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*Photography* Stefanie Schne

## JUMPING FROM LESBIAN

lover to sci-fi action chick,

Radha Mitchell is Australia's latest in-demand acting export. She talks to Alex Craig about

Hollywood and other catastrophes. →





in the midst of her character Syd's sexual bewilderment she's transparent, and real. Radha Mitchell inspired praise for "sweating it out as a bundle of intellectual and erotic confusion" (*The Guardian*). Oddly, she also encountered the babe factor.

"I've had object-of-desire questions – you know – 'you've played an object of desire, how do you feel about that?'" she says in a booming American anchor voice, before breaking into a laugh. "I don't know how to answer that because that wasn't really the character to me. That was only one way of asking a question."

In outlook, Radha Mitchell's as non-celeb as they come. She might inspire gushing, but control that impulse. It's likely to embarrass her, and you. It's Sunday evening in LA and Mitchell's hanging out. She's been immersed of late in a feature called *Everything Put Together* about a woman coming to terms with her baby's cot death. Conversation with Mitchell is punctuated by her easy sense of humour and a lot of "I don't knows" to questions attempting to dissect her rising fame. But it's not youth (she's 25) or self-consciousness (she's too natural) that's got Mitchell hedging. She's smart and too open to experience to limit her horizons. Describing how she came to get the role in *High Art*, she says "it was part of a roving phase I was going through, go anywhere, and I was open to whatever was going on". Angst-free, she's living proof that freedom truly is a state of mind.

Take the question of evading typecasting. Her two breakout roles involved lesbianism: In *Love And Other Catastrophes* as Danni, Frances O'Connor's long-suffering girlfriend, and in *High Art* as a lowly assistant at a photo magazine who falls in love with a sad, heroin-addled Ally Sheedy. For a celluloid moment or two, she might have been pigeonholed for pushing females (indeed the 'what's it like to kiss Ally Sheedy' question has been asked too often), but Mitchell doesn't subscribe to the notion that straight roles might have been harder to get because she was just so good at queer. She doesn't seem to have even considered it. "If you have a strong enough personality and you're tenacious enough to pursue what you want, I don't think an association with something can define you completely."

And nor has that happened. Mitchell will be seen on the screen this Australian summer in two vastly different roles: as space pilot Carolyn Fry in the sci-fi thriller *Pitch Black* and as Tamara, the 'hottest girlfriend on the north shore' in *Kick*. The latter is an Australian teen romance about a private school boy's secret desire to leap into ballet. Mitchell essentially plays a supporting role but gets to try her hand at comedy. "It was fun to take the piss out of myself after so much drama," she says. "[Tamara]'s sweet, she has really good intentions but she doesn't necessarily have the maturity to play them out. I'd like to do more comedy. It's a weird tone – you have to be a little bit self-conscious in the midst of your performance which sort of hypes it slightly. I find that interesting."

*Pitch Black*, directed by David Twohy (*The Arrival*) and co-starring Vin Diesel (*Saving Private Ryan*) and Cole Hauser (*Good Will Hunting*), presented further challenges. About the crash landing of a spacecraft on a desert planet populated by aliens in search of a feed, it involved big budgets, big sets and big bugs. Shot in Australia in the desertscapes of Coober Pedy, Mitchell experienced the physical rigours of, well, being an action chick. →

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being in the desert was amazing but it was freezing. Part of the story was we were covered in dirt the whole time and whenever I wanted to have a shower there was this tiny sprinkle of water – they don't have very good irrigation there – and it was freezing. It was winter, but we had to wear hardly any clothes because it was supposed to look like a really hot planet and they sprayed water on us to make it look like sweat and it was always cold water – really icky.”

Her character isn't quite a Ripley, however. “I have a tendency to make everything internal – I'm like an internal action hero,” she laughs. “In the end Fry's a hero, but in the middle she doesn't really know who she is or what she's doing. She has to find her courage.”

Mitchell took boxing classes and Pilates in preparation. “It was an opportunity to access machoness which I've never really understood before. It was a different way of thinking, very physically driven and about how tough you are, how much shit you can take, and how confident you are in your opinions. It's not really about being a good communicator.”

Hitherto used to independent films and passion projects, Mitchell's first fully fledged Hollywood movie has opened her eyes to tinseltown politics. “When you start paying people well it becomes less about passion and more about power and how people are going to benefit from it in the long run. There's a political infrastructure in a big budget film and a lot of sacrifices get made ... during the filming it was hard to know what it was going to be, but having seen the film I'm totally satisfied with it.”

Raised in Melbourne, Mitchell edged into acting through work as a child model. She landed the children's tv show *Sugar & Spice* but stepped out of showbiz during high school, intending to become a photographer. She didn't act for four years, but then life happened. “When I finished school I went to Bali for a month with my Dad and I decided I wanted to travel the world and have a unique life.” She reasoned that getting a role on a soap would be the best way to finance her globetrotting. But fate had other plans. “I ended up going to university and becoming more selective about the kind of acting I wanted to do. Then I got *Neighbours*, which was ironic because it was at a point when I really didn't want to do a soap!”

Mitchell played Ramsay Street's token greenie Catherine O'Brien (“I was disappointed with the way they treated environmental issues ... they kind of took the piss out of things that are very serious and important”) but she wasn't really destined to be a Lisa McCune gracing *TV Week* on high rotation.

Part of Mitchell's talent is in becoming the character so completely her performance quietly sneaks up on you to deliver an emotional wallop. She's a character actress, not a personality, but with her burgeoning fame, is she in danger of becoming a Hollywood ingenue? A handbag for a Brad Pitt vehicle (albeit a smart handbag like Minnie Driver)? “I just don't think I've got the credentials for that. There's a certain look and certain kind of appeal you have to have that I don't necessarily worry too much about having; but no I don't think I'm in danger of that. Despite how cynical you can be about the scripts that come out of here what they do have is a much greater ratio of interesting roles for women.”

Mitchell's too busy to spend a lot of time contemplating fame. She's been co-producing *Everything Put Together*, which was shot on digital video, and has two more projects on the boil, both set in India. Far off into the future she would like to direct. “It's nice to be able to express your own ideas and be active in empowering them. I think digital video is going to revolutionise film because everyone can make a film and there's no waiting around. We shot in three weeks and there wasn't a minute of down time.”

Right now LA is her base but she comes back to Australia often. “The people that I love are [in Australia], my friends and family. There are people that I love here in LA as well but I know when I think of me I think of Australia.” The alien-in-LA angle is a hard one to resist, however. Mitchell's friend, photographer Stefanie Schneider took these polaroids with another pal, Australian singer Max Sharam, appearing alongside her. “What I like about the polaroids is the instant gratification. So many things you have to wait for in life but Steffie's photos you get straight off the mark.”

With *Pitch Black* Mitchell looks set to achieve, if not instant stardom, then instant recognition. Fame, Mitchell says is “amazing”, but it's not a state of being. She shrugs it off easily. The art of the thing, of making great films, is where Radha Mitchell's passion is really spent.



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