



# Class ACT

The upcoming film *An Education* is poised to make Carey Mulligan, its fledgling 24-year-old star, something of a household name. By Matt Mueller

On an all-too-typical early summer's evening in London, the air is cool, and rain lashes down onto the pavements outside St John's, Smith Square, a Westminster church that's been converted into a concert hall. And tonight it is serving just that purpose for the filming of *An Education*, the only difference being that the British coming-of-age drama is set in '60s London, so all signs of 21st-century life – BlackBerrys, big watches, iPods – have to be hidden away, while in front of the camera a cluster of suited, hatted men and beehive-coiffed women buzz about, including the film's four stars.

When Danish director Lone Scherfig gives the nod, Peter Sarsgaard and Carey Mulligan run hand-in-hand down a side street to the church's steps, where glam couple Dominic Cooper and Rosamund Pike wait shivering under an umbrella, before the four dash up the steps through St John's porticoed entrance. As soon as Scherfig yells, "Cut!", Mulligan is immediately draped in a foil wrap to stay warm. All four actors are dried off, then sent back out into the night to repeat the sequence take after take after take, although – unlike real London – at least the drizzle can be turned off until needed; it's pouring out of a rain machine.

Water is a fitting symbol for this '60s film, since it was actually conceived in a bathtub. Novelist Nick Hornby was soaking in a bubble bath reading a piece by Lynn Barber in *Granta* magazine about her youth in the early '60s when he was struck by the idea that it might make a great movie. He suggested it to his film producer wife, Amanda Posey, who approached Barber for the rights. "I was irritated by the names of the writers she was suggesting for it," laughs Hornby, the author of *About a Boy* and *High Fidelity*, "so I said I'd do it myself."

A coming-of-age story for both its 17-year-old protagonist, Jenny, and a city poised to become the epicentre of global pop culture, *An Education* is set on the brink of the swinging '60s. "It's like a little snapshot of English history that we're very close to – or our parents are," says Cooper. The *Mamma Mia!* star, a last-minute replacement for Orlando Bloom, plays Sarsgaard's best pal Danny (Pike is his rather dim girlfriend, Helen). Although seemingly sophisticated, liberated Londoners in the eyes of Jenny, the two men have a seedy sideline in casual art theft from 'the undeserving', while Sarsgaard's David has other unsavoury secrets up his sleeve.

Losing a star of Bloom's stature could have doomed *An Education*, but the strong ensemble cast they'd pulled together, which also includes Emma Thompson



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Previous page Mulligan as Jenny (far right) with Emma Thompson as Headmistress, Tina (Ellie Kendrick) and Hattie (Amanda Fairbanks-Hynes) Clockwise from top left Mulligan as Jenny (second left) with David (Peter Sarsgaard), Marjorie (Cara Seymour) and Jack (Alfred Molina); Jenny (Mulligan) with Helen (Rosamund Pike); Mulligan as Jenny with her lover David (Peter Sarsgaard)

and Alfred Molina, allowed the filmmakers to carry on. Sarsgaard is the token American in the cast – although he's playing a Brit – but it's a 24-year-old newcomer who's the film's secret weapon. Like Keira Knightley in *Bend It Like Beckham* or Kate Winslet in *Heavenly Creatures*, *An Education* will go down as the breakout movie role for this young British actress. "Carey Mulligan," says Scherfig, "is going to be a huge star."

Stepping up to her first starring role as a bright but mildly pretentious Twickenham lass being whisked off for nights on the town by Sarsgaard's charming older man, Mulligan's rise has been heady and rapid. As a student at Woldingham School, a top-notch Catholic girls' boarding school in the Surrey Downs, Mulligan walked up to Julian Fellowes when he came to speak at the school to ask him for advice about becoming an actress. The Oscar-winning screenwriter/actor took a shine to Mulligan, and introduced her to a casting director scouring around for unknowns for 2005's *Pride & Prejudice* film adaptation. In her very first professional gig, Mulligan found herself co-starring as the youngest Bennet sister alongside Keira Knightley. "It's why I've never been star-struck," muses Mulligan. "Because my first job was with Judi Dench, Donald Sutherland and Brenda Blethyn. I don't get star-struck, I just get really excited about working with people I admire."

Playing Kitty Bennet set Mulligan on a path of sterling TV – *Bleak House*, *Northanger Abbey*, the award-winning *Doctor Who* episode 'Blink' – so it seemed only a matter of time before film roles beckoned. She was first approached about playing Jenny in *An Education* way back in 2006 but, as is the nature of lower-budget filmmaking, had to sit back and wait before it finally went into production in spring 2008. Playing the waiting game was nerve-racking, but while the producers prevaricated, Mulligan did what any ambitious young actress does with an eye on the movies: she hung out in LA for a few months.

Besides signing up with an American agent, she landed small roles in Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* and the war story *Brothers*, in which she was cast alongside Tobey Maguire, Natalie Portman and Jake Gyllenhaal as a US Marine's wife. "I stand in the background and cry," she laughs. "I cry a lot in that

film. So that was fun. I was showing off my American accent to Peter Sarsgaard and all he could say was that it was really bad. But it's great to work in America. I do recognise that it makes a difference to a career. And the food's better."

Scherfig admits to being worried at first whether Mulligan would be able to carry *An Education* on her slender, inexperienced shoulders. But once they got to the set, all her fears went out of the window. "Carey's never phoney, and that's very important playing an ingénue; she does it with such purity. She's also very brainy, and her transformation from being a young girl to someone who is beautiful and sophisticated is completely believable. The big question was always, 'Will the audience like her?' And they will. They will love her."

Scherfig's right to dish out the praise. *An Education* was first unveiled at the Sundance Film Festival in January, with Mulligan's performance instantly singled out for gushing praise. The phrase 'next big thing' was bandied about by Hollywood casting directors, and the chief of 20th Century Fox suggested her for the starring role in the adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, about a society that raises human clones as organ donors. Mulligan wrapped the creepy science-fiction drama this summer, starring alongside Keira Knightley again, and is weighing up her next move. Like Jenny in *An Education*, a girl on the verge of becoming a woman, Carey Mulligan is an actress on the verge of becoming a big star.

"I was quite terrified before I made *An Education*," she confesses. "It's a real responsibility having to carry a story from beginning to end, but it's all about having good people around me. I never felt like I was out there on my own. I had Ros and Peter, who were so experienced and chilled out, and I trusted Lone completely. She was so blunt. She would come up and say, 'Don't bite your lip, it looks weird'. If it was rubbish, she would tell you. But if she said it was good, you believed her. Once you've got that trust, it's so much easier." ■

**An Education opens on 30th October in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Premiere, Grazia, The Guardian and Wonderland