



Venus rising

JODIE Whittaker has lived in London for five and a half years, the last three of them sharing a flat with her best friend in Muswell Hill. In an expensive-looking embroidered top and sleek dark bob she is every inch the trendy young Londoner. Until she opens her mouth that is, when she gives herself away as a proper Yorkshire lass.

Sat in the café of the Almeida Theatre, Islington, where she is appearing in Michael Attenborough's new production of Clifford Odets's 1938 play *Awake and Sing!*, the petite actress talks about being back at the Almeida, sharing the stage and screen with the world's greatest actors and her plans for the future.

Awake and Sing! opened at Almeida on August 31. The play tells the story of a lower-middle-class three-generation Jewish family living in an apartment in the Bronx in the 1930s. Whittaker plays Hennie, the daughter of the piece.

This is not her first appearance at the Islington venue. Michael Attenborough, who is artistic director of the theatre, cast a young and inexperienced Whittaker in Maxim Gorky's *Enemies* in May 2006. She is immensely grateful to Attenborough for having given her this chance.

"When he cast me in *Enemies*, I'd never done an RP role outside of drama school, had not really got anything on my CV that he would have seen, but he auditioned me and cast me from that," she says.

In January of this year she appeared in *The Chain Play*, a one-off fundraiser performance of a play written by six writers, which the cast were given just two weeks to rehearse. She loves the theatre, both for its location – Whittaker is a long-time devotee of the Angel's shops and restaurants – and for the fact that she feels "looked after" by its passionate staff.

Whittaker found the show's five-week rehearsal period particularly enjoyable because she was already familiar with the way Attenborough works with a cast.

"You spend a week around the table, everyone on the same page. It was a very ensemble rehearsal, even though it's a play about individual journeys."

Stockard Channing, star of the 1978 cult movie *Grease* and more recently, *The West Wing*, is the only American in the play. Whittaker describes her as having "a natural energy" that helped the non-American company get to grips with a culture and sense of humour not their own.

Whittaker admits to initially feeling a little overawed by Channing, whose stage, film and television career spans four decades.

"I was so star-struck the first week," he said.

The cast bonded quickly though and any nervousness soon dissipated. Whittaker says of working with Channing: "It's really nice to



YORKSHIRE-born actress JODIE WHITTAKER, who lives in Muswell Hill, admits to being awe-struck when she found herself playing opposite Hollywood legend Stockard Channing in the latest production at Islington's Almeida Theatre (inset)

know that people are this normal; that they've done so much work and can still be really nice ... she's just really funny and lovely."

This positivity and kind-heartedness is typical of Whittaker. Only a few months out of drama school – the renowned Guildhall School of Music and Drama – she was picked from hundreds of actresses for the role of Jessie in the film *Venus*, starring opposite Peter O'Toole, Leslie Phillips, Vanessa Redgrave and Richard Griffiths.

Whittaker received numerous newcomer award nominations and was lauded by critics for her performance but is self-effacing when discussing her success.

"There were four auditions over about four weeks. It's really exciting to know that there are so many actresses out there giving directors and casting directors a run for their money.

"I can say this because I was lucky enough to get it: I know that I wasn't the better actor, it's just to do with what worked, what accent, the things you can't control."

Venus was Whittaker's first film and a steep learning curve. "It was hard because I

had no idea what I was doing. I had no experience of watching myself or of knowing what is theatrical, what's film. It helped to be working with such a talented and experienced cast.

"If you're going to learn from people, my god, you'd pay billions for that opportunity, and I got it for free," she says gleefully, amazed at her own good fortune.

Venus opened many doors for Whittaker. Since its release she has appeared on stage at The Trafalgar Studios, as well as the Almeida, starred in the BBC drama *This Life +10* and made two films, *Good* and *St Trinian's*, both of which are in post-production.

She does not take for granted the situation she has found herself in and is candid about the effect of this first film on her career.

"I think that every job I'll now get will be to do with *Venus* because it just will be. I could never ever stop appreciating that."

Unassuming, beautiful and charming, this Yorkshire lass will go far.

By **JO CAIRD**