

Hello, DOLLY

No one knows better the double-edged sword that is feminine beauty than Jennifer Lawrence. In her portrayal of Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone*, she shows why she's much more than just a pretty face. *By MATT MUELLER*

The phrase 'you're too beautiful' isn't likely to knock a young actress off her confidence pedestal - unless it's being wielded as the reason she lost something she desperately wanted. It's what Jennifer Lawrence was told when she was knocked back twice in her quest to play Ree Dolly - the backwoods heroine of *Winter's Bone* - a poor, proud teenager whose drug-dealing father has jumped bail and left her to pick up the pieces.

But Lawrence wasn't going to be denied. Showing the same stubbornness that makes her 16-year-old protagonist one of the best female movie characters of 2010, the LA-based ingénue hopped on a red-eye to New York to gate-crash the final auditions. Showing up lank-haired and haggard was perhaps the fillip writer-director Debra Granik needed to see past Lawrence's glamour.

"I don't think it was so much about me making myself uglier as it was me just saying, 'Don't let this get in the way,'" Lawrence says. "I think once they saw how dedicated I was, and that I showed up with icicles in my hair after walking 13 blocks in the sleet, it was like, 'You can't say no.'"

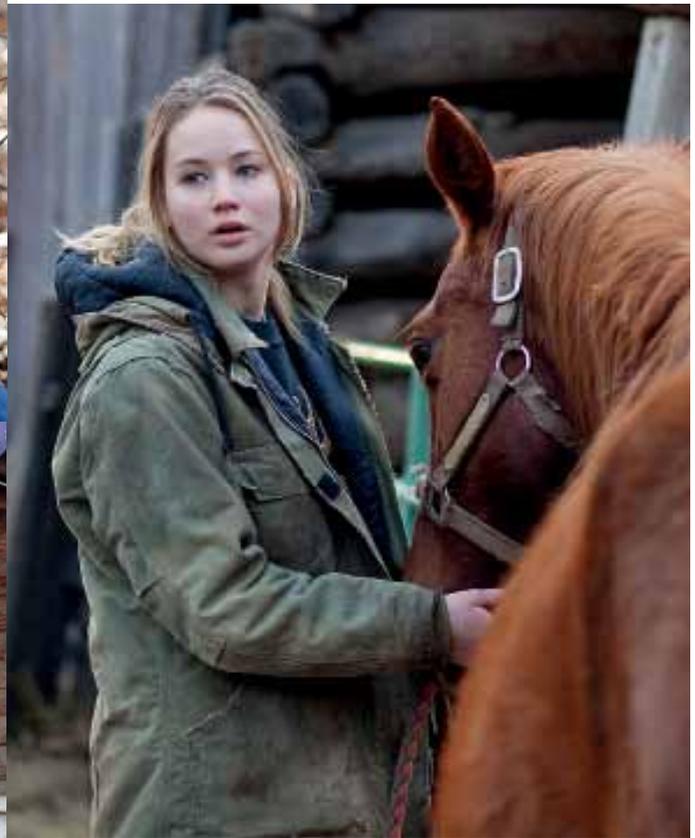
Granik indeed relented and was duly rewarded with a fearless, force-of-nature turn from her star that wowed this year's Sundance Film Festival and had US critics issuing besotted declarations about Lawrence's sure-fire Oscar odds. And, with substantial female roles few and far between, it seems foolish to bet against her.

"Of course I like hearing that, but I can't take any of it seriously," Lawrence counters. "It's kind of like preparing for your wedding when your boyfriend hasn't proposed to you yet. It will be wonderful if it happens, but I can't plan on it."

Lawrence's mother was the first to flag up the part of Dolly to her, telling her she'd be perfect for the role after reading Daniel Woodrell's acclaimed novel. "But she's my mother, so I didn't listen," she admits. "But a few years later, when I read the script, I just knew I had to play her. It's the best female role I've ever seen. I loved her tenacity and her stubbornness, and that she made her own ending out of nothing. It was fun to play someone like that, even though it was not a fun movie to shoot."

At one point, Dolly skins a squirrel so that she and her two younger siblings can eat. The task was a necessity not just for the film's impoverished characters, but for the actress, who performed the gruesome manoeuvre herself. She even had lessons. "A hunter friend of my brother's taught me," she recalls, "and, yeah, it was nauseating. But here's the weird part - I usually don't say this, because I don't want people to know how weird I am, but I love anything medical. My brother works for a medical company, and as part of my Christmas present, he let me come in to watch a knee surgery."

While her own youth is a million miles removed from Dolly's, Lawrence did grow up in the neighbouring state of Kentucky, so she demonstrates a natural facility for Dolly's accent. "It's the same accent I used to imitate my relatives, so it ended up workin' out just fine," says Lawrence, who was raised on a horse farm that her mother also ran as a camp every summer. As the first female born in her father's family for 50 years, she merrily refers to herself as 'the black sheep of all black sheep'. "The fact that I was the only girl and the youngest backfired on me



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totally. They didn't know how to raise a girl, so they just raised me as a boy, and instead of pampering me because I was the baby, they were so sick of being parents, they were like, 'Ech, just do your own thing.'

The performing bug came early, and Lawrence's obvious precocious talent took her to New York with her mum, where she started landing roles in TV and film (including the Charlize Theron drama *The Burning Plain*). In person, she slightly resembles Renée Zellweger. But, having just turned 20, she's not entirely devoid of gawky mannerisms. At one point she squirms in her chair in the minimalist suite at St Martin's Lane Hotel trying to adjust her ruffled couture skirt. "Sorry," she drawls, "I don't know how to work this dress." Is it a particularly complicated one? "They all are," she laughs, adding as a droll aside: "Just like women..."

Despite her tender years, this mesmerising young actress is approaching her profession with Zen-like focus. Call it the legacy of Lindsay Lohan, whose career wreckage offers a clarion warning to other rising stars that hard-partying lifestyles may grant you all the paparazzi exposure you want, but also leave your career in tatters. "Every time I go on set, I've had eight hours of sleep," says Lawrence. "Even if I have to get up at 4am, I'll go to sleep at 8pm the night before. I'm well rested, I know my lines and I'm a professional. That being said..." She bursts out laughing. "It was a small crew, we were all good friends and we'd all go to this bar called Waxy's. So I had a good time too." Isn't she underage in America, though? "On the record? Noooo, I just waited outside," she smirks. We get it - the wonders of the fake ID. "Yeah," she grins, "I had a fakey!" (She approves of Britain's laxer drinking laws - she's already factored in at least one pub crawl during her brief stay in London.)

With refreshing, upfront humour, Lawrence has yet to be ironed free of quirky personality traits, something that seems to befall Hollywood starlets once they reach the stage where they have something to lose. Shooting *Winter's Bone's* harrowing sequences could be tough, she admits, but as soon as 'cut' was called, Lawrence

says she lapsed straight back into her "usual, idiot, hyper, jumping-bean self". Unlike some of her more famous Method-worshipping peers, slipping into the skin of her characters is like flipping a switch for Lawrence. "Even when you see me crying on screen, I've usually just been laughing my head off. And then they call 'action', and I just turn my laughing tears into crying tears."

For Lawrence's next film, crying tears weren't much needed - it's a comedy, albeit a black one, featuring Mel Gibson as a disturbed manic depressive who communicates through a beaver hand puppet. Once again, *The Beaver's* director and star, Jodie Foster, initially refused to cast Lawrence as the high-school cheerleader who falls for Gibson's son (*Star Trek's* Anton Yelchin, now a close friend) because she wasn't convinced Lawrence could be funny. Cue another red-eye flight to prove Foster wrong.

From *Winter's Bone's* wind-lashed heroine to the stunning, immaculately groomed actress sitting before me now, it's not hard to see why Granik and Foster felt confused. But there's no arguing with Lawrence's natural-born talent. Bringing stinging authenticity to Dolly, she appears destined to become a genuine movie star, whether or not she's being showered with awards in a few months' time. For all the unbridled determination she's shown thus far, however, Jennifer Lawrence insists that her motto is *que será será*.

"I can't control what happens," she says. "I've never cried over not getting a role. I still don't really get upset about not getting roles - not out of cockiness, more in the way of what's meant to be will happen. If someone doesn't like me, there's nothing I can do. I just have to do the best I can and march on. Skin some squirrels..."

Winter's Bone opens on 17th September in the UK; The Beaver opens on 11th February

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

Film stills, clockwise from top left Lawrence as Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone* with Ashlee Thompson as Ashlee Dolly (left) and Isaiah Stone as Sonny Dolly; as Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone*; as Ree Dolly; as Ree Dolly with John Hawkes as Teardrop