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cover story



Photo By Steve Payne

ELLEN PAGE RAW TALENT BUSTS OUT IN GRITTY MOUTH TO MOUTH

By CAMERON BAILEY

MOUTH TO MOUTH written and directed by Alison Murray, with Ellen Page, August Diehl, Maxwell McCabe-Lokos and Eric Thal. 97 minutes. Playing at the Moving Pictures Festival Of Dance On Film And Video, Friday (November 4), 7:30 pm, at the Royal Cinema (608 College). Continues November 11-18 at Camera Bar (1028 Queen West). Rating: **NNNN**

This time next year Ellen Page might be a movie star. Or she might grow into one of the best actors of her generation. Or both. Right now she's just a girl sitting in a Parkdale restaurant grooving on the tunes they're playing. She's tiny, and with her engineer's hat pulled tight over her eyes she looks even smaller. As soon as I walk in she yanks off the hat. It's a surprising move for someone so clearly shielding herself from the world. But then, that's Page – massively sensitive, suddenly bold. It's what movies feed on.

So this time next year she'll be a name. That's when 20 million people around the world will have seen her in a full-body leather suit playing Shadowcat in X-Men 3. Others will see her tear up the screen in Hard Candy, as a girl who takes revenge on a pedophile. But real fans will track back before her Hollywood debut and her American indie breakout to her first leading role, Mouth To Mouth. Playing a girl seduced into a street-kid cult in Europe, she shows all the torment and vulnerability that could catapult her to stardom – if stardom is what she wants.

Mouth To Mouth gets a special screening at the Moving Pictures Festival this weekend, then goes on to a run at

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ratings key



● = Critics' Pick

NNNNN = Excellent, maintains big screen impact

NNNN = Very good

NNN = Worth a peek

NN = Mediocre

N = Bomb

No rating indicates no screening copy

Camera Bar. As Page's director, Alison Murray, makes her way to join us at Mitzzi's Sister, the 18-year-old actor explains what draws her to the intense roles she's chosen.

"It's juicy, man!" she exclaims. "All these characters, they have balls!

"If I read something and it grabs me, I just wanna go for it."

Putting herself in the shoes of her parents reading the script for Mouth To Mouth, she admits, "It would be scary for anyone to have their daughter go off to shave her head and have sex on acid and stuff like that. But they believe in me, and I'm really lucky to have that." She laughs, "They're good kids!"

For Page, shooting Mouth To Mouth in Portugal and Berlin changed her life.

"I'd never even gone to Europe before," she begins. But then the music in the restaurant changes and she stops cold.

"I love this song," she says. "It's The Anthem Of A 17 Year Old Girl, by Broken Social Scene. Emily Haines from Metric sings it? When I turned 17, I was very excited because I was like, 'This is my song!' And I'd be all mellow and angsty walking down the street listening to it."

That was a year ago. Where were we?

"When I first met Alison, I was really scared," Page recalls. "She just intimidated the crap out of me. I was like, who is this lady? We were about to start a very intimate process: my first time in Europe, I was 16 years old, I was doing things on film I'd never done before."

After shooting Marion Bridge years ago with director Wiebke von Carolsfeld, Page found herself again befriending her director on Mouth To Mouth.

"I really like to bond, because I can get really emotional, really neurotic, and I really, really want to be able to trust someone," she says. "I have to admit it is better with women, because I guess I feel safer, especially shooting more delicate material."

Not that this movie is in any way girly-girl. Page's character is a raging street punk, and the film draws on Murray's background making aggressive dance films in the UK. Every now and then, little shards of choreography jut their way into Mouth To Mouth, which is why it qualifies as a Moving Pictures entry.

Page has no dance training ("I was always a soccer player"), but she recalls spending a day with Murray in Lisbon "listening to Queens of the Stone Age and hopping down the street." She and her director were finally in sync.

Murray shows up to join the conversation, and it's instantly like two sisters punching each other on the arm.

"Are we friends?" Murray asks Page.

"Are you kidding?" Page jokes back. "You're such an asshole!"

"I've tried to get Ellen to leave me alone," Murray deadpans. "I tried to change my number."

The sparring is both sharp and loving, and it hints at what Page and Murray have been through together. The European shoot was hard enough, but Murray also wrote a sex scene for the 16-year-old Page and Eric Thal, the man who plays her cult leader.

"I felt horrible making her go to this place," says Murray. "Her

character consentingly, but through a lot of coercion and manipulation, gives up her virginity to this horrible man who also happens to be, like, three times her size. I felt like a pornographer. It was a really unpleasant experience to watch that. But I didn't want it to be comfortable or pleasant for the audience to watch either. It's not supposed to be remotely titillating, and I don't think it is."

On the night of the shoot, Murray recalls, "I wanted to get it over with quickly."

"That didn't happen," Page interrupts. "It took so fuckin' long. And those cobblestones were cold."

Clearly still a raw memory. But "ultimately," Page says, "it's a pretend sex scene. Boo hoo. And I was getting paid to do it. And I wasn't actually being penetrated." She laughs awkwardly and pauses. "It seems silly to dwell on it."

Murray has nothing but praise for her actor.

"She didn't filter or hide her confusion, her pain, her uncertainty," she says. "That's what I needed from the performance. It's her ability to stay open and show those things that makes her so good to work with."

"There's an urgency to teenage experience that I certainly remember and that I think Ellen brought to making the film. It's to do with the newness of being in the adult sphere, and the importance of everything that's happening to you because it's the first time."

"So that was really exciting to have. As a jaded 30-something, even though I wrote the script there are some things I couldn't create on the screen on my own without Ellen. There were some things I couldn't even tell her to do as a director. She found those things, and then there they were in front of me."

That's why Murray isn't anxious to see Page become a movie star.

"I think she's better than a movie star," she says. "There's something sad and whorish and plasticky about movie stars. I wouldn't want to see Ellen turn into one of those."

"I don't think she approves of my latest decisions," Page interjects.

But Page is glad that X-Men 3 director Brett Rattner saw her in Hard Candy and that she's getting the blockbuster experience.

"It's very different from what I'm used to," she says. "You'll have four cameras shooting at once while 30 explosions go off and Hugh Jackman's smoking a cigar."

And, she adds, "I never pictured myself in a leather suit. Who does?"

But "it gives me a lot more opportunity," she insists, to do her favourite thing in the world.

"I just love it so much," she says about acting. "When I get passionate, I'll give you everything until I collapse. That's not in any 'Look at me, I'm a saint' kind of way. It's very selfish in a way. I'm doing this really awesome exploration, and it's like a drug, because I completely disappear."

MOUTH TO MOUTH (Alison Murray)

Rating: NNNN

Ellen Page stars as a teenager sucked into a street-kid cult in

Europe. It's a terrific performance by a young actor on her way up, showing layers of aggression, fear and euphoria rarely expressed with such immediacy and precision.

Even better, director Alison Murray uses the cult story to tap themes of belonging common to any kid. Though the story has the intense feel of a European underground film, the conflicts are universal. There's also some surprisingly effective use of movement to say what words sometimes can't. Mouth To Mouth is brazenly original, and a dead-on portrait of a young woman looking for an alternative. - CB

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