

Winona Ryder is a cult heroine of the twentysomething generation, the James Dean of those who grew up wearing purple polyester bellbottoms and came of age during Madonna and materialism.

"How very," she cooed as the manipulative Veronica Sawyer

in the 1986 classic, *Heathers*, instantly gaining the respect of teen cynics everywhere. She's made 11 movies in her eight-year career, including *Lucas*, *Beetlejuice*, *Mermaids*, *Edward Scissorhands* and now *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, more than earning her the title of "queen of teen angst."

But Ryder, the 21-year-old actress and godchild of '60s acid expert Timothy Leary, has moved beyond teen. Routinely compared to the royal greats of previous generations — the likes of Natalie Wood and Lillian Gish — Ryder is coming of age with a graceful confidence and a well-lit career path ahead of her. And because of her uncanny ability to avoid roles in Hollywood bombs, she's done it all without acquiring the kiss-of-death "teen star" label.

"I've been really lucky that I've worked on films that weren't teen films," she says. "Most of the films that I've done were with adults and geared toward a more adult audience."

Of course, Ryder says she's strayed in the past, having acted in a few movies she'd rather forget. But aside from those self-admitted "turkeys," ("I knew when I was making them they were bad, but I couldn't do anything about it or else I was going to get sued.") she has been lucky — if the concept truly exists in Hollywood — with her films.

And now with Mina, her erotic character in *Dracula*, she has the perfect role to carry her into adulthood in the eyes of Hollywood.

"Now it was time to go over that bridge going from a teen-ager to a young woman, which I was doing in my life," Ryder says.

*Dracula* features Ryder as the reincarnated lost love of a seductive yet terrifying Dracula, played by Gary Oldman. Audiences, accustomed to the quasi-innocence of Ryder's earlier suburban-based parts, may be shocked by the eyeful of Ryder's raw sensuality and passion.

Not that Ryder is about to go soft-porn or anything. Despite the role, she says she's not a fan of blood, gore and skin films and actually never has seen a *Dracula* movie. Her favorite movies are about war, including

*The Last Metro*, *Au Revoir Les Enfants* and *The Execution of Private Sloan*. Clearly not your typical teen-fluff stuff.

"Most of my favorite movies are emotional, rip-your-heart-out, drag-it-through-the-street kind of movies," she says with a dark smile.

Indeed the actress has a wisdom about her apparent through her confident frankness. The fact that she's become a "movie star" seems not to have phased her. She certainly has not gone through a typical education process.

"Discovered" at age 13 at the San Francisco American Conservatory Theater, Ryder says she took some of her early roles (the turkeys) to get out of high school classes.

"I was young, bored and I wanted to work," she says.

And work she has. Educationally, she's never looked back, occasionally taking classes but having no desire to attend college.

"I'm completely pro-college and pro-education, but I feel like I'm getting such an incredible education doing what I'm doing right now that I wouldn't want to stop," she says.

"I don't just learn about movies when I make movies. It's a big life lesson. I travel a lot and I learn a lot about other cultures so I don't feel my education stopped."

Instead Ryder's directors have been her teachers. And with tutors such as film greats Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton and Francis Ford Coppola, she's clearly become the head of her class of young thespians.

With Coppola, things haven't always been smooth as celluloid, though.

Slated for a role in Coppola's *Godfather III*,

Ryder left the set the day she was to begin shooting.

Rumors were flying about pregnancy, emotional breakdowns,

drug use and problems with Johnny Depp,

her on-again, off-again relationship. (By the way, it's on for now — on to the point of a boulder on her left hand.)

But Ryder says it was sheer physical exhaustion and an upper-respiratory infection that left her with a 104-degree fever and an inability to work.

Other actresses may not have been able to escape the backlash, but neither Ryder's relationship with Coppola nor her popularity were damaged.

"[*Godfather III*] was just another project. That one didn't work out. This one did and it's really incredible," Ryder says, dismissing the topic.

Still, after all the "career" roles and lauded performances, Ryder says she has no true game plan for her life. She has no wish list of directors or roles, presumably because she has so many offers thrown at her.

"I've been really lucky because I've just had these really amazing roles come along... I know a lot of actresses who have [come across the problem], and I've heard those complaints and I feel very compassionate, and I feel almost kind of guilty that I'm not going through it."

Guilty, yeah, but not apologetic. It's good to be Ryder, what with the hot boyfriend, killer roles and seemingly unlimited potential.

And the actress, "fascinated by the process" of filmmaking, already is talking about trying her hand at directing.

"I'm very interested in that, but I really would not get ahead of myself," she says. "I want to really wait until it's time, and I don't know when that's going to be."

Judging by her past, it won't be long. ■



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