



She was a hooker queen in *Sin City*, a barbarian queen in *Alexander* and is an exotic dancing queen in this month's *Rent*. 'I'm taking advantage of being 26 and looking the way I do,' **Rosario Dawson** tells *Total Film*...

# Show Girl

**A**t least I'm not here doing these godawful hours talking about some dumb movie that I hated making with people I didn't like!" Rosario Dawson hoots, sitting in a Battery Park hotel room on an icy December day, chatting with *Total Film*. "*Rent* has been really fun and bumping into everybody again has been awesome. I'm going to see the movie again tonight for my fifth time!"

Anyone who survived the gruesome twosome of *The Adventures Of Pluto Nash* and *Josie And The Pussycats* unscathed, her street cred still intact, can be forgiven a bit of hyperbole about her latest movie. While her fellow pussycats languish in a post-teen queen fug (Rachael Leigh Cook) or host a tacky cable show called *Taradise* (Tara Reid), Dawson continues to be upwardly mobile, strutting her stuff in this month's urban grunge musical, launching her own production company, and even co-creating her first comic, *The Occult Crimes Taskforce*. "I'm a comic-book freak," she blurts. "I've read them my whole life."

Indeed, the image of Dawson that's seared onto our retinas like a solar eclipse is her barely-clad heroine hooker in Robert Rodriguez's blazing comic-book adap, *Sin City*. Decked out in thigh-mounting stilettos, S&M leathers and an Uzi, Dawson's Gail was the unchallenged dominatrix of Rodriguez's sex'n'sleaze epic. "My brother works in a strip joint and there's definitely a dichotomy that goes on there," says Dawson of playing a >>

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CONTOUR PHOTOS

# ROSARIO DAWSON



Rising star (clockwise from left): Dawson sings her heart out in *Rent*, with Chloë Sevigny in *Kids*, alongside Clive Owen in *Sin City* and Colin Farrell in *Alexander*.



steely streetwalker. “There are women who are victims and then there are women who get how needy the men are. That’s Gail. She may not be doing things politically correctly, but she’s doing it with integrity. She’s awesome... And that costume!” Oh yeah, that costume – more on that later.

**F**irst, let’s talk *Rent*. Junket gush aside, she is palpably proud of Chris Columbus’ adap of the award-hoovering guitar-rock opera about bohemian squatters in early ’90s, AIDS-afflicted New York. She plays Mimi, an HIV-positive, heroin-addicted stripper who’s one of the few engaging, three-dimensional characters in Columbus’ staid film. “I like doing things that aren’t very much like myself, because serious is not where I’m at. I’m more goofy and retarded than Mimi. She’s so needy, she’s like a puppy. I play a lot of girls who have issues of self-respect because I don’t like playing someone who’s always happy. It’s just not real...”

While the rest of the cast were mostly plucked from the original stage version, and therefore are a decade too old to be playing loft-dwelling rebels, Dawson bewitches the camera, which hugs her form like a melted PVC catsuit. And she’s a bit of a revelation in her first onscreen stab at singing and dancing on screen, her coy seduction number ‘Light My Candle’ one of *Rent*’s highlights.

“I didn’t want to make Mimi look like she was an incredible dancer,” says Dawson, “although you do see her personality in the dancing scenes. She’s this young girl and she’s on fire! I don’t walk

around like that personally – I’m not Gwen Stefani going to red carpet events in a bikini top. But I do enjoy and I am taking advantage of the fact that I’m 26 and I look the way that I do. And I’m open-minded enough to push myself in those directions when the character dictates it.”

Dawson brought some useful life experiences to Mimi, having grown up in a squat on the Lower East Side. In a ghetto-urban twist on that hoary Hollywood cliché of stars discovered on street corners, Dawson was indeed hired for her first film role while hanging out on her block at the age of 15.

“I was laughing and having a good time when these two men came up,” says Dawson, referring to Larry Clark and Harmony Korine, who were location hunting for their street-kid button-pusher *Kids*. “Harmony was talking a mile-a-minute,

**‘I’m not Gwen Stefani, on red carpets in a bikini. But if nudity’s required, I’ll do it’**

‘Oh my God, I wrote this character for you; I didn’t even know you but you’re perfect!’ I’m looking at both of them like, ‘This kid’s 19, this guy’s leering at me.’ I called my parents down.”

Cast as Chloë Sevigny’s best friend, Dawson only worked on the duo’s nihilist vision for four days, but it was all she needed to latch onto the stardom ladder. Her grab-bag multiracialism (Puerto Rican, Irish, Afro-Cuban and Native American) saw her cast by a who’s who of New York filmmakers, including Spike Lee in both *He Got Game* and *25th Hour*. But soon she was in danger of becoming a fearless actress with nowhere to go, sidetracked by tedious girlfriend roles and a few washouts, including *Alexander*, in which she bared all – breasts, bottom, teeth – in a spectacularly wacky sex scene with Colin Farrell. “It’s a very intense scene,” she says. “Maybe it was a little rich and indulgent but that is exactly how they all lived. It’s weird looking at it now because I go, ‘Oh, I’m naked.’ But I didn’t think about that while I was doing it...”

**T**alking in her rapid-fire chatter about everything from running with the bulls in Pamplona (“A bit crazy”) to her upcoming role in *Clerks 2* (“It’s going to offend tons of people”), she credits her enormous reservoir of self-belief to her “extremely supportive” family. In fact, the excitable 26-year-old even kept a place in the East Village tenement she grew up in until a few months ago, when she moved to LA.

Now she’s using her newfound clout to help her pals. Through her production company, Trybe, she’s producing and starring in the rape-revenge flick *Descent*, directed by her friend Talia Lugacy. She even found roles for *Rent* co-stars, Wilson Jermaine Heredia and Tracie Thoms, not to mention a cameo for Leigh Cook (Dawson’s Clique, anyone?). She’s also got the Elmore Leonard adap *Killshot* in the works, in which Dawson “does a Charlize” as a trailer park dweller. And

she has *Total Film* quivering in anticipation of the 2007 re-entry of *Sin City*.

So, back to that costume. Surely even Dawson’s seen-it-all jaw dropped when Gail’s miniature leather-wear was unveiled. “The designer goes, ‘I understand, the other actresses have changed things, like Jessica Alba’s not topless and we added material to her costume. But I made your costume as it exists on page.’ I put it on and I was like, ‘Well... let’s do it.’ She was like, ‘Oh my God!’ I went back to my hotel and she had sent me a huge bouquet of flowers. Putting on that costume puts you into what kind of character this woman is. It was awesome.”

Men (and a few women) the world over would like to send the costume designer their own bouquets of appreciation. For Dawson, who’s not afraid to push boundaries, it’s all about making the most of what she has now – and keeping a step ahead of anyone out to pigeonhole her. “I don’t take myself that seriously,” she insists. “I hope that people look at me and go, ‘I don’t know how this girl did *Sin City* and *Descent* but that’s interesting.’ That’s where my business is...”

**Rent opens on 7 April and will be reviewed in the next issue of Total Film.**