasn't planning on and it brings out absolutely the worst in her.”

Coming after her fearless turn as a racist socialite in *The Help* and the vicious, vengeful vampire she portrayed in *Twilight: Eclipse*, *50/50* marks the third film in a row in which Howard has been cast in an unsympathetic light. She undoubtedly has a knack for being horrible on screen (“Why, thank you,” she laughs, arching an eyebrow), but isn't she worried that the film industry will only think of her to play nasty characters? “It's eerie how naturally it comes to me,” she says, “but it's been fun. It's fun because it feels so wrong. It's that thing where you're like, ‘I really shouldn't be enjoying this as much as I am right now.’ But I like it because these kinds of characters are usually male, and a bit older. To be a young woman and get to play an unlikeable character is something that doesn't come along very often.”

The shoots for *50/50* and *The Help* couldn't have been more different. The former was shot in Vancouver, with Howard popping back and forth for a few days here and there. And it was very male-oriented, revolving around the true experiences of screenwriter Will Reiser and his good friend Seth Rogen, who also stars in the film opposite Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Despite the adversarial relationships on display, *The Help* was more of a bonding experience for Howard. For one thing, she finally got to meet the actress who has been called her doppelgänger for years. “I'm not having a bad year, but I will say that every single time someone comes up to me and says, ‘Wow, you have had the most incredible year,’ I have to stop them and say, ‘Oh no, no, no, I'm not Jessica Chastain,’” says Howard, collapsing into heaps of laughter. “It was one of the first things we asked each other. Because for 10 years people have been saying to ▶

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ABOVE Bryce with her father, filmmaker and former actor Ron Howard; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Howard in her breakthrough role in 2004’s *The Village*; as Hilly Holbrook in *The Help*; in 2009’s *Terminator Salvation*; with Willem Dafoe in *Manderlay*; as Victoria in *Twilight: Eclipse* in 2010

me, ‘Oh my gosh, you look so much like my friend.’ And she’s been hearing the same thing.”

Not counting brief appearances in her father’s films, Howard’s big break came in 2004’s *The Village*. Bryce’s parents weren’t that keen on her becoming an actress, and raised their four children on a farm outside Greenwich, Connecticut to keep them away from LA’s febrile atmosphere. That meant a childhood of mucking out the goat barn, studying at private schools and immersing herself in existentialism (she loved Camus and Sartre as a teen). And showbiz wasn’t too far away: Tom Cruise was an occasional babysitter and Natalie Portman was her partner-in-crime at a performing arts camp in the Catskills. Howard studied at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting and New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, segueing into the city’s theatre scene. She made such a big impact as Rosalind in a Public Theater production of *As You Like It* that M. Night Shyamalan cast her in *The Village*.

As for NYU, it had a profound effect on her life in other ways beyond education; she met all three men in her life at the university where they were sharing digs: one (Seth Gabel) she married and will soon be having her second child with, to join four-year-old Theo; one (Jason Lew) wrote *Restless*; and one (Dane Charbonneau) has not only been her writing partner for the past six years but, rounding out the cosy circle, “I set him up with my sister and they got married two years ago. So he’s now my brother-in-law too!”

It shouldn’t really come as a surprise that Howard, whose middle name comes from the city of her conception, has filled her life with friends who are also collaborators. Her father has had the same producing partner, Brian Grazer, for three decades and, under their Imagine Films banner, they’re behind some of the most successful blockbusters of the era. Bryce has witnessed first-hand how loyalty in Hollywood can pay off. And – like father, like daughter – she’s about to embark on her directing debut, a script she co-wrote with Charbonneau called *The Original*, which she hopes will be no less than “a *Big Chill* for my generation”.

It might have to wait until after the birth of her second child, an event that she’s no doubt hoping she’ll be better prepared for than the first. Howard suffered badly from postnatal depression following her son’s birth, and wrote an intensely personal account of her experiences on Gwyneth Paltrow’s website, Goop. Although she came through it, perhaps that explains her publicist’s presence – it’s not something she wants to revisit so close to the arrival of baby number two.

Meanwhile, she is incredibly excited about stepping behind the camera, citing her first three directors – Shyamalan, Lars von Trier on *Manderlay* and Kenneth Branagh on *As You Like It* – as a major reason why she wants to take the plunge. “I’ve become obsessed with filmmaking and the potential that film has,” says Howard. “Early on, I worked with people who did things in their own way, and I found that to be very inspiring.”

Doing it her own way and standing on her own two feet is something her parents have always pushed for, although, let’s face it, having an industry potentate in the family is undoubtedly a huge boon. Imagine Entertainment, for instance, stepped up to the plate when Bryce was looking for backers for *Restless*, and she’s not too concerned by charges of nepotism, saying simply that she wanted to make the best version of the film she possibly could. When it comes to stepping behind the camera, though, she admits to feeling a trifle nervous that her film will instantly be compared with her father’s.

“Oh man, he’s just so much more experienced than me,” she says. “It would be awful to compare a first-time filmmaker with someone who’s been working for 55 years! That’ll scare me before I even start – in fact, it might scare me into not starting at all...” Don’t count on it. ■

***The Help* opens on 28 October in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian