



Allen

TOWN

Talent makes her more
than just a contender

By Sioux-z Jessup

She doesn't wear designer dresses that show more skin than sequins. She didn't sell her wedding photos to the highest bidder. And no, she hasn't left her husband for Russell Crowe.

Garnering her third Oscar nomination, Joan Allen is much more than just a contender. She's clearly established herself on Hollywood's A-list of talented actresses.

This year, Joan Allen, 44, was honored with a Golden Globe, SAG and Academy Award nomination for her role as Sen. Laine Hanson in "The Contender." "I think I screamed louder when I heard Jeff's (co-star Bridges) name," says Allen, when asked about her reaction to the nomination.

"I appreciate the acknowledgement very much," muses Allen. "But, I think about it in terms of the logistics of my life. I live in New York. And if my husband comes to the awards show, how can we take care of my daughter? I think more in pragmatic terms."

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Former Los Angeles film critic Rod Lurie wrote the part of Laine specifically for the Allen. Lurie met the actress at an awards show and told her, "I should write something for Joan Allen because then I know it will be good." Lurie kept his promise and was right about Allen, who gives a tour de force performance in "The Contender." The DreamWorks movie, also directed by Lurie, is Hollywood's formal response to the barrage of sexual scandals that have plagued U.S. politics in recent years. Allen portrays a vice-presidential nominee whose candidacy gets derailed by an alleged past indiscretion.

"I liked the role because it was about a proactive woman who was very good at her profession," states the actress. "And she took a stand for what she believed in. I was inspired by her convictions."

Allen struggled to make the character of Laine three-dimensional as opposed to portraying her merely as self-righteous or saintly. Characters with foibles are always more interesting.

"The fact that she was an atheist really appealed to me," confesses Allen. "That she had actually stolen one of her closest friend's husband, as awful as that was, I was glad the character wasn't perfect."

In order to research the role, Allen scouted out an elected female official. "I met a wonderful woman, a senator from Arkansas, Blanche Lincoln, who helped me do some research in

terms of the part," notes Allen. "We discussed her feelings about being the youngest female senator. It was interesting to pick her brain about her experiences."

Unlike England, India, and Israel where women have held the highest office, America has not yet followed suit. "I hope young girls can see this movie and have some sense of hopefulness that women are capable of holding these types of positions," says Allen.

While filming the movie, writer-director Lurie lamented the difficulty women face in

ascending to the most powerful elected position in this country. "Do you realize that 50 percent of the people that live in this country are not seriously considered for the most important position in the land?" challenged Lurie. "That is a lot of potentially intelligent people to disregard."

The movie also addresses the ongoing debate regarding the zone of privacy for public figures. Consistent with her film's character, Allen believes illegal acts are fair game and subject to public scrutiny.

"If the person has committed an illegal act, the public has a right to know," affirms Allen. "But, if it's on a more personal nature, then I do believe in the right to privacy. We've all been young and made mistakes. But, that's part of growing up and learning from your failures and successes."

Although Allen has portrayed other political figures including the role of Pat Nixon in Oliver Stone's "Nixon," an underlying sexual essence pervades many of her characters. Yet, Allen has never played the sex-card. In fact, she has never accepted a role where gratuitous sex was part of the equation.

"I like having an element of sexuality to the character," insists Allen. "But, there's something else going on as well. With many male leads in movies, sexuality is a part of their lives, but they also have amazing jobs. There are many dimensions to them and they live a well-balanced life." As Allen has lived, with a set of unshakable Midwestern values to always fall back upon.

Growing up in Rochelle, Ill., population 9,300, Joan Allen was striving for balance under the tutelage of overprotective parents. A big event for Allen as a kid was viewing the latest Disney flick followed by a scooter ride to the local Dairy Queen. But, when she slipped into the film version of

"Long Day's Journey Into Night," the teenage Allen was spellbound. "It was unlike anything I had ever seen before," says Allen.

"Katharine Hepburn's performance struck a chord within me." While working as a secretary by

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day, at night Allen honed her craft on the stage with Chicago's famed Steppenwolf Theater Company. "The stage was the perfect place to be outrageous," avows the actress. She met her husband, actor Peter Friedman, when they were in the New York production of "And a Nightingale Sang." They have one daughter, Sadie, who is almost 7 years old. And every time she hears the World War II ballad, "And a Nightingale Sang in Barclay Square," she still gets choked up.

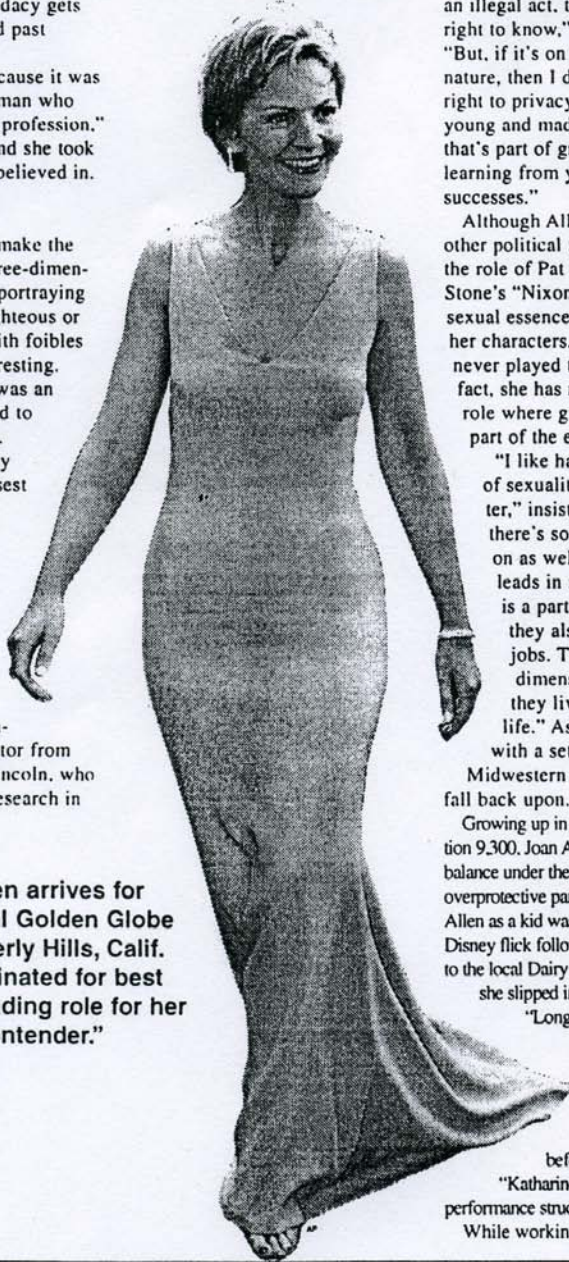
Winning theater's most coveted awards, the Tony and the Obie, the big screen began to beckon. However, Joan didn't do her first film until she was in her late twenties, which is considered ancient in movie years.

Long before Dr. Lecter uttered "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chi-an-ti," the actress starred in the first film of the "Silence of the Lambs" trilogy, the 1986 movie "Manhunter." Allen portrays a blind woman who unknowingly befriends a serial killer. He lures her to a zookeeper's office and lets her pet an unconscious tiger. "How lucky am I?" jokes Allen. "Who gets to pet a tiger? And live to tell about it?"

Allen caressed an even bigger and more vicious beast than a sedated tiger when she floated into Hollywood. And yet, the experience has left her unscathed. Joan Allen is a perfect example of an anti-celebrity. She's a mother, a wife and an artist. Although she has an incredible career, she's not enamored with her stardom. She's doesn't overexpose herself on the talk show circuit. And she's totally removed from Tinseltown's circus-like atmosphere.

The three-time Oscar nominee does have a secret technique for letting go and having fun. "I play with my daughter Sadie," smiles Allen. "She keeps me fresh."

— Sioux-z Jessup is a Los Angeles-based entertainment freelance writer.



Actor Joan Allen arrives for the 58th Annual Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, Calif. Allen was nominated for best actress in a leading role for her part in "The Contender."