



## Jessica Chastain wants to be an actress, not a celebrity

Jessica Chastain, an Oscar contender for 'Take Shelter,' 'The Help' and 'The Tree of Life,' is happy to have her work seen but uncomfortable with fame.

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Actress Jessica Chastain (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By Rande Dawn, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
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Reporting from New York— — Jessica Chastain is clearly up for just about anything. On this warm November night she could be sitting cozily inside a buzzing hotel restaurant surrounded by chandeliers, candles and ivy trellises. Instead, she's gamely agreed to be interviewed in the hotel's garden, and is now swaying gently in a wooden swing, articulating with a wide-open, shining face and fluttering hands about what it was like, once upon a time, to be "the most unlucky actress in Hollywood."

Hard to believe now, of course: Today, Chastain has at least three films putting her in Oscar contention: "Take Shelter,"

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"The Help" and "The Tree of Life." ("The Debt," "Coriolanus" and "Wilde Salome" are also Chastain films released this year, though they're less likely to have award season legs.) The pale, angular, striking redhead with the wide, questing eyes may have had to float around the small and big screens for seven years before those films made it out, but ever since they did — starting earlier this year — she's been impossible to forget.

But before she was everywhere, she says, she was nowhere. "I would be attached to these beautiful projects, with Al Pacino or Terrence Malick and Brad Pitt, or Helen Mirren and for some reason ... the companies would just keep getting sold," she recalls. "It was like, 'Gosh, I am the most unlucky person.'"

In what appears to be a Chastain characteristic, however, the glass was always half-full. "I took advantage of the delays and kept working. The great thing is it created a blank slate," she says. "A director could see me without having knowledge of a performance that might have typecast me, so I took advantage of that a lot. This year ... is the flip side of that."

It's hard to catch an actress at the crossroads in her career, a place where she has the luxury to swing back and forth between semi-obscure and breakout fame. Chastain is in such a spot now. On one side, she's the Northern California gal, a firstborn child out of five who started out dancing (and still has the "ugly toes" from being able to go up en pointe) and forged into acting without knowing a single person in the business.

"Maybe being first [born] gave me a sense of like, 'I'm going to find my way! I'm going to do it!'" she suggests.

Chastain started her arc toward the other side by earning a scholarship at Juilliard, and banging around in such TV shows as "Law & Order: Trial by Jury" and "Veronica Mars" for a few years until all of that hard feature work just took off. And now she's having to deal with some of the biggest challenges of her career, including figuring out how to swing into the mainstream of success, keeping her open heart and earnest eagerness intact.

Already she laments feeling treated differently once she's revealed as a movie actress. At a recent dinner party, a lively

conversation quieted once she told the strangers she was talking to what she did for a living. "Immediately, I could see their eyes change," she says. "The conversation stopped being this free, equal thing. They separated from me. But I don't want that to happen — how can I play normal people if I'm separate?"

Working next to Pitt showed her what being separate is like: "There were paparazzi trying to get pictures of him, and when the film came out, do you know how many people were asking me what he was like as a parent? That's none of my business!" she says. "I remember thinking that for your whole life, there's going to be someone who wants something."

Her openness and sincerity, qualities that she telegraphs so clearly in her performances, are precious commodities and, at this stage, Chastain keeps them on her sleeve. It's almost hard to imagine that one day she'll have to draw them in a little deeper and keep the things that allow her to play an idealized mother, or the embodiment of grace, out of sight for her own protection. She already says she'll stop doing interviews when the questions become about her, rather than the work.

"I love talking about the films, I love cinema. But me ... that's so uninteresting," she says.

Many would disagree, even if the sentiment makes sense. For now, Chastain's hat trick of performances threatens to undermine the career she's worked so hard to build up. No matter how award season wraps up, she's going to have to fight hard to prevent her "it" status from flipping into celebrity of blockbuster proportions. Expect more indie films with strong characters, or perhaps a



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return to the theater. Whatever she does, however, she'll do it with grace.

"Right after 'Tree of Life' came out, I started hearing about strategies for my career," she says. "And I made a decision that I wasn't going to do anything based on a strategy. If I don't continue to challenge myself and risk failure, I have no business being an actor. I'm not an actor to be a personality. I want to see every part I take like a master class. And you know what? I'm going to fail sometimes. And that's OK. Because when you fail, you learn more."

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