

Thrilled with her latest film – in which she gets to ride an elephant and kiss ‘handsome, sweet’ heart-throb Robert Pattinson – Reese Witherspoon is deeply happy off-screen too. Newly married and on good terms with her ex, she’s keen that her children inherit her work ethic and optimism Interview ELAINE LIPWORTH Photographs JAMES WHITE

Reese

While filming the sweeping Depression-era drama *Water for Elephants*, Oscar-winning actress Reese Witherspoon fell hopelessly in love. Not with her leading man, the devastatingly attractive Robert Pattinson – although she does describe the British *Twilight* star as ‘handsome, sweet, thoughtful and sensitive’ – but with her other, decidedly wrinkled, 9ft-tall co-star: Tai the 42-year-old elephant. It was, the actress tells me, love at first sight. The director, Francis Lawrence, took Reese to the California elephant sanctuary Have Trunk Will Travel to meet Tai, who plays Rosie in this compelling love story set in an American circus, and she signed on for the film without a second thought. ‘I couldn’t say no,’ she says.

Reese shines as Marlena, the equestrian star of the Benzini Bros Most Spectacular Show on Earth, a struggling but colourful circus. When Marlena’s horse has to be put down, the circus owner buys the elephant to pull in crowds and revive his ailing fortunes, taking on Robert’s character as Rosie’s keeper.

‘Having such a close relationship with an animal was magical and intense,’ says the 35-year-old actress. ‘To spend five months with Tai was amazing. I so rarely cry when I leave

movie sets nowadays, but I just burst into tears on Tai’s last day – it really got to me.’

Reese was already an experienced horsewoman, but for this film, based on Sara Gruen’s bestselling novel, she performs a series of breathtaking routines with the 9,000lb elephant – without ever using a stunt double. ‘In one scene Rosie stands on a platform which makes her about 20-feet tall, and I stand on top of her with no harness, no rigs, nothing – I am holding on with one hand, and it is terrifying. It’s a very intuitive communication based on trust that she won’t drop me and I won’t hurt her. When she picks you up in her trunk, she could crush your hip, but she manages to just grab you tightly enough that you don’t fall.’

The first time I meet Reese is during a break from filming on the set in Los Angeles, where they’re shooting a circus parade at 20th Century Fox studios. Her costume of pink sequins, feathers and halo of platinum blonde ringlets conjures up the allure of old-school Hollywood as she rides Rosie the elephant through town, waving to the delighted crowds of extras who line the pavements. Marlena’s look was inspired by 30s screen siren Jean Harlow. ‘The glamour is amazing,’ says Reese, whose fabulous costumes in the film range from slinky, halterneck evening gowns to today’s

spangled leotard. ‘They just don’t make movies like this any more!’

Robert Pattinson, 25 this week, plays Jacob, who is studying to be a vet, but has to drop out of university when his parents die, and joins the circus instead. There is an instant chemistry between Marlena and Jacob as they bond over their love for the elephant. But the relationship seems doomed, because Marlena is trapped in an abusive marriage to the volatile ringmaster (played superbly by Christoph Waltz, who won an Oscar last year for *Inglourious Basterds*).

Their romance develops against the odds – ‘Jacob kind of melts her heart,’ says Reese – and Marlena inevitably ends up in bed with him. ‘I’ve got to say it was a little disappointing,’ she laughs. ‘Rob had quite possibly the most hideous cold of any co-star I’ve ever had to do a love scene with. I was spraying the sanitiser trying not to get sick myself! We had a brother/sister kind of relationship,’ she adds. ‘I know his girlfriend [*Twilight*’s Kristen Stewart] really well, and he’s met my husband.’ (Reese married Hollywood agent Jim Toth in March.) It wasn’t the first time the pair had worked together, if you count Robert’s fleeting turn as Reese’s son in *Vanity Fair*. ‘I was 27 and he was 17,’ she smiles. ‘We didn’t really know each other very well.’ And ➤



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'I've
got the
greatest
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Left: Reese with Christoph Waltz (left) and Robert Pattinson in *Water for Elephants*. Right: with her new husband, Hollywood agent Jim Toth

◀ the scene ended up on the cutting-room floor.

How times have changed! Obsessed admirers hovered around the *Water for Elephants* set in Piru, the small Californian town where much of the filming took place. 'There were really young girls out until 4am, sitting on the roofs of cars holding signs [saying they loved him], waiting to see him. Where were their mothers?' exclaims Reese, who has two children, 11-year-old Ava and seven-year-old Deacon, from her first marriage to actor Ryan Phillippe (of *Gosford Park* and *Crash* fame).

'It is an incredible phenomenon. Rob and I were at a photo shoot together the other day and the photographers were saying, "Kiss him", and I said, "Do you think I want to get killed? Women all over the world are going to kill me!" But you know,' she says, 'he's actually as sweet and lovely as he seems on screen.' I tell her that Robert paid her similar compliments when I met him recently, raving about her looks and personality.

After the movie has finished filming, Reese invites me for tea in Santa Monica at a beach-front hotel not far from her home in LA. 'Hi, honey,' she says, all Southern warmth and hospitality. Today she is sharply contemporary, in a wine-coloured Roland Mouret sheath dress and Armani platform sandals. Her blonde hair is glossy and straight, framing a heart-shaped face and vivid, sparkling blue eyes. It has been just a few weeks since her much publicised wedding to Jim Toth at her country home in Ojai, Ventura County. As a leading agent, her new husband must be used to his clients (who include Scarlett Johansson, Tobey Maguire and Matthew McConaughey) living in the spotlight, but I wonder whether he is finding it strange being the focus of attention himself. 'He thinks it is totally bizarre.' Is it easier having a relationship with a man who isn't an actor? 'I wouldn't say it's easier; every relationship has its own dynamic. But it helps that he understands what I do for a living.'

She's reluctant to reveal much about her

husband, except to say he's great with her children and 'a great guy, wonderful and handsome'. But she's open and insightful about relationships – and about what persuaded her to exchange vows for a second time. 'I think you have an instinct when you're with the person you want to build a life with. You learn more as you get older about what you need in a partner,' she says. 'It's definitely about partnership and love, especially when you have children.' Would she like more children? 'Sure, yeah,' she says.

There is no attempt to whitewash the challenges she's faced in the past few years. 'I've had ups and downs, emotions that haven't always been sunny,' she says, 'and it's really important to have a support system. I think the early part of raising children is very physical and then the later part is very emotional. It's complicated making big decisions about how to guide a life and soul in this world. I'm very lucky that I have really good girlfriends.'

'I have a very optimistic mother – she's taught me to see the bright side of things, and when you have children you don't have a choice. You can't just sit around and feel bad about yourself. You've got to take them to school, you've got to pick them up. They look at you as the guiding compass of how to behave in life.' She pauses for a moment and flicks her long fringe out of her eyes. 'Some days I didn't want to get out of bed, but as someone said to me when I first had kids, "Being a parent stops the horrible cycle of self-obsession."'

It is impossible to imagine that Reese was ever self-obsessed. She has clearly inherited her mother's sunny outlook and has handled post-divorce family life in a constructive way. On good terms with her first husband (who is now dating *Mamma Mia!* actress Amanda Seyfried), she says, 'We co-parent very well together. I am quite conservative. I think children actually like to have rules and boundaries.' When I tell her I took my own 12-year-old daughter (also called

Ava) to see *Water for Elephants*, she looks concerned, because there are scenes where her on-screen husband is violent towards the elephant (though animal welfare officers were on the set at all times to make sure the animals were well treated). I reassure her that my Ava loved the film and, although affected by the emotional story, didn't find the scenes too disturbing; she came to the press event with me and was overjoyed at meeting Tai the elephant. 'I don't let my children see scary things,' says Reese. 'I worry about them having nightmares. But I'm pretty open minded and we talk a lot.'

'Being a parent is the hardest thing on earth,' she continues. 'It breaks your heart when your children are unhappy and you feel incredible joy when they are happy. It's a great equaliser, too – you feel very close to other people who have children. The night I won the Oscar [Best Actress for *Walk the Line*], I was out till 2am, and I remember I had to be up at six the next morning to pack my daughter's lunch and get her to school, and I thought, "This is real life."' She laughs. 'It's nice to be honoured, but the real world is about caring for other people. And I would never deprive my children of that wonderful feeling of working hard to get something,' she adds. 'I remember really wanting a bag when I was 15, and my mum said, "OK, you can babysit and teach at summer camp to pay for it." That's such a gift.'

Reese's down-to-earth values were instilled during a happy childhood in Nashville, Tennessee, with her older brother, her father John, an ear, nose and throat specialist, and her mother Betty, a nursing professor. 'My brother and I ran around and climbed trees and played with the neighbourhood children. And I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, which I think was very formative, spending so much time with older people.'

A natural in front of the cameras, Reese was appearing in commercials by the time she was 12, and at 14 she starred in her first film, *The Man in the Moon*. But she had every intention of following in her father's footsteps and won a place at the prestigious Stanford University, using acting jobs to help pay her tuition fees. 'I thought I was going to be a doctor. But I started becoming more successful as an actress.' She left college to pursue acting full time, motivated by determination and a rigorous work ethic. 'You have to be focused and tough because it takes a tenacious personality to deal with rejection. When I first came here [to LA], all I heard was, "No, not right – not tall enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough." But I didn't really care about their opinions. I'm stubborn.'

Her first big leading role was in *Pleasantville* in 1998, which was followed by a part in *Cruel Intentions* (with Ryan Phillippe). In 1999 she

starred in the witty satire *Election*, and then came the career-changing *Legally Blonde* in 2001. There were also strongly reviewed roles in *Sweet Home Alabama*, *Vanity Fair* and *Just Like Heaven*, proving that she is equally adept at drama and comedy. And with her company Type A Films, she has produced *Legally Blonde 2* and *Four Christmases*, in which she also starred.


She was 29 when she won an Oscar for her portrayal of Johnny Cash's second wife, singer June Carter Cash, in the 2005 biopic *Walk the Line*. Could she relax a little after that? 'No,' she says adamantly. 'If anything it makes you feel, "Oh gosh, I have to live up to that," and it's difficult because as an actor you're at the mercy of other people creating opportunities for you to work.'

Does she think her success is the result of luck or sheer talent? 'I do think it is a gift to be empathic enough to be able to play a character,' says Reese frankly. 'I'm a very empathic person. I travel around the world, and I started thinking about what fame means, and how I can use it to help other women. My mother instilled in me a desire to give back.' Her extensive commitments include a role as Global Ambassador for the cosmetic company Avon, campaigning to stop violence against women.

Reese's mother has clearly been her greatest inspiration. 'She'd studied child psychology and understood that you can't stop development and growth. She always wanted me to keep growing, keep succeeding. The other day she said to me, "You've no idea of the pain you feel in your heart when your children leave home, but you've raised them to want to leave and that actually means you did a good job." I just can't imagine that heartbreak.' I tell her I know exactly how her mum feels: my elder daughter will be leaving home in a couple of years. 'Oh I'm sorry, you're going to cry,' she says, putting her hand on my knee. We both laugh. It's a moment between mothers that speaks volumes about her: no matter how focused she is, humanity and compassion come before fame and success.

And Reese, thankfully, is one of the few actresses who doesn't complain about fame. 'I have the greatest fans in the world. I was out shopping with a girlfriend before the wedding and a group of women from Oklahoma came up to me. One of them said [she switches into a Southern drawl], "We just love this guy you're with, we think you should marry him."' Reese's silvery voice erupts into bubbles of laughter. 'They all want to congratulate me on my marriage. You know, I have a great job, I get to work with the greatest people on earth and wherever I go people hug me. I am very, very lucky.' **Y**

Water for Elephants is on general release



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