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SCARLETT FEVER

Scarlett Johansson's
mystique reaches new
heights with her role in
'Girl With a Pearl Earring'

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Shades of Scarlett Johansson

Actress brings art to life in 'Girl With a Pearl Earring'

By Evan Henerson
Staff Writer

There are people — admittedly, many with a film to promote — who believe that the face of Scarlett Johansson is as layered and enigmatic as, well, as the model for a quite famous 17th-century painting by Johannes Vermeer.

The comparisons figure to come hot and heavy, if simply because in "Girl With a Pearl Earring," Johansson plays a fictionalized subject of Vermeer's masterpiece. "She's a dead ringer, 'GWPE' incarnate." "Nah, they look nothing alike."

But a physical resemblance was never really an issue, says Peter Webber, director of the film "Girl With a Pearl Earring" which opens this weekend. And by now, he figures enough people will simply enjoy looking at — even studying — Scarlett Johansson.

The director certainly does. So, it seems, do the housewives who have responded to "Lost in Translation" and the teenagers with "Ghost World" DVDs in their backpacks who see Johansson as one of them, not just an indie queen, cultural "It Girl" or a cinematic work of art.

"I just found myself compelled and fascinated by her presence," Webber says of Johansson. "I saw what you saw in the film: an intelligence, a kind of budding sexuality. I saw a girl who was mature beyond her years. I saw a sensitivity. I just saw that I could do a close-up on her and I could tell what she was thinking."

Brush with greatness

Truth be told, Webber and the actress herself both feel there's not much physical resemblance between Vermeer's Girl and the 19-year-old, New York-born Johansson, who earned praised earlier this fall for her role in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation." Take Johansson out of that bottle-like bonnet scarf and put her in contemporary clothes and the gap between subject and

actress widens further.

"We both look European, we both look young, and she's got big eyes," says Johansson, her blond hair pulled back in a twist during an interview. "There were ideas that were thrown around, like, 'Should we morph Scarlett's face into the painting? How are we going to sell this that it's really her?' Then I think Peter realized this is a fictionalized story based on the painting, and it doesn't make much sense to morph it. Some of those things (we tried) looked like a cross between, I don't know, Hayley Mills and the youngest Hanson brother."

Little is known about the life of Vermeer, much less about the model for his painting. In her best-selling novel — on which the film is based — Tracy Chevalier suggests that a poor but intelligent servant named Griet negotiated her way around the bustling Vermeer household, struck up a rapport with the artist and became his assistant. In addition to modeling for him, Griet also fell in love with her employer. And vice versa.

Who's that 'Girl'?

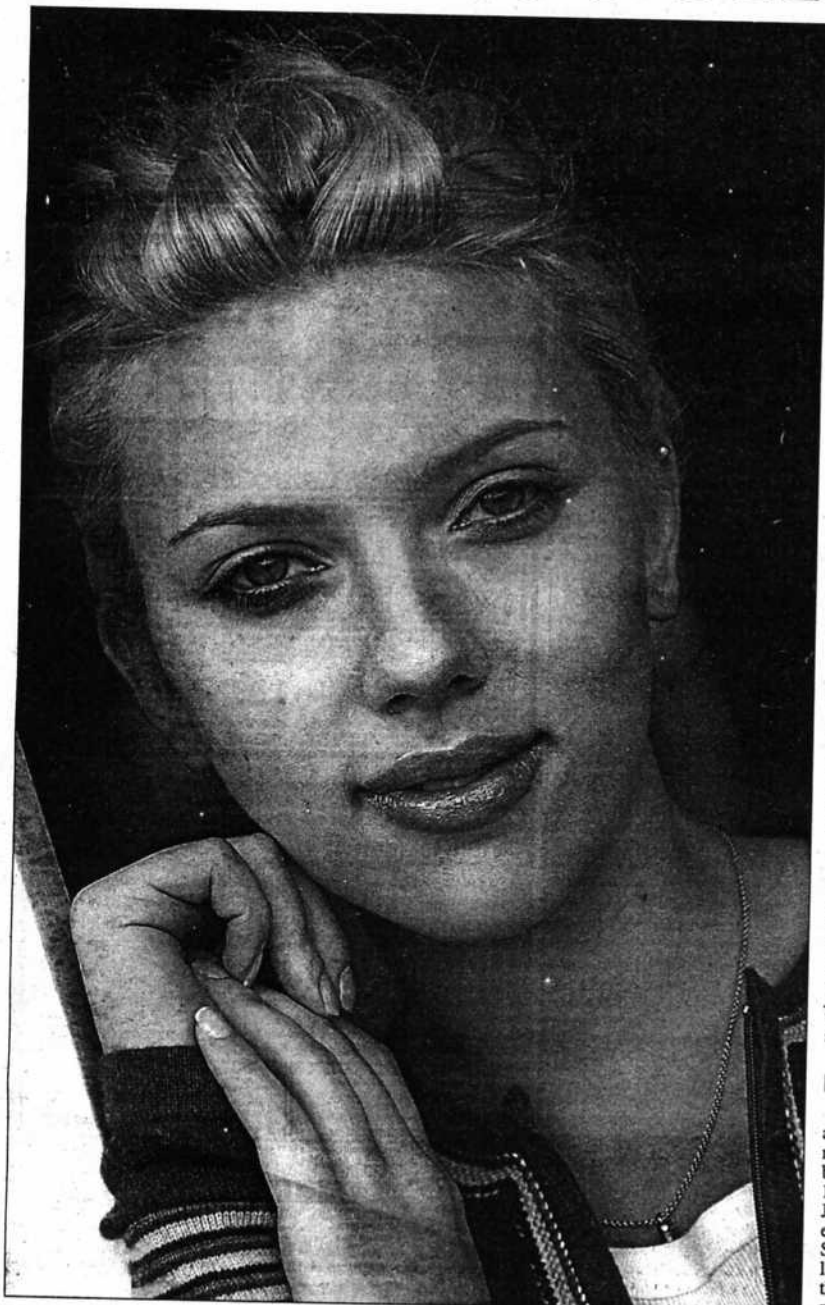
With several "Pearl Earring" cast and crew members nursing an interest in classical art, discussions and debate over the painting filtered over the set. Colin Firth, who plays Vermeer, has suggested that the girl could have been one of Vermeer's daughters. Johansson disagrees.

"There's something very sexual about that painting," she says. "There is like a certain longing in her eyes, and her lips are moist. Maybe it was a young lover. Who knows? It seems too sexy to be something you'd paint of your own daughter."

Playing the smart but quiet servant Griet, whose presence is noticed by nobody except Vermeer, Johansson is largely silent. Colin Firth's Vermeer is much the same way.

Which is not characteristic of either person, says Firth.

"As soon as someone would say cut, we'd start talking 10 to



Evan Yee/Staff Photographer

"She has the child and the adult in her. She can look ordinary or look stunning, which is an amazing asset for an actress to have."

Colin Firth

on his "Girl With a Pearl Earring"
co-star Scarlett Johansson



the dozen because we both are like that as people," says Firth. "It's quite ironic in a way that such a quiet, wordless film is made by such loquacious people."

Count Firth as a Johansson admirer as well.

"She has the child and the adult in her. She can look ordinary or look stunning, which is an amazing asset for an actress to have," says Firth. "She can be aggressive and fearless, and she can be extremely fragile and vulnerable. And I think those are the things you keep looking at and studying and wanting to get to the heart of — and that's why you can watch her in close-up for hours."

Anonymous no longer

In person, Johansson is, if not loquacious, certainly open. Her voice is low, her wit bone-dry. She talks a lot about movies and about the "private moments" she occasionally seeks out. With her recent film "Lost in Translation" turning out to be a well-seen, critically praised sleeper, those private moments aren't as easy to find — at least not in public — as they once were.

A lady can't even spend a few minutes alone with a certain famous painting, apparently. The first time producers took Johansson to the Hague in Holland to see the portrait, the

actress recalls noticing a certain nervousness among her escorts.

She soon found out why. Johansson had just started to study the brush strokes and the aging when she turned to find a video camera pointed at her.

"It was like, 'So, Scarlett, what do you think of the painting?' I was like, 'Whoa, where did you come from?' " she says. "And this guy was standing behind me saying, 'In 1976, we uncovered the white spots on the lips, and you can see the cracking.' I got all nervous all of a sudden. What am I supposed to think? 'It looks nice, I guess. Look, 'A View of Delft.' Let's go over to that painting.' "

"I really wish I had seen it on my own," Johansson continues. "It was nice to see the physical painting. However, I would have liked to have spent some time just looking at it. Just trying to figure out what she was thinking."

Johansson made her film debut in Rob Reiner's ill-fated "North" (1994) followed by a turn in the indie film "Manny and Lo." More attention came following her casting as Kristin Scott Thomas' handicapped daughter in Robert Redford's "The Horse Whisperer." More recently, she has worked with the Coen Brothers in "The Man Who Wasn't There" and in the horror comedy "Eight Legged Freaks."

It's an eclectic body of work for an actress who has largely steered clear of films that would target audiences in her age range. During a recent visit to Starbucks, however, Johansson found herself approached by "like 15 13-year-olds with 'Ghost World' DVDs in their backpacks." The Terry Zwigoff dark comedy, she notes, because of its R rating, would have kept a lot of teens from seeing it.

"Ratings prevent younger people from seeing smarter films," Johansson says. "I had a meeting with a studio head, and I was talking about this film that I was really excited about and really wanted to get made. And she turned to me and said, 'Yes, yes, I know, but we have to appeal to the MTV generation.' "

"And I looked at her and said, 'I am the (expletive) MTV generation. You're wearing a blazer and loafers and you're telling me about the MTV generation.' I find that very upsetting, and I think that youth is underestimated in that sense."

And as for that "It Girl" label, Johansson has heard it too often and doesn't know what it means.

"Who wants to be the It Girl?" she asks. "Then you're the one who once was the It Girl. It's so in the moment, and that's a terrible thing."

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