

PORTRAIT

The real Renée – or: Miss Zellweger is more than the sum of her roles

In July 1966, The Left Banke had the first of its two big hits with the song *Walk Away Renée*, which reached number 5 in the Billboard Hot 100. Interestingly, the Renée in the song really does exist: At the time she was a teenager – a pretty, blonde dancer, who is now an opera singer and singing teacher living in the Bay Area. Little is known about the whereabouts of the song writer Mike Brown aka Michael Lookofsky, who penned a musical tribute to Renée, but he will have been delighted that in January 2009 a new Renée wearing a stunning red dress strutted to the sounds of *Walk Away Renée* on stiletto heels exceeding 12 centimeters on David Letterman's talk show. Renée Zellweger wore the same shoes in what was then her new film, the romantic comedy *New In Town*. Zellweger beamed, Letterman grinned, and the film became incidental. Not surprisingly really, as film critics had already unanimously declared it to be a poor Oscar vehicle for the female protagonist or any of the other actors. Then again, Renée Zellweger has had an Oscar on the shelf for some time.

Do you suppose that Emil Erich Zellweger, an engineer born in St. Gallen, Switzerland, and his spouse, midwife Kjellfried Irene Andreassen, had even the slightest inkling that the blonde ballerina Renée of the pop song existed when they gave their daughter this name in spring 1969? At any rate, the “real” Renée did not want to become either a ballerina or a singer, though she would have one of her greatest successes in the musical *Chicago* alongside Richard Gere. She is first and foremost a versatile actress, who can act equally well in slapstick comedies, gruesome horror movies and period dramas, and has at times given truly brilliant performances, for example as Tom Cruise's love-sick assistant in *Jerry Maguire*. She received a Golden Globe for her performance as a traumatized wife who loses her grip on reality in *Nurse Betty*, and for the Civil War drama *Cold Mountain* she even won an Oscar.

The road to fame did not always run smoothly, winding via the cheerleader team at school, an acting class at college – she actually wanted to become a journalist – and appearances in commercials and minor roles in cult films such as Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites*. She landed her first major role in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*. The fact that the sequel to the splatter classic was a great flop should be attributed more to the director and script than the actors. While *TCM* was for absolute beginners and geographically close to home for the actress born in Katy, Texas, Zellweger fared much better with the murderous independent road movie *Love and a .45*. In 1994 she received an Independent Spirit Award for the lead female role as the best novice. But it was her Hollywood debut in 1996 that was her big break, acting alongside Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire*. As single mom Dorothy Boyd, who is absolutely loyal to and hopelessly in love with her chaotic boss, she enchanted cinemagoers and critics alike.

Her inimitable pouting smile, complete with dimples, has won her many millions of fans since then. Ultimately it is to *Jerry Maguire* and the brilliant mixture she played of simple-mindedness and defiant pride that she owes the biggest role of her life so far – at least in terms of dress size – namely as the tubby lead in the comedy *Bridget Jones' Diary*. With her often embarrassing and simultaneously endearing clumsiness and a somewhat involuntary sex appeal, Zellweger's Bridget not only wins the hearts of her co-stars Hugh Grant and Colin Firth. The American also pulls off the incredible coup of upstaging two Brits in a British comedy.



Because she not only seems to appreciate but also to need variety, Renée Zellweger danced away her extra “Bridget” kilos for the musical adaptation *Chicago*, and only just missed out on an Oscar for her performance as Roxie Hart in 2002. But she might have felt comforted by co-star Richard Gere, who commented in a press conference: “Chicago works because of her” and pointed to Zellweger. Then, one year later, she “finally” and deservedly got her Oscar – for the Best Female Supporting Role in Anthony Minghella’s *Cold Mountain*. The epic Civil War drama starring Jude Law and Nicole Kidman was soon followed by larger meals and another Bridget Jones blockbuster, namely *The Edge of Reason*. Although, as was to be expected, the critics were less euphoric about the sequel, this excursion across the Atlantic also turned out to be a great success. In 2006, the Texan excelled once again in a British film with a British subject. In *Miss Potter* she plays Beatrix Potter, the children’s author, who refuses to comply with her parents wishes in Victorian England and falls in love with her publisher.

Now, exactly 15 years after *Chainsaw Massacre*, la Zellweger is once again in a hapless horror movie: *Case 39*. For the Hollywood debut of German director Christian Alvart, Renée plays the steadfast social worker Emily Jenkins, who wants to protect a ten-year-old girl who is evidently being abused by her parents and whose life is in danger. But hardly has Lilith moved in with Emily when more and more people die in a mysterious and cruel manner. Although Zellweger is convincing in many scenes with her tough yet warm-hearted manner, *Case 39* is a problematic film for Paramount, above all because of the poor script that several critics have complained about. Though it was made back in 2006, the start has repeatedly been delayed and now, following several festival screenings, the costly horror film will hit movie theaters in early 2010 in the United States and various European nations.

Zellweger’s erratic choice of roles in recent years is a mystery, and the only conceivable connection between *Case 39* and her two subsequent films, which however started earlier, namely *Appaloosa* and *New In Town*, is the sentence uttered on many occasions by the great British comedians of Monty Python’s *Flying Circus*: “And now for something completely different.” It is difficult to believe that one and the same person is equally capable of portraying blood-curdling moments in a nocturne horror film, the fragile female role in a Western and an involuntarily funny businesswoman in a romantic comedy. At any rate, in *New In Town* Zellweger gets another opportunity to display her considerable comic talent: As manager Lucy Hill, she is sent from Miami to New Ulm, Minnesota, to pep up an unprofitable branch of her company. This not only involves her surviving a roughly 50°C drop in temperature, but also getting acquainted with a totally alien world inhabited by amazingly nice people. As a kind of Bridget Jones antithesis, the slim and willowy Lucy, wearing a mini skirt and helmet, teeters on high heels through the factory and predictably enough falls flat on her face, to great effect. She is to be paired off with a union representative of all people – Ted, played by Harry Connick Jr. – and it comes as no great surprise that these two totally incompatible people fall in love with each other. But before they do, Lucy has to fall on her face a few times, because she catches her heel in a metal grid, slips on the copious quantities of ice or ricochets off a frozen door. Admittedly, the slapstick scenes are worth seeing but the humor does not match the quality of *Bridget Jones* or *Nurse Betty*. *New In Town* flopped with numerous U.S. critics: The *New York Times* critic found it “flat” and *Variety* dubbed it “shamelessly clichéd.”

Accusing a Western of being stereotyped is roughly like accusing a car for resorting to such banal aids as wheels and an engine in order to move. In Ed Harris’ *Appaloosa* the major roles are occupied by men, horses and guns. Renée Zellweger’s part as the attractive widow Allie French may be a minor role on the face of it, but it is by no means secondary. After all, she also got her Oscar for a supporting role. Allie is flirtatious, timid, manipulative and allows doubts to develop regarding her faithfulness to Virgil – the type of woman for whom the real Renée presumably has little sympathy. But given her Texan roots she will have found it easier to identify with the Western clichés; at any rate the portrayal of a widow who is actually not all that mournful amongst the more recent highlights of her career, and as she herself commented with a touch of self-irony in an interview, this “minor role” is by no means a bad day’s work for her either as a girl or an actress between Ed Harris, Viggo Mortensen and Jeremy Irons. She celebrated her latest success in a tragicomic role which was truly tailor-made for her: In the dramatic comedy *My One and Only*, she sets out after divorcing her unfaithful husband (Kevin Bacon) in search of a solvent and serious husband... Not an easy topic – in the movies or in real life. Let’s see what the girl Renée, who turned 40 in April, has up her sleeve next. One thing is for sure – it won’t be boring...

Christian Arndt

Phonak is delighted to welcome Renée Zellweger as the 37th ambassador for the Hear the World campaign.

In this role she joins a series of celebrity artists including Plácido Domingo, Harry Belafonte, Diane Kruger, Bryan Adams, Moby, Annie Lennox, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Bobby McFerrin – to name just a few.

An overview of all ambassadors can be found at www.hear-the-world.com.