

WW

(Shannyn Sossamon plucked from a DJ gig at Gwyneth Paltrow's birthday party to star opposite Heath Ledger in *A Knight's Tale*; Rosario Dawson approached for a role in *Kids* while sitting on a Manhattan stoop), Hollywood loves a good discovery story. Then there are the rare individuals like Naomi Watts, who make names for themselves the old-fashioned way: by blowing people away with their talent.

Two years ago, in David Lynch's dark Hollywood fable *Mulholland Drive*, Watts gave a bold, raw performance that few actors this side of Jessica Lange, Meryl Streep, or Julianne Moore would have the guts to attempt, let alone the chops to pull off. Even though *Mulholland* made a paltry \$7 million and split critics wildly, the British-born, Australian-raised Watts was so good in it that after more than a decade of sporadic work in mostly forgettable projects, she emerged a freshly minted star.

Taking swift and shrewd advantage of her new status, Watts jumped from the art house to the multiplex as the lead in the horror thriller *The Ring* (which earned nearly \$130 million), then showed her comedic range in last summer's Merchant-Ivory comedy *Le Divorce*.

Prior to *Mulholland Drive*, Watts, who turned 35 in September, was known less for her work than for her close friendship with Nicole Kidman, whom she met when they were Sydney teenagers vying for the same bikini commercial. But with the way things are going, they may soon be vying for the same Oscar. After years of having to scrape for every job she got, Watts has six films in the can (including the comedy *I Heart Huckabees*, with Mark Wahlberg, Jude Law, and Dustin Hoffman, and *Ned Kelly*, about the Australian outlaw hero, with her former boyfriend Heath Ledger), and at least four others in the works (including a sequel to *The Ring* and a new version of *King Kong* from *Lord of the Rings* maestro Peter Jackson).

But first up is *21 Grams*, a somber meditation on grief, guilt, faith, and fate from Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, whose 2000 debut, *Amores Perros*, established him as a filmmaker able to handle weighty themes with both power and sensitivity. In *21 Grams*, the title of which refers to the amount of weight a person is said to lose at the moment of death, Watts stars as a suburban wife and mother whose life, following a tragic car accident that kills her husband, intersects with those of Sean Penn, as a math professor in dire need of a heart transplant, and Benicio Del Toro, as an ex-con who has become a devout Christian. The film, which won acting prizes for all three of its leads at the 2003 Venice Film Festival, unfolds in a fragmented narrative style that disrupts traditional chronology to reveal events gradually, accentuating the pain and confusion of its characters' circumstances.

Watts was so taken by the concept that she agreed to do the movie before she even read the screenplay. "I had seen *Amores Perros*, which I thought was genius, so I really wanted to work with Alejandro," she says. "He came to see me on the set of *The Ring*. First he told me what the meaning of '21 grams' was; then he said, 'I want you to do my film.' I just said, 'Absolutely, I don't care what the role is.' When I got the script six weeks later I couldn't believe it. From page one I thought, *This is better than anything I've ever read.*"

LOS ANGELES CONFIDENTIAL: Was the *21 Grams* script written in the same disjointed structure depicted in the movie?

NAOMI WATTS: Totally. Even reading it, I knew it was going to come together. It's about paying attention and waiting to see how it unravels. I think that's great, and I think audiences will get a lot out of it. Afterwards you feel so much more stimulated, as if you've had an active involvement with the film. It makes you feel better about that experience.

LAC: How did you prepare to play a character who has to cope with such a devastating tragedy?

NW: I sought out groups where people who are grieving the loss of someone get together and express their feelings, and I listened to them speak about their experiences, with all the twists and turns and ups and downs. Some of them were saying good-bye to a loved one over a period of time, and for some of them the loss was very sudden. But what was consistent were the feelings. It's so painful. I particularly connected with one woman who lost her daughter to cancer, just from reading her words, because she documented every moment leading up to it and every moment after it. It took me night after night to read it, and it really helped me to get in touch with what [my character] would be going through, and the fear of aloneness, and the feeling that there's no point in living anymore, and wondering how she would ever carry on with her life.

LAC: Between the serious subject matter and intense actors like yourself, Sean, and Benicio, what was the mood like on the set?

NW: Alejandro chose the people he wanted for these parts very carefully. And I think it was very important that we all tried to see how many different ways there were to play a scene. Alejandro has great ideas, and is extremely prepared, but that doesn't mean he wasn't open to our ideas, which was wonderful. There was an enormous amount of respect all around. I think I was probably the most excited to be there, but everyone was excited. I didn't actually get to work with Benicio until the last two weeks, and that was great because I had spent all this time with Alejandro and Sean, and then there was this new energy with Benicio.

LAC: You've said that while you're making a film you listen to music to put you in the right frame of mind for the particular story and character you're working on. What did you listen to during *21 Grams*?

NW: I listened to a lot of Björk. She has a very expressive voice that goes in so many different pitches and levels. Sometimes it just seems like shrill screaming, and other times it's very soft, but it expresses so much.

LAC: Not many actors would be brave enough to go to the dark, vulnerable places you went in *Mulholland Drive* and *21 Grams*. What draws you to roles like that?

NW: I just like to play characters that sort of bring us together as human beings, and to say

