

# Reluctant star

From the ice rinks of Ontario to the Boulevards of Hollywood, *The Notebook* star, **Rachel McAdams**, keeps her feet firmly rooted, writes Harold Von Kursk

It's hardly surprising to learn that Rachel McAdams is Canadian. After all, she's polite, self-effacing, and publicity-shy. And though she's been an A-list star for two decades, McAdams has chosen to fly under the radar and avoid the trappings of fame.

"It's always been a priority for me to lead as normal a life away from my job so I get to enjoy experiences I can draw on when I'm working," said McAdams.

"That's why I need to take breaks every so often, enjoy time with my family and friends, and maintain some distance from my acting profession which I love very much but is only one side of me."

McAdams was once heralded as the second coming of Julia Roberts following her memorable turn in *The Notebook*, the 2004 film that gained instant cult status among audiences swept away by the aching romance between the two young lovers played by McAdams and her fellow Canadian co-star Ryan Gosling.

That film propelled her to two more back-to-back box-office triumphs — *Mean Girls* and *Wedding Crashers* — followed by acclaimed performances in *State of Play* (opposite Russell Crowe and Helen Mirren), *The Time Traveler's Wife* (co-starring Eric Bana), and, finally, *Sherlock Holmes*, the 2009 blockbuster

hit where she played alongside Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law.

But in the middle of that winning streak of six major films, McAdams did the unthinkable — she took a year off in 2006 and went back home to her native Ontario to gain her bearings.

"I felt the need to find myself again. When you start to succeed in this business, you find yourself getting caught up in this massive wave and you feel like you're losing control of things," recalled McAdams.

"I decided that I needed to restore some balance in my life rather than working non-stop. It was important to me to learn more about who I am and find my bearings like so many women in their late twenties.

"The truth is that I never wanted to become a big star. That was sort of a vague idea in my mind when I was a kid, when you think, 'What would that be like?' But it wasn't something I really meditated on or planned for in any way. I really thought I'd be doing theatre in Canada where I had grown up doing children's plays. My ambitions were more along the lines of becoming the artistic director of a children's theatre company."

In April of this year McAdams was finally able to realise her theatrical ambitions, albeit on a grander scale, by making her

Broadway debut in *Mary Jane*, the Amy Herzog play about a single mother caring for a sick child. Not only was this a welcome change of pace for McAdams, it also marked her return to the stage after a 25 year absence. The last time she had performed in front of a live audience was while she was an aspiring actress pursuing theatre studies at York University in Toronto.

"I have stopped shaking uncontrollably before the show, my legs are co-operating now when I walk out there," said McAdams midway through her two-month run on the *Great White Way*.

She had been anxious to do a play for several years but those plans were scuttled when she found herself raising two young children (a boy, 6, and a girl, 3) with her partner, screenwriter Jamie Linden, followed by the onset of the pandemic. Then she came across *Mary Jane* and was hooked from the outset.

"I couldn't put [the script] down. And once I put it down,

**"IF I'M PICKY IN SOME CASES, IT'S OFTEN OUT OF MY OWN INSECURITY. I WANT TO BE ABLE TO BRING MY BEST TO THE TABLE"**

**RACHEL MCADAMS**

I couldn't stop thinking about it.... Luckily the director [Anne Kauffman] and the playwright [Amy Herzog] didn't seem bothered in the least that I haven't done theatre in 25 years," said Adams.

"They said they would give me all the support I need. And they weren't lying. It's been incredible, and I have felt privileged the whole time, from beginning to end."

"Parts like this just don't come along, sometimes ever in a lifetime," she added. "It's so rare to be able to play a woman with this much resilience and joie de vivre and buoyancy."

It also wasn't lost on McAdams that the play would be performed at a Broadway theatre only a few blocks away from where the stage version of *The Notebook* is enjoying a successful run.

"Isn't that wild? I wonder what the music is like. In the [*Notebook*] movie, it's all Billie Holiday and 1940s stuff. I can't wait to see it...It's been so exciting for me to get to live and work in New York. When I first saw our marquee (for *Mary Jane*) I took a photo and sent it to my parents. I was like, 'This is the theater I'm going to be performing in! Moments like that have kept hitting me in waves.'"

One of the high points of McAdams's career was *Spotlight*, the searing drama that earned her a 2016 Oscar as Best Supporting Actress. She played real-life journalist Sacha Pfeiffer, part of an elite team of Boston Globe investigative reporters that broke the story of rampant paedophilia within the Roman Catholic Church that had covered up the decades-old activities of nearly 100 Boston-area priests who had ►





been molesting children throughout the city.

That performance captured the essence of McAdams's gift for bringing an uncanny level of gravitas and authenticity to her work.

"I pretty much stalked the real Sacha Pfeiffer for weeks to prepare for the part," recalled McAdams.

"I saw first-hand her gift for being able to listen to people with empathy and sensitivity which were the qualities she required to get the victims to talk about the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of priests.

"She was able to connect with those young boys who grew up to become business executives, managers, and regular workers who would not have felt comfortable telling their stories

to male journalists. And she succeeded. She is one of many women who have made an incredible contribution to journalism."

Recently McAdams played opposite Benedict Cumberbatch in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), which earned nearly \$1 billion at the worldwide box-office and marked the biggest box-office success of her career.

Previously she co-starred with Rachel Weisz in the love story *Disobedience* (2017), *Southpaw* (2015), Richard Curtis's *About Time* (2013), and Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011).

**Above:** *Spotlight* stars Brian d'Arcy James, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams, John Slattery and Michael Keaton

And before that she was known for having turned down multi-million dollar paychecks to play the Bond girl in *Casino Royale* as well as the Anne Hathaway part in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

"If I'm picky in some cases, it's often out of my own insecurity," McAdams admits.

"I want to be able to bring my best to the table. So if I'm not connecting to a project, then I'm not going to be able to hold up my end of the bargain, and that's really embarrassing."

**"I WASN'T THINKING OF PURSUING ACTING IN UNIVERSITY, THOUGH, UNTIL A DRAMA TEACHER TOLD ME THAT I HAD THE TALENT..."**

**RACHEL MCADAMS**

Her directors and fellow actors will all testify to McAdams's work ethic and dedication on the set. She owes that mindset to the kind of discipline she developed while competing as a figure skater.

Born and raised in the small town of St. Thomas, Ontario by her father Lance, a removal man, and mother Sandra, a hospital nurse, Rachel enjoyed what she describes as a "happy and loving childhood." As a young girl she was drawn to watching figure skating on TV and drew inspiration from that.

"I started figure skating when I was four and I got really into it for a long time. My parents were very supportive and the only thing they asked from me was that if I'm going to pursue it, that I take it seriously. ▶



“The discipline that came from all the hours of practising I would put in every week for figure skating for so many years is something that definitely helped me with my acting. At one point though I felt that figure skating was becoming too consuming and I really needed a different outlet.

“I always knew that I wanted to engage in some form of art. I can’t sing, so eventually I hooked onto some Shakespeare when I was about twelve and participated in a summer acting camp.

“The next year I did Greek tragedy and kept going from there. I wasn’t thinking of pursuing acting in university, though, until a drama teacher told me that I had the talent and should consider it as a possible career choice. So instead of taking cultural studies I wound up studying theatre at York [University].”

Upon completing her bachelor’s degree, McAdams found steady work in Canadian TV and film productions that attracted the attention of Hollywood casting agents and led her to fly to L.A.

**Above: The premiere of *About Time* at Somerset House in London in 2013 Right: McAdams at the 2016 Film Independent Spirit Awards held at the Santa Monica Beach**

for auditions where she soon landed her first Hollywood role in *The Hot Chick*. She has not looked back since.

Not that she ever abandoned her native Ontario where her parents and many of her closest friends live. McAdams has spent most of the past 20 years dividing her time in a modest Victorian-style house in the quiet South Annex neighbourhood of Toronto and a Los Angeles house where she could spend more time with sister, Kayleen, a top Hollywood make-up artist.

But after her second child was born, McAdams decided to move with her partner Jamie Lindell to a small town in the American south (she prefers not to disclose the location) where she can still indulge her passion for riding her bike and taking long walks in nature.

“I’ve never owned a car although I’ve rented ones when I needed to,” said McAdams.

“Whenever I’m in Toronto I take the street car or ride my bike and I’m never really

recognised and I can just be myself.

“Even when I’m not home I like to spend a long time chatting on the phone with my mother and my sister. My sister and I are best friends and she’s such a good person and I always have a good time with her.

“I also like to take long walks in the wilderness when I’m in Canada. My family also has a cottage in the woods and it’s so relaxing and peaceful to be out in nature and appreciate the beauty of that setting.” ■

