



When she's 64

She has played a bunny boiler and a Stepford wife. Now, Glenn Close is achieving a 30-year dream of playing a man. She opens up to **Jenny Cooney Carrillo** about her sister's bi-polar, her cult upbringing and why she is deeply in love with her husband.

LOOKING SOFT AND feminine, made-up and coiffed, it's hard to reconcile this Glenn Close with the character she plays in her Oscar-hyped film, a project that has taken her three decades to bring to the screen. In *Albert Nobbs*, she plays a woman passing as a male butler in order to work and survive in 19th century Dublin. Glenn not only starred, co-wrote, co-produced and co-financed the film, she also wrote the lyrics to the song over the end credits, *Lay Your Head Down*.

Why did *Albert Nobbs* resonate for you so much?

I think, in the beginning, we're taught as women to look into somebody's face and say, "Who do you want me to be?", [then] "Okay, I can be that" – until your back is against the wall and you realise that's not really who you are. So it fascinates me

how people perceive other people and what the truth is because I think everybody has secrets – it's just the size and duration of the secret that may vary.

How long have you been interested in the story?

It's based on a short story by 19th century Irish author George Moore and it was a very battered old book from my grandfather's library that my mum used to read to us on Sunday nights in front of the fire, so that still has a resonance with me. I first played the role off-Broadway in 1982. On stage, you don't wear any make-up, so I had a wig and the audience creates the illusion in the magic of theatre. But for this film, it really tested my craft more than any other part I've ever had to play. In film, you get into somebody's soul and that was incredibly challenging to know how much to show at what time with this person, who had basically gone through life with her eyes downcast.

Was the physical transformation difficult?

I did question whether I was still right for it after all the time that had gone by. Three years ago, I had a test with [Oscar-winning make-up artist] Matthew Mungle and it was a moment of epiphany for me. I'd always felt that, somehow, my face – that's very well-known – would have been a burden to me in this part, but after the very subtle things that Matthew did, I looked up and it wasn't me anymore. It was this strange creature and I started to cry because it was like, "Here she is!"

How did your husband [David Shaw] react when he saw you in the character of *Albert Nobbs*?

I think he was a little surprised and wasn't very comfortable, especially when he came on set to visit and I sat on his lap as Albert! But he invested in this movie, which was the first time he's ever put money in a movie, so that meant the world to me and I knew I had his support on every level. ▶



Left: Mia Wasikowska and Glenn Close in a scene from *Albert Nobbs*. Above: Glenn and her daughter, Annie Maud Stark, also an actress.

Below: With husband David Shaw, whom she married in 2006 and “whose company I adore”.



How do you juggle your career with your life in Maine, in north-east of the US?

It always depends on what [projects] people ask me to do, but I’m not going to do something that’s not worth leaving my husband for. We got married in 2006 and he’s a man whose company I adore. I think, as you get older, your priorities change and while I still love to work, having someone to share it all with is much more important.

Albert lost her identity. Have you ever lost your identity and, if so, how did you find yourself again?

That’s a very loaded question for me because my parents were in a cult-like group from when I was seven to 22, and I left it in order to go to college. In that kind of culture, everybody is supposed to say the same things and act in the same way. So, it’s devastating for a child because at a time when you’re trying to figure out who you are, you’re told who you’re supposed to be.

While I survived that to the point that I was finally able to break free and go to college, I didn’t trust any of my instincts for a long time because I thought they had all been dictated to me and it was like starting a clean slate. Of course, at college, I walked straight into the theatre department and became someone else all over again! [laughs]

Do you feel women have come a long way since *Albert Nobbs*’ time?

I’m realistic about Hollywood, where a lot of equality is just how much money you make and men still make more money than women in our profession. I just came from the *Fortune* 50 Most Powerful Women conference and that was really wonderful – there’s a room full of incredibly powerful women.

We know it’s been a long journey for women, but we also know it will be never-ending because women in power will always be problematic for men. *Albert Nobbs* lived in a time when women had absolutely no rights whatsoever and they were considered the property of their husbands. But while people may think the movie is all about gender, I also think it’s about how people survive and need to feel safe. All human beings long for connection, it’s that simple.

Tell me about your organisation, *Bring Change 2 Mind*?

I want to try and eliminate the stigma around mental illness. My sister, Jessie, is bi-polar and my nephew, her son, Calen Pick, is schizo-affective and has been in the hospital for two years. My sister wasn’t properly diagnosed until she was 49 and she had a very difficult life up until then, but we had no vocabulary to talk about it in my family

and that was shocking to me, so I figured it must have been happening in other families, too.

I learned one in six people are affected by mental illness in some way, so it’s part of the human condition. My goal is for people to just be able to talk about it freely because it’s the last frontier of stigma.

What has it been like working with Australians Rose Byrne in *Damages* and Mia Wasikowska in *Albert Nobbs*?

I don’t know what you put in the water down there, but both of them are wildly gifted. I have made two movies in Australia and spent a lot of time there, and I always love working with Australians. It’s been thrilling to watch Rose blossom in her role on *Damages* and Mia brought so much to *Albert Nobbs* for someone so young.

What life lessons would you pass on to Rose and Mia?

They are doing just great without my advice and I would never be arrogant enough to offer it. But I guess what I have learned, that I would pass along if they asked, is that you must remain authentic and stick to who you are – even when everybody tells you to be someone else. Which brings me back to *Albert Nobbs*, I guess. ■

ROBERT ASCROFT/CPI-SYNDICATION/HEADPRESS. GETTY IMAGES.



“We know it’s been a long journey for women, but we also know it will be never-ending because women in power will always be problematic for men.”