



SLOW BURN

Patricia Clarkson braves 130 F temperatures to play a woman falling in love...at a glacial pace

BY INGRID RANDOJA

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atricia Clarkson, the consummate supporting actor, finally gets to play the lead.

Filmmakers have cast the whisky-voiced Clarkson as wife, friend, mother and mistress in films such as *Pieces of April*, *The Green Mile*, *Far from Heaven* — the list is long — since she starred as Elliot Ness's (Kevin Costner) wife in 1987's *The Untouchables*. But it took Montreal-born director/writer Ruba Nadda to set Clarkson free in her tender love story *Cairo Time*, casting her as an unassuming married woman who falls for an Egyptian man (played by Alexander Siddig).

Clarkson, now 49, was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, the youngest of five girls. She moved to New York City at the age of 18 to attend Fordham University, then the Yale School of Drama, and she hasn't looked back, acting steadily for the past 25 years.

Clarkson was in Los Angeles when we spoke to her by phone about *Cairo Time*.

Q: Tell me about your character, Juliette.

A: "Juliette is not like Patti [laughs]. She is a quiet, self-effacing woman. She's an ordinary woman and that's what attracted me to her — playing a woman who's been a good wife and mother and who doesn't realize that there is anything wrong with her life. In fact, she is startled to realize that there is this need inside her. I had to sit on my hands, both figuratively and physically, she is such a distilled character."

Q: What's so lovely is that the romance between you and Alexander Siddig is so subtle, bubbling under the surface.

A: "The subtlety is enormous. I tell people the most erotic thing I do in this movie is drink a cup of coffee. This relationship is not moved forward in inches, it's moved forward in fractions. That's Ruba's doing. You could not have such a real, adult romance without her passionate and disciplined writing and direction."

Q: And the film gives you the chance to shine, as a leading actor.

A: "Rarely, as a woman of a certain age, do you get the opportunity to play a woman who goes on such a journey. I was blessed to be given the opportunity."

Q: Even if that meant acting in 100 F heat in one of the world's most chaotic cities?

A: "Actually, it was 130 F in the White Desert, outside Farafra. We were the first film allowed to shoot there. It was an incredible place, it was like being on the moon, it really was. But I began to love the oppressive heat. I'm a Southern girl, I grew up in New Orleans so I am used to the heat."

Q: I've read that you do a lot of charity work in New Orleans.

A: "I do what I can, it's my hometown, it's part of me. My mother is councillor-at-large, and she loves the city more than anyone in the family. It runs through her blood. And the good news is that the tourists are returning, and that is good news because the city depends on the tourist economy. But there are still parts of the city that are in shambles and government money is owed to the city."

Q: You have another film opening early next year, *Shutter Island*, directed by Martin Scorsese. I know you're not allowed to talk about it, but can you at least tell us who you play?

A: "A woman in a cave."

Q: A woman in a cave?

A: "Yes, a woman in the cave, that's who I play [laughs]."

Q: What was it like to work with Martin Scorsese?

A: "Martin is incredible, an incredible director, but so is Woody Allen [Allen cast her in both *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *Whatever Works*] and Ruba. In the last few years I have worked with Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese and Ruba Nadda. How amazing is that? I was thinking, 'Watch out Patti, don't get hit by a bus, your luck may have run out.'"

Ingrid Randoja is deputy editor of *Famous*.