

Films

Bon Appétit TO Indian Cuisine



Canadian actor Charlotte Le Bon stars in Steven Spielberg and Oprah Winfrey's *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, a charming film starring Indian cuisine and endearing cross-cultural sparks. In an interview with *Khabar*, Le Bon talks about her character, how she did not believe she would get this role, two-and-a-half months of filming in France, Om Puri's culinary skills, and her co-star Manish Dayal.

By AJAY VISHWANATHAN

Montreal-born Charlotte Le Bon was never keen on an acting career. It was serendipity that nudged her into the industry. Just a few films old, Charlotte was handpicked by Steven Spielberg for his *A Hundred Foot Journey*, co-produced with Oprah Winfrey. Directed by Lasse Hallström (remember his *Chocolat*?), and shot in the luxurious landscape of southwestern France, the film's 'clash-of-cultures' theme, explored through a visually rich, heartwarming tale has already generated ripples.

What was it like for relative newbies like her and co-star Manish Dayal to be part of a Hollywood biggie? Charlotte takes us behind the scenes of the film, with delightful nuggets of information—Om Puri's culinary talents, film editing techniques, and more—and offers insights into her performance that hint at wisdom quite beyond her years.

Were you familiar with Indian cuisine before you got roped into the movie?

In a very clichéd, ashamed kind of way. Butter

chicken and *naan*, and cardamom! Basically, these were the only things I knew about Indian food. Talk about foreign cuisines, Om Puri really hates French food! He couldn't eat it. It was pretty sad to watch. He used to go to those creepy Indian places in the village where we were living and find all the special spices and ingredients to cook some amazing Indian dinners.



Films

So Om Puri was cooking during the shooting?

Yes, he was. He's a great cook. He made some of the most amazing Indian food I have ever had.

You looked ravishing in the movie. Tell me—how did you land this fetching role?

[At the time of the casting] I was in a rush, I had to catch a train to go for another movie, and I didn't have much time to learn all my lines. I didn't ask too many questions about the character. I didn't bother with the details: Oh, she's French, she's in a village, she's a cook. I told myself, I am just going to go to the casting session and do what I would in real life. And that's what I did. And after the casting, I just forgot about it. I was saying to myself, "This is too big ... there's no way I am going to get this part." So I was pretty relaxed. When they called me back for a second casting, I told myself, "Oh my God! Now this is getting official!"

Tell us a bit about your time in France shooting for this film.

The southwest (of France) is not the same as the south, where you have the sea, and the culture is a little different. It was my first time there and we really got to learn about it. We were there for two-and-a-half months and—I cannot lie to you—we got so bored! When we were not working, we were like *Oh, shoot me in the head!* But looking back, it was really nice. The scene in the market, well, that's a real market. Every Sunday it is organized with fresh produce. Actually all the men there that I talked to in the scene are real people who work in the market. The names by which I call them in the movie are their real ones.

The place Om Puri stares at and says, "I love this location"—is that a studio?

No, this one was actually a real house. Quite a place! The French restaurant was built in front of it.

Any other memorable moments that jump at you when you think of your experience?

A bunch of them. We were like a little family. In the same place for weeks. There was something very cool about it. Coming home after work, having dinner together, and then going to bed. Sweet times. A bunch of sweet moments. And real conversations, too. Very important moments for me.

It must have helped to have someone like Manish with you, who is as young and new to Hollywood as you are.

Manish (Dayal) and I got along immediately. I had just acted in a movie with Joseph Gordon-Levitt and it



Charlotte Le Bon, serving up a side of romance in a delectable clash-of-cultures tale.

was so different (with him).

Even though he was about the same age as Manish, he has made hundreds of movies, so the relationship is not the same. With Manish, we were both in this same situation: it was our first official American production, a huge one. We reminded ourselves, "What's happening to us now is amazing! It's so big!"

One could see that you got along. The chemistry was quite palpable on screen.

I really respect him and I love him so much. He's an amazing actor and a beautiful human being. Very intelligent.

Your expressions were wonderful, especially in scenes where you did not have to say a single word. For example, the scene where Manish brings the food to Helen. She is tasting it and the camera focuses on your expression. Without saying you are so expressive. Tell me more about scenes where you have nobody around you and you have to emote. How does that work?

It's interesting you say that ... I just read somewhere that what's expressed in silence is more interesting than the dialogue. And that's true. When you are really sincere and into your character, every expression has its own words. The way you look, or the way you move your hand. Everything is important.

I love the scene where Manish comes to you and tells you he's been offered a job by Helen. And your reaction: you are happy for him but then you are pained because he is now your competitor ... that was your best scene, I thought.

Thank you. Lasse told me it was one of his favorite scenes in the movie. That's probably one of my best scenes for the character, too. The first thing I learned about acting is to not judge your character but to respect it. And when I read this scene, I told myself,

>>

Films

"That's it, I really respect this woman." Unfortunately the roles women get right now, especially those where they play the girlfriend, are not realistic. They are usually too sweet and generous, and give everything to the men they love. But it's not like that in real life. Girls have their own goals and ambitions and dreams. I think that scene is really well-written.

On the other hand, I wish your character would have been a bit more fleshed out: Where did Marguerite come from? What is her background? Did she get hired by Madame Mallory?



Extending a hand of more than friendship to Hassan (Manish Dayal).

Actually Marguerite's character is based on the novel. It got more important in the movie. There's not a lot of information about her. Yeah, maybe it would have been interesting to see more of her passion, which mostly involves food. It's funny that you mention this because when I called my mother and told her I had got this part for this movie, she got really excited and said, "Oh, I'm going to read the novel." So, she read it and three days later, she called me and she goes, "I read the book. Don't read it!" I said, "Why?" She said, "Because your character is not important in the story!"

So she told you, don't read the book but accept the part?

Exactly. Because you'll find it more interesting in the movie than in the novel.

How was working with Lasse as a director different from the other directors you have worked with?

Maybe it's true for European directors ... for them, the aesthetic of the image is more critical, perhaps more refined. It's about being more natural. Usually,

when you work with bigger production companies, you cannot lose much time, and everything has to happen quicker. But it wasn't like that working with Lasse; we had a lot of time to shoot again and again. He liked to do a lot of takes.

Were there scenes that required more work?

The scene that you liked. Where Manish is announcing that he is entering Madame Mallory's kitchen. That took several takes, maybe more than 20 times in one type of frame. We changed the frame after that. We tried it in a bunch of different ways. At the end of it, Lasse said, *Improvise! Just do whatever you want.* And the best part is he used quite a few frames from the improvised versions."



With director Lasse Hallstrom.

Were you awestruck working with people like Spielberg and Oprah and Helen ...

Of course! When somebody calls you to say, Steven Spielberg thinks you're The One, it's unbelievable! I had never really met Spielberg in person. I had to Skype with him. It was the most beautiful Skype experience of my life! I remember when I got that call, I looked at my best friend and I said (to her), "This is not real! It doesn't make any sense!" Everything happened so fast. It was like an amazing star was watching over me.

Wow. That is amazing. You have a very nice story to tell.

Because this came out of nowhere. I didn't work for it. I really didn't want to be an actress and here I am talking to you ...it's amazing.

>>