

Krystal's Big Break

Could my daughter, who has Down syndrome, succeed in her first major role?

BY MADELEINE GREY

LANDING a movie part is the stuff of dreams. It's a heady, narcissistic affair accompanied by chauffeured cars, private trailers and teams of hair, makeup and wardrobe professionals fussing and fixing. The lights go on, cameras start rolling and all the action is focused on you, you...you! Movie-star treatment spoils some people rotten, but it can also be the most uplifting, rewarding and self-esteem-building experience of a lifetime—or so it was for my 19-year-old daughter, Krystal, who has Down syndrome.



It wasn't just dreams that helped Krystal land the role of Phoebe in the TV-movie version of the bestseller *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*. The years of Saturday theatre classes and the countless hours spent in lively animation, talking to the full-length mirror in her bedroom, certainly helped. And her four-foot-seven, 72-pound frame didn't hurt. When we got an email last October from the Down Syndrome Association of Toronto, announcing the audition, it was clear Lifetime Network was looking for two different girls to play Phoebe—one as a 13-year-old, the other as a young woman. But when Krystal walked into the Toronto audition, ready to read for the young-woman role, director Mick Jackson eyed her tiny frame and asked her to read both parts. "We knew she was the one," executive producer Howard Braunstein revealed to me on the set one day in Halifax. "We'd searched across North America. When Krystal walked in, we knew we'd found our actor."

MOTHERS live for words like that; little did I know, there'd be other bonuses. Shortly after Krystal landed the role, the script arrived by FedEx. What happened next was a thrill I'll never forget: She ripped open the package and read all 95 pages in two days. Teachers tell me Krystal has the reading ability of a Grade 4 student. She'd never enjoyed reading and

had never finished a story longer than a few pages—until this one arrived.

I felt an odd mix of pride and trepidation when, partway through her reading, she asked, "Why did the father not want a baby with Down syndrome?" I told her people in those days just didn't understand how great a kid with Down syndrome was. That seemed to appease her until, pages later, her hands clenched and her face flushed with anger: "Why did he call Phoebe a mongoloid and say she has half a brain? That's wrong!"

"Yes, it's wrong," I said. "And it's going to be your job acting in this movie to show everyone what a big mistake he made."

But could she do it? Learning all her lines was going to be a challenge, so we all pitched in. Her dad coached her for scenes, cracking her up with his silly imitations of the other characters and exuding that natural calm he possesses, soothing her when stress levels climbed. And as little brothers are wont to do, 14-year-old Nick offered tips and critiques from the sidelines. But he also patiently explained some words she didn't know and was quick to praise. As long as she understood the scene and read through it a few times, her memory kicked in—like a lock. This surprised us—and others, too. "Not only did she know her lines," recalls actor Hugh Thompson, "but she knew mine and Emily Watson's, too!"

Naturally, Krystal was a little nervous her first day on the set, her giddy excitement palpable the moment she met co-actors Watson and Thompson

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY EDWARD GAJDEL

in the hair-and-makeup trailer. "Hey, wow! You are Emily Watson!" she gushed to the Academy Award nominee. And to Thompson, she chirped, "You are my stepfather in the movie, and I will see you and Emily in bed and say, 'How come you two are so lazy today?' And you," she said, pointing her finger at him, "you'll be Al and you'll say, 'Shall we tell her?'" Being cool is simply not in Krystal's operating manual and bluntness is her natural default.

Thompson laughed and shot back, "I hate it when other actors know my lines better than I do!" then made a goofy face that had Krystal instantly

doubled over in laughter. A few minutes later, Watson sagely suggested they run through their lines a few times before the three of them went on set.

A bystander to this exchange, all my negative stereotypes of self-centred movie stars were shattered. Krystal was not only put at ease in her first hour with these pros but was made to feel welcome, important and valued.

NEXT CHALLENGE: the director. When Krystal auditioned, I had concerns about Mick Jackson and whether or not he would "get" her; he used several lofty words that just aren't in her vo-

cabulary. His demeanour was serious and stiff. After I discussed my concerns with Krystal's agent, she asked the production company if they would supply a coach, someone who could run interference between the director and Krystal, smoothing any miscommunication and, hopefully, harvesting Krystal's best performance.

In the end, I was asked to be my daughter's coach—a dubious arrangement for any mother of a teen daughter.

ALL MY concerns fell by the wayside the moment Krystal first stepped onto the set to work under Jackson's tutelage. We'd been chauffeured the three-minute drive from the film base camp (where the production trailers are parked) to the set (a nice house in a quaint residential district of Halifax). We crossed the threshold of the screenplay's so-called "Pittsburgh House" and were bombarded by an army of mostly male 20-somethings dressed in black and sporting headsets. They were busily working in the narrow house; cables and wires were everywhere, and huge, hot lights glared from above.

Krystal was whisked into the fray by an AD (assistant director), and I was shoved into the "green room," where I stood temporarily transfixed, staring at a canvas chair with the name "Phoebe" written across the back in large black letters. Outside the door I heard someone yell, "Rolling!" I felt like a caged animal, desperate to see

Krystal's first moment before the camera, yet too intimidated to open the door and walk smack into a film-in-the-making. A member of the hair-and-makeup department walked in, reached into her black bag, pulled out a hand-held TV that picked up a direct channel to the set's camera and motioned me over.

I looked at the screen and gasped. Before me was perhaps the most iconic moviemaking scene I could have imagined: a man holding open then snapping shut a clapperboard inscribed with a film title—in this case, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*. The next instant, my daughter was running down the hallway in her wacky, kind of lopsided way, her face set with determination and framed by wigged pigtailed bobbing in the air.

"Cut!" called Jackson, followed by, "Nice job, Krystal. Now do it again!" And she did, perhaps four or five times, before moving on to scene after scene, working right through to midnight. Cut off from the action, all I needed to hear was "good work, Krystal" coming from Jackson to know that interference from this stage mother was not required. In fact, Krystal was holding her own, obediently listening to instructions from this tall, grey-bearded man with the soft voice, then adding her own riff by reaching her short little arms up, placing her hands squarely on his shoulders, looking him in the eyes and placating him with, "I got it, Mick!"

In fact, I started to wonder who was directing whom by Krystal's third day on the set. It was 10 p.m. and she and

her screen parents were working well into overtime. She was standing in the "kitchen," drying dishes and delivering what was one of her most demanding speaking parts. I was watching the monitor alongside Jackson when he turned to me and said, "She's not coming through clearly. I'm having trouble understanding what she's saying."

"I know," I agreed. "She's really tired. I can't do a thing to help her speak any better."

Jackson huddled with Watson, who suggested some line changes: Watson could deliver some of Phoebe's message, and all Krystal had to do was mutter "humph" and "yeah, right."

"Can she make this change?" Jackson asked me. We both knew she *could*, but would our little starlet be willing to lose some of her valued lines? "Will you tell her?" asked Jackson, looking uncharacteristically vulnerable.

"Are you kidding?" I replied.

While my daughter has chutzpah, she knows when she's beaten. As Jackson gently delivered the news, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "Whatever."

THAT WAS easy compared to her most challenging scene in the movie, which required very little talking but lots of sexual innuendo. "Awkward" was the word Krystal spat out when anyone asked her how she felt about a passionate kiss with her onscreen boyfriend,

Emily Watson and Krystal share a scene in the TV movie *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*.

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Robert. It turns out Robert was not just another actor, but Krystal's childhood friend Dylan Harman. Krystal was nervous but game to act out the scene—an attitude I found remarkable, considering she'd never kissed a boy.

It was all so surreal. There sat my wig-adorned daughter, decked out in a 1970s mod skirt and go-go boots, groping and necking with her friend Dylan as a crew of a dozen stood there, watching her first kiss, her coming of age—a moment that seemed sacredly private to me but was being captured on celluloid nonetheless.

"They look so subdued," complained Jackson after the first take. "Can you put more life into it?" he asked the pair.

They learned quickly, each time coming out of the embrace looking hot and disoriented as Watson's character chided, "Phoebe, Robert, that's enough!"

The lines that followed came naturally for Krystal. Like most girls her age, she dreams of getting married, and often struggles to assert her independence from parental grip. "It's not fair!" she shouted at the end of the onscreen argument, stomping her feet and repeating a complaint that has echoed through our household.

LIFE, WE all know, isn't fair. Kids with Down syndrome struggle against the odds to learn to read and write, make

friends, understand how to use money and talk clearly enough that people won't ask for repetitions again and again. Almost daily they fight near-crippling frustration, sensing how different they are and wondering how being "normal" can fall into others' laps.

My husband and I wish a world of opportunity for Krystal, but we recognize her limitations. We hope she'll find something that will captivate her enough to work hard at. For Krystal, that's acting. Not the most reliable career, but worth shooting for as long as the phone rings with news of auditions.

If anyone had said when my daughter was born that she'd star in a made-for-TV movie, I would've laughed the words away. Doctors said she might not learn to walk, let alone get out of diapers or feed herself. But I've learned that doctors don't always know best, that people with Down syndrome generally are able to do more than anyone imagined, and that dreams are worth dreaming.

As I accompanied Krystal in a limousine on her way home from her momentous moviemaking experience, I looked at the tiny dynamo sitting beside me, plugged into her iPod and writing a screenplay aptly titled *The Memory Keeper's Daughter 2*, and thought the same thought I had when she was born: Let her show me.



WIGGING OUT

"I know it looks like I comb my hair forward," Donald Trump told Conan O'Brien and his *Late Night* audience. "But actually, I comb my face backward."

Submitted by PATRICIA WATKINS

ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES MCMULLAN