

OVER HERE MISS ZELLWEGER!

Until recently, Renee Zellweger did not have the instant recognition factor of a true Hollywood star. But getting the part of Bridget Jones has changed all that. Now she is the real thing, and although she remains effortlessly charming and down-to-earth, everyone wants a piece of her. Interview by Christa D'Souza

Renee Zellweger is thrilled. So thrilled, she is almost squeaking with excitement. Why? Because I have decided to bring the family retriever along today. Knowing Zellweger's own dog Dylan, aka Woof, is languishing 6,000 miles away in LA, while his mistress is in London filming *Bridget Jones's Diary*, I thought it might cheer her up a little on this wet and windy Saturday afternoon. It has been a bit of a hassle, given this is a no-dogs hotel and we have to rely on an understanding member of staff to sneak us in via a tradesmen's lift, but obviously I made the right decision.

STEVEN MEISEL/A+C ANTHOLOGY
'Oh my God,' Zellweger cries, kicking off a pair of slip-on kitten heels and falling to the carpet on her knees. 'Look at you, you are so-o-o cute, yes you are, yes you are. Oh God, this is the best thing that's happened to me in a long time. Get over here, you tart you, so I can give you a great big kiss.' Then she lies down on the floor to do just that, with such heartfelt affection it seems cruel to tell her how

revoltingly indiscriminate our retriever is when it comes to what goes in her mouth.

'Yeah, yeah I know,' says Zellweger fondly, 'you're disgusting, aren't you, just like Woof, huh? Cow dung, anything, you name it, you'll eat it...' and continues thus for at least 10 minutes, maybe more, while the animal lies on her back with her paws in the air, thinking Christmas has come early. 'OK then,' she says, finally getting up and still addressing the dog, 'do you think you might like a little water? What do you think? Still or sparkling?'

Zellweger, 31, who first dented the public consciousness three years ago as Tom Cruise's goofy yet intense Girl Friday in *Jerry Maguire*, looks a little different from the way she did then. The trademark squint is still there, as is the tinkly-tonky little voice and that faint wryness about her velvety features which so captured us all in Cameron Crowe's masterpiece, but the extra stone she has had to put

on for her role as the calorie-counting Bridget Jones – all those pints of Guinness and protein powder shakes and omelettes dripping in butter – have subtly transformed her into someone else. Someone, frankly, you wouldn't look twice at if she were sitting opposite you on the Tube.

But therein, perhaps, lies the reason why it was she, rather than Helena Bonham Carter, Emily Watson or Kate Winslet who snagged the coveted \$3 million role. And why nobody recognised her when she walked into Picador – the publisher of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* – to work undercover as 'Bridget Cavendish', the boss's new 'intern'. (The film's production company, Working Title, felt that this experience would best equip her for the role.)

Not that you would ever describe the new Zellweger as fat (she is far too small-boned, too petite, for that, and her lily-white legs are still in exquisite shape), just a little on the puffy side, with a bosom and a stomach and the vague hint of a double chin, all perfectly complemented by an unremarkable black sweater and elasticated-waist skirt, now covered in a film of dog hair. Exactly the sort of figure, in other words, you'd expect of someone who didn't exercise, who sometimes binged and drank Chardonnay every night. Which must have been a tough call for someone who is normally an American size two, weighs seven-and-a-half-stone and feels weird if she doesn't exercise every day.

'Yeah,' chuckles Zellweger wryly, 'London's a little different from LA, where there's such a heightened awareness about appearance, and physicality is so heavily scrutinised. But here the billboards and magazines aren't nearly so infiltrated with eensy-weensy, bitty women.'

'The novelty of eating pretty much what I want has worn off now. I did put on a lot more weight than I needed to... but actually I was real glad, because I was in such a hurry to get it done.'

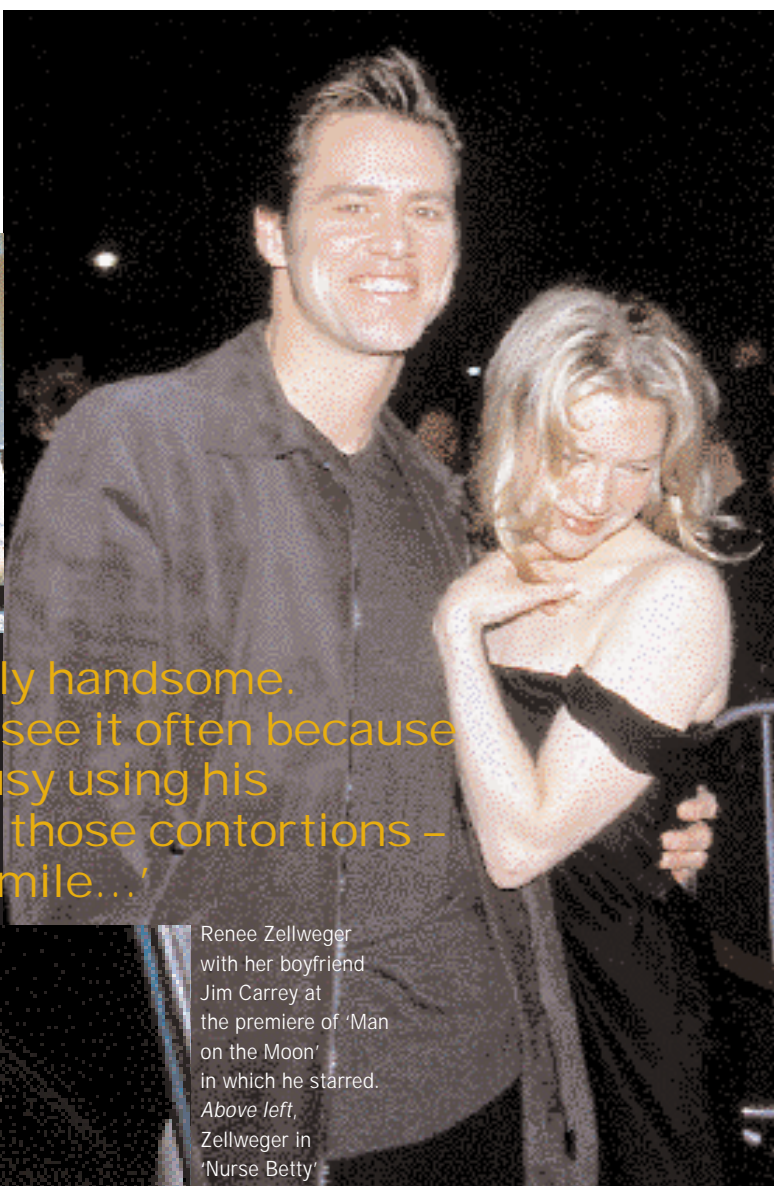
Zellweger is not yet quite a household name – in part, perhaps, because of her somewhat unpronounceable surname. She is, however, riding an extraordinarily high crest at the moment, appearing twice on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine in the space of 18 months, and being hailed by Hollywood as the next Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock. Certainly *Nurse Betty*, the latest noir-ish offering from Neil (in *The Company of Men*) Labute, and one of two films she has out next month in the UK, should secure her position.

In it she plays an endearing shiny-eyed nut from the sticks who witnesses her husband being brutally scalped to death (by Morgan Freeman), and then travels all the way to LA in pursuit of her favourite soap opera character. It is, without doubt, Zellweger's best role since *Jerry Maguire*.

Then there is *Me, Myself & Irene*, the latest comedy by the Farrelly brothers (of *Dumb & Dumber* and *There's Something About Mary* fame), which tells the tale of a schizophrenic Rhode Island cop (played by Jim Carrey), who is dumped by his wife for an Afro-American dwarf, and whose dual personalities fall in love with girl on the run Irene (played by Zellweger). Predictably shocking, it features Carrey voiding his bowels on a neighbour's lawn, snatching a baby off a mother's breast so he can have a drink, and intermittently threatening Irene with a large dildo. But the real piquancy of the film is what happened off screen, namely that Carrey had fallen in love with his female co-



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Renee Zellweger with her boyfriend Jim Carrey at the premiere of 'Man on the Moon' in which he starred. Above left, Zellweger in 'Nurse Betty'



Above, Zellweger with her dog Dylan, aka Woof. Above right, with Jim Carrey in 'Me, Myself & Irene', the film that sparked their romance



star. At first, his love was unrequited, and America's favourite funny man found himself wandering around the set like a 'whipped puppy dog', as one of the Farrelly brothers told *Vanity Fair*, when Zellweger daintily refused to succumb to his charms.

Eventually, however, she gave in, and soon after they finished filming, the couple were spotted outside a restaurant in New York 'playing Twister' as *People* magazine put it, in the back of a limousine. Since then, the couple have become a glamorous fixture in Hollywood (with Woof's approval, of course), and Carrey – whose former marriage to Lauren Holly, the actress he met on the set of *Dumb & Dumber*, recently ended in divorce – is a frequent visitor to London while Zellweger is filming over here. Not that we can really talk about it.

Indeed any mention of Carrey – who sprang to fame in *The Mask* and as Ace Ventura, the pet detective who could talk out of his bottom – sends Zellweger into an instant panic. 'Mmmmm,' she goes, a blush spreading across her slightly swollen features when I ask at what point she actually fell in love. 'Well, let's see. We had a really, really fun time together on the film. I mean, I don't know how you want to define that – nothing, er, happened – but we had

ALPHA, REX

a great time working opposite one another. It was fantastic.

'And he's really, really handsome, too,' she adds somewhat earnestly. 'It's funny, you don't get to see it too often because he is so busy using his face in all those contortions – but that smile...'

Renee Zellweger was born in Texas, the daughter of a Swiss-born engineer called Emil, who liked to dismantle television sets in his spare time, and a Norwegian-born nurse called Kjellfried, whom he met on a boat trip to Denmark. Brought up in the 'little itty-bitty town' of Katy, 40 minutes west of Houston, with her older brother Drew, Zellweger spent most of her early childhood outside – riding her bike, swimming in the ditch when it flooded and going hunting for crayfish. A popular, athletically inclined teenager, she was the quintessential all-American, playing basketball on the school team, dating a footballer and becoming a cheerleader, which didn't always tally with the rather strict European atmosphere at home. 'I think I spent my entire junior high career grounded for leaving my Carmen rollers on,' she snortingly confesses.

It was only as a student at the University of Texas, after getting cast in an advertisement for the American Beef Industry ('It was 212 degrees outside and we all had to wear wool sweaters and berets but it was fun. Can you imagine that?'), that she discovered a love for acting.

By 1994 Zellweger was 25, she had moved to LA (driving herself across the desert from Houston to Hollywood in a little Honda which her father had fitted with a CB radio), and appeared in seven films, including the cult 'stoner' movie *Dazed and Confused* as well as *Reality Bites* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre: the Next Generation*, in which she starred opposite her former fellow student Matthew McConaughey. But although she was beginning to receive some critical acclaim (namely for *A Price Above Rubies* in which she played, of all things, a Hasidic Jew, and an indie project about a pulp-fiction writer entitled *The Whole Wide World*), Zellweger was still by no means a familiar name.

She was merely another struggling actress, living in a tiny flat above a garage, and making ends meet by working nights in a bar called Three of Clubs, where she frequently and rather embarrassingly found herself cleaning up after actors such as John Cusack and Ben Affleck, whom she had met on the set of *Dazed and Confused*. Most embarrassing of all, however, while on this set, she once made the mistake of taking a pack of chewing-gum from one of the food tables set up for the principal actors and actresses, and was promptly yelled at in front of everybody by one of the catering staff.

Zellweger remained so poor that when rehearsals started for *Jerry Maguire* – the film that catapulted her into the big time – she was still drying her laundry on the back of a sofa. 'It was a drag, and it was totally humiliating, waiting for the work to start so I could get paid,' she says cheerfully. 'But it wasn't like I ever went to LA and hopped off the bus with my suitcase going, hey, I've arrived! I knew the reality. And it was perfectly rewarding, working in a bar, having my own little secret about what I did during the day... it was like school: you take your cumulative knowledge and then you go on to the next place.'

As for the gum incident: 'Oh God, I wanted to cry at the time,' she says. 'I remember just walking away and shivering. But it was a great lesson. It was like, OK, that's how it feels to be treated so dismissively. Put that one on your list. It's just a process that happens. And, to a certain extent, it's still happening now.'

Part of Zellweger's charm is that she does genuinely believe this – as those who have worked with her will attest. 'She was extraordinarily down-to-earth and friendly,' says her former 'boss' from Picador, Camilla Elworthy, the only one from the publishing house's publicity department who was in on the game, 'and she was also incredibly good at her job, doing the ring-rounds to all the literary

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editors and helping us position books for 2002. In fact, I remember one scheduling meeting where the deputy publisher was so impressed by her comments that she came up to me afterwards and wondered whether we should be offering her a full-time job.'

While she was there

Zellweger certainly never played the Hollywood star. She offered to make coffee for meetings, and even ran out to get some cakes for a party to celebrate the promotion of a fellow worker.

'It was good-luck-on-the-other-side-of-the-shelf cake,' explains Zellweger. 'He gave up his desk for me, and I went out and got them because he had been so nice to me. The amazing thing was that all the girls ate the cake too! That was a real learning experience for me, I'll tell you. From where I come nobody actually *eats* the cake.'

Interestingly, all of this is delivered in an American accent, for not only has Zellweger been method eating for the part of Bridget Jones, she has also been method talking, conducting her latest *Vanity Fair* interview – much to the bemusement of the American journalist – entirely as if she were British. 'Yah, well, it's a habit I wake up with,' says Zellweger, lapsing into it momentarily. 'It usually starts when I get in the car every morning and start talking to Mark [her big, burly driver currently sitting outside the door], but then when I get back at night and make phone calls home, I switch back.'

Another learning experience, says Zellweger, has been getting acquainted with the ways of the British press. She is horrified at some of the spurious things they have said about her – that she bitched about Cameron Diaz's split ends for example, or that she is pregnant with Jim Carrey's baby; how they have so exhaustively dug for skeletons (there are none, unless you count Sims Ellison, a musician and ex-boyfriend from college who committed suicide, or the short stint she did in a topless bar, fully clothed of course, to pay for her tuition fees), and how some of them have greeted her role as the iconic Ms Jones with such mean-spiritedness, insinuating she has been given the part not because of her abilities but to ensure box-office success in America.

'I won't whinge, I won't bitch, I won't cry and moan, because I understand it,' says Zellweger, her high-pitched, childish voice a perfect foil for her steely message. 'One is fair game, but that doesn't mean it is easy. It's a very demanding experience being so up for personal scrutiny and criticism. Public humiliation is something you risk every day. You cannot just show up and hope for the best. I don't know why there is so much negativity in what we read, why we keep wanting to tear people down, but it is something I do think about a lot.'

For the moment, though, all Zellweger really wants to think about is getting the film finished and getting back to Beverly Hills, where she has just bought a \$1.5 million house, and where, of course, poor Woof is waiting. Oh, and then there's her boyfriend, who just happens to be visiting. Last night the couple went for a romantic dinner at the Ivy and tonight they are thinking about 'doing' Nobu... the mention of which, for some unknown reason, elicits a loud, contented snore from the dog. 'Can you believe it?' squeals Zellweger, delightedly. 'She wants us to stop talking about it! Oh honey, I'm sorry! Are we boring you?'

As it is time to leave, the nice man from downstairs suddenly appears to escort me and my dog back down in the tradesmen's lift. But Zellweger is having none of this, insisting that we all go out via reception, and vowing that she will never come to this hotel again if this is its policy on animals. And who says this woman can't play an English eccentric? **L**