

The Hot Seat

Small talk with big people

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Kristen Stewart

The *Twilight* star turns to stripping. By Sharon Steel

Kristen Stewart is often painted as one of Hollywood's most awkward starlets—painfully shy, ill-suited to the spotlight and, for better or worse, entwined with the *Twilight* saga and her embodiment of its romantic heroine, Bella Swan. In *Welcome to the Rileys*, the 20-year-old actor plays Mallory, a teenage runaway stripper who forms a fast, intense bond with the grief-stricken Doug (James Gandolfini), who lost his daughter in a fatal accident. Together they create an ad hoc family only slightly more dysfunctional than most. We spoke with Stewart about *Twilight*, *Rileys* and hanging out in strip clubs.

You seem very attracted to roles in which you play someone who is defiant, constantly fighting for something—emotionally,

physically. What is Mallory fighting for the hardest?

I think she's just trying to survive. She's had a rough upbringing, which has taken something from her on a really basic level. It's hard for a young girl in the normal world, but put her on the streets...she doesn't realize that she does actually need people, that she needs to have a capacity to trust, accept and love other people. She sees and tastes that with Doug, realizes she can have it, and she's not dead yet.

You shot this film between *Twilight* and *New Moon*, before *Twilight* had even been released, and you were still very young. Did you feel ready to play a runaway stripper at that point in your life?

I think I was 16 or maybe freshly 17 when I first read [the script for *Welcome to the Rileys*]. I was really intimidated, and I'm really glad that the film took the time that it did to find its legs, because I wasn't in the position to play the part [then]. I

wouldn't have jumped into it as much. I would have been afraid of it.

What changed, besides getting a little older?

In order to play it right and not be a total fraud, we went to strip clubs and I talked to girls in, like, really gross bars. [Director] Jake Scott gave me all these really great books and recorded and transcribed conversations and stories from kids who've grown up on the streets.

Did you talk to girls who had grown up on the streets, or were you just in the clubs?

I didn't go talk to runaways at shelters. I didn't meet anybody that was under, I would guess, 25? I mainly just talked to girls who told me funny stories. We didn't really delve into their histories, but the books and stuff that Jake provided me with were really right on.

What was the best book?

Gosh, it's sort of funny to tell people

this—there was this one in particular that there were a few things that were perfect and pictures that were really beautiful and heartbreaking, just strange. It's called *Raised by Wolves*. It's so good. This guy basically endeared himself into this world of street kids in Hollywood.

What do you think about young people who have fallen through the cracks of life?

It's a strange little society. It's a world of people living in a vicious circle, you know, an altered, broken, strange existence. But they're all a family, and they're making it work. Mallory takes herself out of that.

"I literally was stomping around the city in fishnets."

Did anything about filming the movie scare you?

When I was shooting I lost my mind a little bit. I was so comfortable. I literally was stomping around the city in fishnets and half of a robe, like walking to set from base camp like, "No, fuck it, I'll just walk, don't worry about it." I had absolutely no fear in the world. You never know if you can do something until you do it.

You're under more pressure than most actors because of *Twilight*, and perceptions about typecasting and your range.

Yeah, and you know, it definitely doesn't deter me in any way, but it's something that I think about when asked: "Has anything changed?" *That* has, but the work hasn't.

You're about to shoot the final film in the *Twilight* saga, *Breaking Dawn*. Are you still enjoying it, or are you desperate for it to end?

I can't wait to do it, I can't wait to get it out...it's the craziest, longest buildup. It's just like, Let's fucking do it already, you know what I mean? But at the same time, it's sad. Not to be totally and completely candid, but—I know some people think they're bad—but they'd be really bad if the cast didn't really love them.

Welcome to the Rileys opens Fri 29.