THOMPSON ON HOLLYWOOD

Amy Adams Explores Her Edge with 'Nightbitch'

As producer and star, Adams and her director Marielle Heller navigated a tricky narrative about a mother forced to connect with her feral self in order to reclaim her identity.

BY ANNE THOMPSON

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Amy Adams and Marielle Heller attend the premiere of 'Nightbitch' during the 2024 Toronto International Film Festival at Princess of Wales Theatre on September 07, 2024 *Getty*

"There is nothing she can't do," said



one veteran **awards** campaigner, praying that **Amy Adams**' fearless performance in Marielle Heller's adaptation of Rachel Yoder's novel "**Nightbitch**" (December 6, Searchlight) would not nab a Best Actress Oscar slot. Adams has lost at the **Oscars** six times now, from "Junebug" (2006) to "Vice" (2019), and many consider her long overdue. But it's a fierce field of contenders this year, including Oscar-winners Nicole Kidman ("Babygirl") and Angelina Jolie ("Maria"), Oscar nominees Cynthia Erivo ("Wicked") and Marianne Jean-Baptiste ("Hard Truths"), never-nominated Demi Moore ("The Substance"), and newcomers Karla Sofia Gascón ("Emilia Pérez") and Mikey Madison ("Anora").

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Never underestimate the actors-branch voters' admiration for Adams, however, who walks a tightrope in "Nightbitch," which debuted to **mixed reaction** at the Toronto International **Film** Festival but raves for her performance as an artist turned lonely suburban mother who is forced to find her feral self in order to reclaim her identity. Adams wears baggy clothes and no makeup, and starts to sprout back fur, sharp teeth, and a tail. We talked on Zoom about the film's potential pitfalls.

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This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and brevity.

Anne Thompson: Were you more anxious than usual about how audiences would react to this edgy movie? After all, you turn into a dog.

Amy Adams: I'm always anxious because you're not sure how people will process it, or what their experience will be. When I was making the film, I came to terms with the vulnerability of being in the skin of that character. So by the time we showed it, I wasn't attached to that vulnerability because I had to process it in the moment of doing it.

What made you want to star in this challenging role?

I read the book before it was published. Sue Naegle from Annapurna brought it over to my production company, Bond Group, and we read it, and I was so taken aback with its point of view and the unique narrative that Rachel Yoder uses. The stark honesty of it struck me. I was like,

“Let’s go for it.”

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As the producer, how did you choose director Marielle Heller? She wrote the script.

We brought her the book. She was at the top of our list. And I’m always a shoot-for-the-moon kind of gal. We were so fortunate because it was right time, right place for her, because she had just had a child and was living isolated outside of New York City during the pandemic and quarantine. I called her, and we had a great conversation about our own experiences with being mothers, with being women in this world, and how we move through it. She adapted it so beautifully. The first time I read it, I thought I should give notes, because I feel like I’m not being effective if I don’t. But I absolutely loved it right away.



'Nightbitch' *©Searchlight Pictures/Courtesy Everett Collection*

You had a delicate line to walk portraying an angry mother. The point isn't that she doesn't like her child, or hates her husband (Scoot McNairy). But you could not make her unappealing in the end. Which you didn't.

A piece of what I identified with was motherhood, but it wasn't the whole story. The idea of identity and transformation inside of that and isolation were the things that I tapped into, and her choices with her husband and how they would divide labor and where she would focus her attention. I always felt that she thought she'd be OK, she could do it. This was a developing issue. This wasn't a choice she made inside of frustration. She made it because she thought, "This is how I do it." At the same time, she became more isolated and felt more unseen and lost her footing with her own identity. That's when she started to slide down deeper into this magical surrealism.

In the transformation into the dog, how did you decide how far to go with it?

We filmed several different ways and talked through it. We all agreed we didn't want big special effects like [an] "An American Werewolf in London" kind of transformation. Mari was also good about communicating how much she wanted to use as imagery and this magical realism and how much would be shown. There were some things in the book that are a lot more graphic [like] the killing of the cat. It's hard to come back from the real mistreatment of an

animal like that. We were aligned on how far to go, like, when she showed me the pulling out of the tail. I was like, "I saw one test. I'm good. It's pretty gross."

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This movie doesn't go full-on horror. She doesn't turn into a dog in real life. Is it a metaphorical dog? Is it a dream dog?

We never answer that. And I never answered that for myself either. I believed that she believed that she was turning into a dog. It's that need to go back to something instinctual and something feral and something ancestrally familiar to get back in touch with herself, and I believe that she becomes a better mother because of it, she taps into the needs of her son and is able to step out of this idea of perfection that she was trapped in, so stuck inside of what motherhood should look like from the outside in.

So the big mistake is cutting off her creativity. That was not a good idea.

No, not for her. Or not just cutting it off, but also not finding a way to manifest her new experiences into her creativity.

When you and Mari were discussing the character, were there debates about how angry she was or

how far you could go?

We understood the line we had to toe. But also, there's so much of Mari in this, and so much of me in this, and so that idea of playing frustration and love side by side was so familiar to us, I feel like that's how I walk through any given day. It's this balance to not try to give into a frustrated person when we were doing it, but also not to back down from the ugly side of ourselves. And to lean into that at times, and to lean into our sadness. The kale salad scene [in which she scarfs down kale and then barfs it back up] was the most vulnerable I felt on camera in a long time, because I almost felt as if I was speaking something that we shouldn't be talking about, but that I was feeling acutely, this idea of invisibility as a human being moving through the world and evolving and changing, and not speaking your truth. So that's going to create a deep identity crisis. She deeply loved her child. I deeply love my daughter, and I also deeply get frustrated with her.

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How old is your daughter Aviana now?

She's 14. She's great. There's a lot to say.

The trick was you didn't want the mother to be too likable. You needed to be in the middle somewhere, right? Not too edgy and not too soft.

We were getting a deep look at her psyche. When voicing all of that internal monolog of frustration, we would do silent takes without the internal monolog out loud, and then we do takes with the internal monolog out loud. That's so great in the book, having that perspective on somebody's darkest, deepest, most unattractive, unflattering thoughts. It's what I loved about the book. And I wanted to make sure it had that biting wit, but also she has this curiosity that helps keep her from sounding so certain in everything. She's always asking questions of herself.

What drove you to become a producer? You have an incredible track record of movies, but Hollywood is not always coming up with great material for women.

I love being a part of the creative process. I love being a part of the environment on set and the material that we're bringing to set, of the conversations, of the solution, and that felt empowering.



Chris Messina and Amy Adams, 'Sharp Objects' *HBO*

What was the first project you produced?

I exec-produced "Sharp Objects." I was brought on early

on. That's where I was, "I want to continue doing this, to be a part of the conversations around casting and location and set, building all of those things." I was able to have agency that had impact on the final product. Of course, what I always love is bringing the right creative people together, and then step back until I'm needed, because Mari is so thoughtful and so meticulous, and she has a great team of people around her, and I never wanted to be obstructive in her process.

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In "Sharp Objects," you play another dysfunctional character, a hard-drinking journalist. Does television give you more room for maneuvering in terms of what you're allowed to get away with as a woman on screen?

It allows for exploration of nuance, and I do enjoy that. We're seeing a lot of films dealing with more rage in women as subject matter, it's interesting for me, the conversations we have around angry women.

Did you see "The Substance"? Did it go too far into gross-out horror?

I wasn't bothered by any of that stuff. I was bothered by her scrubbing her face that hard, that hurt me more than all the well-done body horror stuff. It's been interesting to

see the two movies in a similar conversation and see how people talk about them. I approach things with curiosity, like, “Oh, what does that mean for people?”

Are you developing more television? And what else do you have coming up?

Yeah, I have stuff in development. We’re still in that period post-strike and post-COVID. So I’m looking forward to getting back into that. I just finished this past year “Klara and the Sun” with Taika Waititi, and a film called “At the Sea” with Kornél Mundruczó. He did “Pieces of a Woman.”

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