

PORTRAIT

Role play – Maggie Gyllenhaal’s rise from the secretarial office to Assistant District Attorney

Only a few years ago, Maggie Gyllenhaal was “just” a hopeful up-and-coming actress, whose films were shown primarily in art house movie theaters and on TV. Then, suddenly, in summer 2008 she starred as Assistant District Attorney Rachel Dawes in the new Batman epic “The Dark Knight” – an unexpected development for many fans. This is by no means going to be the last surprise with which the daughter of a movie director and a screenplay writer is going to enchant the film world.

In an interview with talk show host Jon Stewart she admitted that in the past comic book heroes were “really not my thing”, but that she has now been “converted”. In David Letterman’s show, Gyllenhaal confessed that when she was growing up she was much more fascinated by Michelle Pfeiffer’s Catwoman than Batman. It was surely no coincidence that she was taken by the most daring female character in a US comic of the Marvel and DC Comics universe, after all Catwoman is the incarnation of a male dream and nightmare, whose shiny black coat reflects erotic fantasies and from which all established morals run like water off a duck’s back. Unlike the Catwoman of 1992 however, Gyllenhaal’s Rachel Dawes in the recent Batman epic “The Dark Knight” is an upright character. As a smart District Attorney, she comes across most of the time as hugely self-confident and intelligent, but still likes Batman to save her and wrap her in his big black cape.

Even though the offer of the role in “The Dark Knight” was her ticket to the premier league of the movie business, Gyllenhaal remained true to her acting principles, as she has emphasized in numerous interviews. She maintains that only when she is able to nurture a “constructive exchange” with the director and contribute her own ideas is she capable of doing a really good job as an actress. In the case of Rachel Dawes she was in the fortunate position of her role being “not yet quite finished” when she conducted initial talks with director Christopher Nolan. As her character did not feature in the classic Batman comics, as opposed to Heath Ledger’s Joker, she enjoyed considerable freedom in molding it. Nonetheless, she still stayed within the confines of the genre conventions, while Heath Ledger, like Jack Nicholson in his day, burst out of these confines with his performance as the deranged Joker.

Maggie Gyllenhaal has always had a weakness for the role of strong women, although she generally portrays the strength of her characters in a very unorthodox way. In Steven Shainberg’s 2002 play “Secretary”, which on several occasions has been branded a “scandalous film”, she plays Lee Holloway, the untalented office hand of a lawyer with whom she soon gets caught up in a sado-masochist relationship. The lawyer, E. Edward Grey, played by James Spader, appears to dominate her by hitting and humiliating her, but in reality Lee sets out the rules and her boss increasingly falls under her spell. However, Grey cannot accept that she enjoys and actively requests his beatings. He fires her and breaks off all contact with her in shame. The story ends in an unexpectedly positive way, and can certainly be described as having a happy end.

In the hands of a less competent director, “Secretary” could well have ended in disaster but Gyllenhaal trusted Shainberg and, moreover, she immediately recognized the screenplay’s potential. “It is really provocative and has a number of themes I had never seen before in this way – love, the world and interpersonal relationships.” She found the story fascinating and “frightening” at one and the same time, and ultimately her fascination is evident in every minute of the film. Gyllenhaal’s virtually symbiotic interaction with Spader, who is 17 years her elder, was also a rare stroke of luck. He is known from “Sex, Lies & Videotape”, “Stargate” (!) and the TV series “Boston Legal”.

Maggie Gyllenhaal comes from a real film family and in her teens even appeared in movies directed by her father Stephen, alongside acting greats such as Jeremy Irons and Ethan Hawke. Together with her brother Jake, who has already scored considerable success, Maggie made more than a good impression in films such as “Donnie Darko”, but it was “Secretary” that gave her career the big push that put her name up for potential blockbusters, even though it was to be a few years before she was to act, by now mother of a little girl, in movies with budgets stretching to hundreds of millions of dollars. And on the way she delivered a whole series of impressive performances.

Photo: Bryan Adams



In “Happy Endings” Gyllenhaal plays a young woman who has an affair first with a young man of a similar age and then with his father, played by comedian Tom Arnold. This alone is perhaps less noteworthy than the fact that in the movie Maggie reveals her talent as a thoroughly respectable singer. With her deep alto voice she breathes new life into the somewhat stale Billy Joel songs “Honesty” and “Just the way you are”. It is also possible that her singing performances sound especially authentic precisely because there was simply no time for weeks of rehearsals and voice coaching.

The role of Sherry Swanson in “SherryBaby” (2006) was probably the most difficult of her career so far. Sherry is a heroin addict who robbed a gas station and served three years for it. In that time her little daughter grew up with her brother and his wife. Her sister-in-law Lynette has long since considered Alexis her own child and tries every which way to keep Sherry away from her. When in desperation Sherry asks her father for help he becomes sexually overbearing. Although Sherry makes a serious attempt to start a “normal” life in order to be able to take Alexis back, she increasingly falls back into old patterns of behavior, even relapses and is finally forced to realize that she is incapable of being a good mother to her daughter. “SherryBaby” is a kind of “hardcore portrait” of a confused young woman who has lost her way. Sherry has the sex appeal, but not the intelligence and luck of Erin Brockovich; she lacks the courage and dignity of Thelma and Louise. Gyllenhaal plays the role of Sherry as the confusing “white trash” element at the heart of the American middle class. This acting “tour de force” is based not only on talent and hard work: For the role, the director Laurie Collyer even urged her leading lady to conduct research in women’s prisons and transition hostels, “which I don’t otherwise do”, Gyllenhall said in an interview. As such the directness, with which she lends form and voice to the tragic figure of Sherry, is based on real-life experiences, and for this reason as well seems so profoundly and enduringly unsettling.

“Stranger Than Fiction” (2006) is a very different story. Alongside Will Ferrell, Gyllenhaal plays the anarchic baker Ana Pascal, who refuses to pay part of her taxes for ethical reasons. This role however, in which she takes a rare non-stop comic turn, also seems to be custom-made for her, at least according to the director Marc Forster, in whose opinion “Maggie contributes so much passion and soul” like hardly any other actress of her generation, and Lindsey Doran, the film’s producer, sees in Maggie the movie’s “biggest surprise” and praises her as a “free spirit”. Even though tax inspector Harold Crick, played by “Saturday Night Live” star Will Ferrell, has the uncontested main role, Maggie Gyllenhaal as Ana makes an essential contribution to the success of this romantic and slightly quirky comedy, in which, by the by, Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson and Queen Latifah also shine.

At just 31, Maggie Gyllenhaal has already worked with the greatest actors from three generations, has two Golden Globe nominations to her name and has maneuvered herself into a prominent position in one of the most successful screen series. She will soon be in cinemas in “Crazy Heart” alongside Jeff Bridges, and in other roles with Colin Farrell and Robert Duvall. She is currently filming the fantasy comedy “Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang” together with Ralph Fiennes and Emma Thompson, which will be in cinemas in 2010. It seems as though there is no stopping Maggie Gyllenhaal, at least not with legal means.

Christian Arndt

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