



BEING

**CATHERINE
KEENER**

The actress' smart, sexy, acerbic screen personality has won her acclaim, but her success is no surprise to Wheaton's Theatre Department.

Joan Crawford had it in spades. Linda Fiorentino made it her calling card. And now Catherine Keener '83 and her gift for playing smart, sexy and delightfully nasty screen roles are gaining her a reputation in Hollywood.

In the surprise indie hit *Being John Malkovich*, Keener delivers one verbal blow after another—usually directed at her pathetic admirer Craig, played by John Cusack. Her character, Maxine, an attractive, aloof, neurotic ice queen, taunts Craig with lines such as, “Even if you had me, you wouldn’t know what to do with me.” Her sexy self-assurance at once terrifies and attracts the men around her.

It’s a performance that’s winning Keener honors: The New York Film Critics Circle named her best supporting actress, and she received supporting actress nominations for the Oscar, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild awards.

Keener’s talent for the stage and screen is no secret in Wheaton’s Theatre Department. Professor Pamela Bongas, who first worked with Keener in the Wheaton production of *Vanities* in 1981, describes her as “offbeat, individualistic, funny.”

Malkovich director Spike Jonze immediately grasped that quality in Keener when he picked her to play Maxine. In a way, it was counterintuitive casting: The usually sexy Cameron Diaz plays Craig’s dishwasher-boring wife, Lotte, in the movie. After auditioning more than a dozen actresses for the role, Jonze said Keener clinched it while reading one particularly snappy exchange between Maxine and Craig.

“She did it so casually and so unforced,” Jonze said. “It was sort of the quintessential Maxine with a zippy line. She had the ability to play Maxine in a way that she would say the harshest things to somebody, but you almost didn’t know you got stung until afterward. She didn’t do it venomously, which is more interesting than playing those lines as a villain.”

To Keener, “Maxine was like an arsonist setting fires here and there and leaving other people to clean them up. That’s probably why I kept trying to get close to Lotte, because I kept thinking, ‘This is not me! It’s not me!’ . . . I’m not the person that can do all of those things!”

Playing sharp-tongued women is not new to Keener. In Neil LaBute’s 1998 film *Your Friends & Neighbors*, Keener played Terri, Ben Stiller’s no-holds-barred girlfriend. Terri is the kind of girl who says what’s on her mind—no matter how hurtful or mean-spirited it may seem.

“Is there any chance you could shut up?” Terri barks at Stiller’s character as they are making love. “Lovemaking is not a time for sharing.”

Portraying women who play by their own rules, who defy society’s traditional standards for women’s behavior, appeals to Keener.

“My natural tendency would have been to make Terri more palatable to people by making her more diplomatic,” she noted. “That is what women do all the time—soften themselves up—and usually that softening is in the presence of men. Terri was consistent in front of men and women, and I found that really interesting.”

For avid independent moviegoers, Keener is a familiar sight. She has appeared in more than a dozen films, showing a tremendous range. In her current film, *Simpatico*, which opened in January, she plays a not especially bright supermarket clerk who gets caught in a bizarre triangle with Jeff Bridges and Nick Nolte.

But Keener is winning more mainstream fans with the breakout success of *Malkovich*—the film has won numerous awards, including those from the New York Film Critics, Broadcast Film Critics and the American Comedy Awards, and it has received nominations for a Golden Globe, and an Oscar and many others.

In real life, Keener is nothing like Maxine or Terri. There is nothing manipulative or hard-edged about her. In fact, at a recent interview, it was hard to believe that the shy young woman could be the same razor-edged woman she plays on screen.

“I struggled. I really struggled,” she said about playing Maxine.

Jonze and Keener were vigilant about making Maxine a multidimensional character and not allowing her to lapse into simple nastiness. “It was easy for me to fall into the trap of just being hard and mean,” she said. “Underneath it all Maxine might have had a heart somewhere . . . I think.”

“I knew we needed to get her,” said *Friends & Neighbors* director LaBute. “I couldn’t let her go after the audition.”



Catherine Keener, center, as Arlie in Wheaton’s 1983 production of *Getting Out*. Opposite: Keener as Maxine in *Being John Malkovich*.

I can't even explain what her real beauty is—it's kind of amazing, you can't stop looking at her. It was important to have those piercing eyes."

But many of Keener's film roles have not been as biting as Maxine or Terri, from Anne Heche's sweet, lonely, single friend in 1996's *Walking and Talking* to George Clooney's wacky, chain-smoking ex-girlfriend two years later in *Out of Sight*. Her roster of performances is what convinced LaBute and Jonze that she could play their respective characters.

"From talking to her and seeing her in movies, I realized she's a really incredibly perceptive person," Jonze said. "She has played so many different roles and has done them so naturally. Her style of acting is very real."

Added LaBute: "If I was looking for a female Christ, she is who I would cast. Catherine draws you in by saying so little. What I have found as a common thread with really good film actors is a comfort zone where they are seemingly doing nothing. There is no wasted energy."

Keener said she fell into acting quite by accident. She grew up in Miami, the eldest of Jim and Evelyn Keener's five children. As a child Keener wanted to become a nun. "I never had the Cinderella thing going," she said. But the Cinderella thing happened anyway. Unable to land a spot in a photography class at Wheaton, she instead enrolled in an acting class. She performed in theater throughout college, with her first performance in a production of Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others*.

"As an actress she was smart in an intuitive sense," Bongas remembers. "She very quickly could see to the deeper levels of a character."

Bongas and Keener worked together in several Wheaton productions, including *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds*, *Getting Out* and *Chamber Music*. "We would sit around in my office for hours and read scripts aloud. She was hungry for knowledge and growth as an actor, and it was so joyful for me as a teacher to share with her."

Upon graduation with a degree in American civilization, Keener moved to New York and worked as an assistant to a casting director. She never thought of herself as an actress—until her boss told her she had no talent for office work.

"She said to me, 'You're not so good as a secretary. Is there anything else you would like to do?'" she recalled. She moved to Los Angeles and began taking acting classes. It



Co-stars Catherine Keener and John Cusack share a scene from *Being John Malkovich*.

was there she met her husband, actor Dermot Mulroney, the man she calls her "coach."

She was cast in bit roles until *Johnny Suede*, a 1991 film directed by Tom DiCillo and starring the then little-known Brad Pitt. Her role as the neurotic New York girlfriend opposite Pitt's flaky character opened doors for her. It also marked the beginning of her collaboration with DiCillo, who went on to direct her in three more movies, including 1995's *Living in Oblivion*, in which she starred opposite her husband and Steve Buscemi.

Johnny Suede was "the first time that made me feel connected to the material," Keener said. "Working with Tom DiCillo feels like one big chunk of my career."

Though she is very pleased with the way her career is going and admits that more scripts are landing on her doorstep, she is philosophical about success in Hollywood. In the end, it really is her family life that keeps her grounded and gives her perspective, she said.

A new mother (son Clyde was born last summer), Keener is quite content with her quiet home life, her marriage to Mulroney (the groom in *My Best Friend's Wedding*) and their home in Los Angeles. And though she probably has hit the highest point yet of her 14-year career with the popularity of *Malkovich*, Keener seems unfazed by stardom or Hollywood's obsession with celebrity.

"Even if you have an innate ability or talent, you need to learn a bunch of other things to deal with the business," she said. "You have to find a balance between taking yourself seriously enough and not taking yourself too seriously. When people are scrutinizing how you look and what you sound like or how big or small you are, you have to know that it's not personal."

Lorenza Munoz is a Los Angeles Times staff writer. Jayne M. Lafrate contributed to this story.

Keener on Film

About Last Night ... (1986)
 Backtrack (1989)
 Survival Quest (1989)
 Switch (1991)
 The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag (1992)
 Johnny Suede (1992)
 Living in Oblivion (1995)
 Box of Moonlight (1996)
 Boys (1996)
 The Destiny of Marty Fine (1996)
 Walking and Talking (1996)
 The Real Blonde (1998)
 Out of Sight (1998)
 Your Friends & Neighbors (1998)
 8MM (1999)
 Being John Malkovich (1999)
 Simpatico (2000)