

PERFORMANCE

Rachel Nichols is Soooo...in *The Loop*.

Leading Lady

THE PITCH:

Imagine a high-concept rom-com about a handsome loner who endlessly drives the big, black Loop Road around Houston at night—in search of himself and the meaning of life. When a cryptic-talking parrot interrupts the simplicity of his dark spirals, he starts to believe if only he can understand what the bird is saying and find its original owner, he might lift the veil on the universe's deepest secrets.

With the help of the drop-dead sexy assistant librarian at his junior college, naturally.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

Rachel Nichols is thrilled to have just finished shooting her first leading role after turning heads in *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* and *Star Trek*. Reached in Los Angeles, where she's shooting new episodes of *Criminal Minds*, the Columbia grad is excited about the intellectual frisson generated by *The Loop* and what this is going to mean for her as an actress.

"*The Loop* is about a girl whose dog teaches her how to listen and a man whose parrot teaches him to talk," she says. "It's a quirky, edgy love story. Playing Fiona was great for me, because she's a departure from some of the roles I've been offered. For the first 20 minutes, she actually annoys you. This tall, quiet giant fascinates

Rachel Nichols as librarian Fiona in her upcoming romantic drama *The Loop*.

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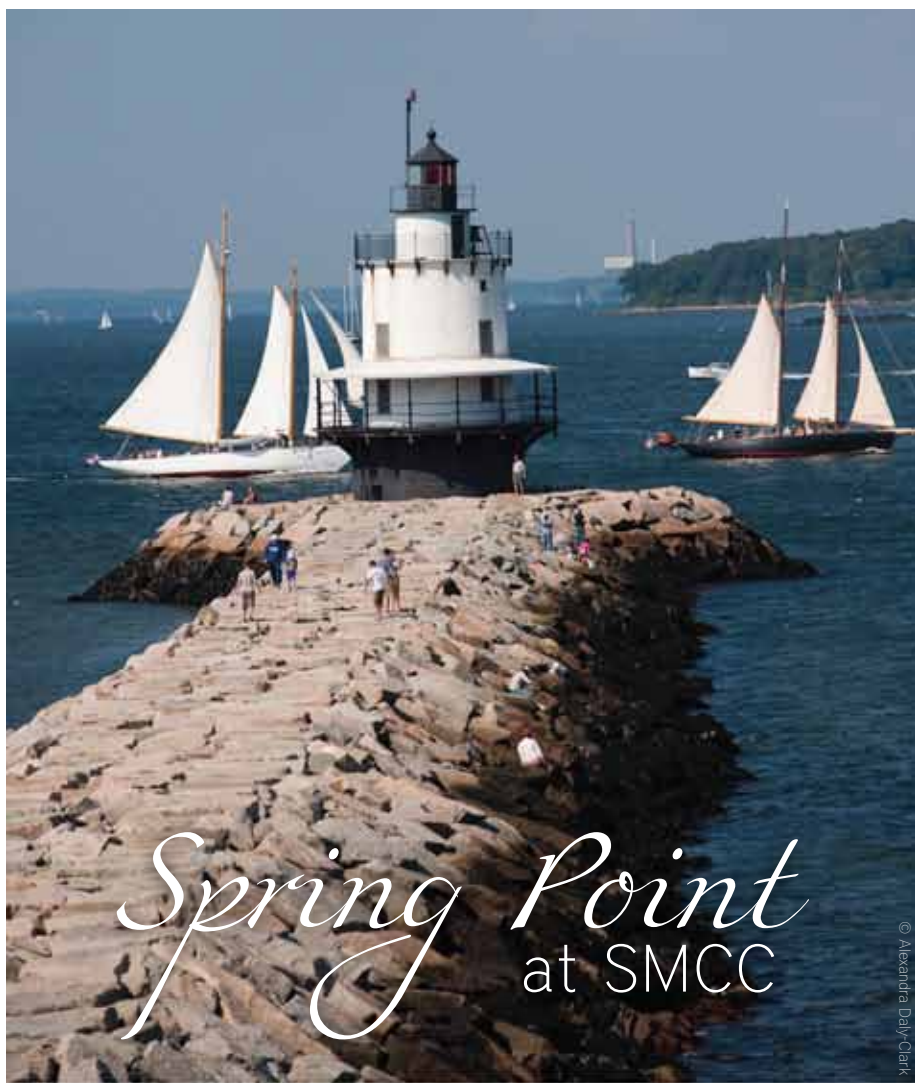
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"I'VE GOT A GUN!"—Rachel Nichols as FBI cadet Agent Ashley Seaver mugs between takes on the CBS series *Criminal Minds*.

her, and she sort of stalks him."

ALL THE NIGHT MOVES

There's a lot of star dark where she grew up in Maine, so the existential loneliness of the setting, with its never-ending night orbits, was familiar to her, though the movie wasn't even shot in Houston.

"We shot in New Mexico. There's a lot of big and dark out there, too, with even less traffic. It was really beautiful, very sweeping, gorgeous—very dark and very cold, because we did a lot of night shoots."

Not only was this Nichols's breakthrough opportunity as a leading film actress, it was the first time out for director Margaret Whitton, as well.

"She's a very successful actress, in movies like *Major League* and *The Secret of My Success*, and it was a privilege to participate in her directorial debut. She worked very, very closely with Jackson [Hurst, who plays Lyman, the night driver] and me, all the way to the wardrobe and physicality. Among many things, she didn't want Fiona to be a cliché."

THE BIG BANG THEORY

That is, no before-and-after reveal, no shake-out of hair. Still, apart from double majoring in math and economics, how does the green girl from *Star Trek* transform into a librarian—superficially speaking?

"Bangs. We put some bangs on me—quirky, fluffy bangs, which were the last piece of the

COURTESY RACHEL NICHOLS

PERFORMANCE

character that made her come together for me. We stayed away from quiet, from glasses, from muted tones. I had the dark hair. We didn't have bookworm-type things, because it's Lyman's character who has the spectacular inhibitions," the former Abercrombie & Fitch model says.

"Though you learn very quickly, Fiona and Lyman are a lot more alike than we originally suspect. They both seem to be running from themselves, but in different ways. She has this fight or flight thing and seems always to be running: new town, sets up, stays a while, then moves quickly somewhere else. Lyman has never been past the state line. There's a big arc for Fiona because she goes from being the one who's running away to the one who dares to stay."

RUN SILENT, RUN CREEP

Usually, neurotic personalities are played by guys destined for the geek squad, so it's refreshing to see convention twisted to find Lyman played by a leading-man type.

"Jackson [Hurst] is one of the most charismatic, sweet people I've ever met. He's obviously gorgeous and very handsome. But he is quiet! I remember hearing from casting, 'We have this guy we like. Will you come in and audition with him?'"

"I shook his hand. I felt, *Oh, this is Lyman*. Though he has no trouble meeting women nowadays, he found the way to his part by overexposing his younger, more shy, awkward version of himself, maybe from junior high.

"Lyman is very quiet and clearly turned off by this awkward librarian. He doesn't talk to anyone from work. He certainly doesn't have any friends. He'd have never gotten involved with Fiona if it hadn't been for the crazy quest that brings them together.

"Both are loners, but they're loners in a different way. Even at the end, there's a calming, quiet thing about him."

UPCOMING ATTRACTIONS

While Tashtego Films, the movie's producer, negotiates with the usual suspects for the most desirable release date, Nichols is gratified by the career-boosting connections she's already made by being in *The Loop*.

"Margaret is a great friend now. It's so fantastic that Joe Coomer is a Maine writer. He came to visit on set! He's [got a summer place] around Deer Isle [in Stonington].

(Continued on page 94)

"A lake...is the earth's eye."

Henry David Thoreau



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Leading Lady (continued from page 31)

[Oscar-winner] Philippe Rousselot, *The Loop*'s cinematographer/director of photography who did *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Big Fish*, and the *Sherlock Holmes* movies, is a wonderful friend, too."

In fact Rousselot departed to work on *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* directly after finishing *The Loop*.

There's a Romanian saying, "If you don't have an old one around you, you'll invent one." As for what it was like working with Buck Henry in *The Loop*, Nichols says, "I never had any scenes with him. I'd most recently seen him playing Liz Lemon's father from *30 Rock*. Margaret has some extraordinary friends who came in and played with us."

FROM INDIE TO BLOCKBUSTER

And now for something completely different: Nichols is *also* in post-production from shooting the mammoth action-adventure drama *Conan the Barbarian*.

"It was big budget, filmed in Bulgaria. Completely surreal. I never shot anything in Europe for three months in a row before this. I

shot *G.I. Joe* in Louisiana for three months and then a month in Prague."

NO, NOT CONAN O'BRIEN

Far from being a librarian, Nichols plays a heroic swashbuckler named Tamara in *Conan the Barbarian*—your basic princess who rides horses a lot and is unperturbed by the gnashing of metal.

"We didn't have a week of rehearsals. It's less character driven and more story driven. If I'm the goodie, there's Rose McGowan, who plays the bad girl, and Stephen Lang [*Avatar*], who plays Rose's father."

As for joining the horsey set, "I'd never really gotten to ride a horse in my life until I got to Bulgaria. I wanted to look good and know what I was doing, so I had to work at it and grew to love it.

"My favorite horse was named Blanco, all white. Another one I liked was La Pizza, or at least that's what the name sounded like.

"The horse I *didn't* like was the horse Conan rides in the film—his massive horse Rodolfo. He was so big I was petrified of him."

Rodolfo's menacing coat alone threw

her, because it seemed to change according to his mood. "Dark gray or potentially black. Just a threatening presence. Just having to ride as the second person on his back was quite scary."

I'M SCREAMING AS FAST AS I CAN

Even scarier, perhaps, than the acting assignment that led to Nichols winning MTV's Best Frightened Performance award for her blood-curdling shriek in *The Amityville Horror* in 2005—something she still laughs about.

"I played the babysitter. The clincher scene was in the closet, when the little girl who plays the imaginary friend comes in and sticks my index finger through the bullet hole in her forehead. You sort of see me leaving on the stretcher in a catatonic state. I was also hanging in the same movie. It's so funny; my *mom* will avidly watch the bits where I die. My dad, on the other hand, has no interest."

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Not that her lucrative TV career has been suspended while her film star rises. How loop-like is it that she's twice been asked to

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ROAR OF THE GREASE-PAINT—Rachel Nichols gets ready for her close-up in *Conan the Barbarian*.

play a recurring character on high-visibility series—first on *Alias* with Jennifer Garner and now on *Criminal Minds*, playing FBI cadet Ashley Seaver?

"I love shifting gears from film to TV. The schedule on TV is so different than something on film."

For the *Criminal Minds* gig, "They invited me to come on for three episodes to join a cast that has been working together for five years. A popular character [known as J.J.] had recently departed, and there was this kerfuffle among the fans that I was brought in to replace her, though the only shared trait was we were both blondes. The first was well received by the fans, and they decided to ask me to come on permanently. I'm in Episode 10, 11, 12...and on Episode 15, I'm back. After that I'm in every one." Factoring in residuals and reruns, how's that for looping the loop? ■

» For a full list of Rachel Nichols's screen credits, visit portlandmonthly.com. To see Nichols's *Amityville* scream, visit: <http://www.mtv.com/videos/movies/82634/best-frightened-performance-rachel-nichols.jhtml#id=1528989>

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