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RENT

Rosario Dawson recalls the East Village, by Lola Ogunnaike. Page 3.
Anthony Rapp, left.



Go West, Young Mimi Marquez

With 'Rent' on her resumé, Rosario Dawson leaves New York behind.

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE

IT'S been nearly two months since Rosario Dawson left her native New York for Los Angeles, and already she is sounding like a changed woman. For starters Ms. Dawson, who plays Mimi in the film adaptation of the musical "Rent" (Nov. 23), has become more outdoorsy: rock climbing and hiking in the desert, visiting wineries in Santa Barbara, admiring skyscraper-free sunsets. During a recent outdoor dinner in the West Village she was even extolling the benefits of driving in freeway traffic — "You can chill and listen to all of your own music" — when the conversation was interrupted by a neighboring diner loudly reprimanding a motorist attempting to squeeze his large car into a tight parking space. "Somebody got his license plate," the diner yelled at the surrounding patrons. "He keeps bumping that car behind him."

As Ms. Dawson, 26, started at the drama unfolding before her, she smiled wistfully. "I do miss this about New York," she said. "No one speaks to each other in L.A. You could be on an elevator with someone and say, 'Nice shoes,' and that person will ask, 'Are you talking to me?' Yes, you're the only other person on the elevator."

Ms. Dawson's recent move to the West Coast is par for the course for actors serious about taking their careers to the next level, and she appears ready to make the leap from supporting player to leading lady. Since being discovered while sitting on the stoop of her Lower East Side apartment a little more than a decade ago, Ms. Dawson has been in more than 20 films, from indie ("Kids") to blockbusters ("Men in Black II"). She has played a gun-toting prostitute ("Sex City"), an eager-beaver journalist ("Shattered Glass"), a feline rocker ("Josie and the Pussycats") and the wife of Alexander the Great ("Alexander"). And Ms. Dawson spent the summer starring in the musical version of "Two Gentlemen of Verona" for the Public Theater in Central Park.

She manages to imbue her characters, no matter how minor, with a palpable sensuality and a New York grittiness that attracts men without alienating women. The director Spike Lee, who cast Ms. Dawson in his dramas "He Got Game" and "25th Hour," calls her a "natural." "She's very open, and she's very easy to direct," he said. "She always comes to the set with great energy."

As the drug-addicted, H.I.V.-positive exotic dancer Mimi Marquez in "Rent," Ms. Dawson not only acts but sings and dances as well, holding her own in a cast that includes stage veter-

ans who were in the original "Rent."

"I had no idea she could sing," said her co-star Jesse L. Martin who was in the stage production 10 years ago. "Occasionally she'd say things like, 'I've never been onstage,' or 'never sang this much before,' and I'd say, 'Oh yeah, you have never done this before.'"

For a neophyte, landing the role was both exhilarating and terrifying. Ms. Dawson said. She admitted to being so nervous during her audition that she forgot a dance routine she had prepared. "When you're standing next to Idina Menzel, it's like, 'Wait, how many Tonys do you have again? What was I thinking?'" Still, Ms. Dawson said she had never felt closer to a character. Set in the 1980s and based on "La Bohème" by Puccini, "Rent" chronicles the turbulent lives of a motley band of squatters struggling to survive in the East Village as the AIDS epidemic rages.

It is a world with which Ms. Dawson is all too familiar. She was raised on the Lower East Side in a squat brimming with colorful characters. As a result, she said, she learned about improvisation early. It was her mother, a singer, who fixed the plumbing, and her father, a construction worker, who installed the electricity in their dilapidated apartment, where windows were made of plastic and a cast-iron stove doubled as a heater. "I saw my parents build our apartment with their hands," said Ms. Dawson, over soup and sangria. "That gives you a sense of pride." She happily remembered potluck dinners with tenants and "crazy artists" who lived by candlelight.

But not all her memories were romantic. "We weren't allowed to be outside at night after

a certain time," she said, "because there was literally a crack house across the street." All of this informed the role of Mimi, said Ms. Dawson, who also mined the experiences of her family, including an H.I.V.-positive uncle who contracted the disease in the 80's. "I talked to my friends who were there during that time, and it was scary — people were dropping like flies," she said. "I wanted to know all about the harsh realities."

Chris Columbus, who directed "Rent," said that Ms. Dawson's intimate understanding of that world was invaluable. "Authenticity is always a plus, and the fact that she lived there and her mother still lives there was definitely an added bonus," he said. That Ms. Dawson, with her luminous skin and warm brown eyes, is stunning also didn't hurt. Mr. Martin said, "The girl ain't had to look at that, for sure."

While many of her Hollywood peers are partial to scripted answers and 30-second sound bites, Ms. Dawson is a self-proclaimed talker. When she is on a roll her sentences can last for minutes on end. She can leave others feeling as though they are in a game of verbal double Dutch, standing on the sidelines of her conversation, waiting for the rare opportunity to jump in. She speaks with an enthusiasm that can be both charming and infectious. Her thoughts that evening skipped from gentrification to her obsession with puppies featured on Peefinder.com. "I'll spend hours looking at them," they're just so cute."

Her boyfriend's giant Rhodesian Ridgebacks, when she lovingly refers to as her children, were part of the reason she moved out of Los Angeles. "They need the outside," she said. Just

then a white cocker spaniel trotted by, and she interrupted herself to coo, "Look at the doggie!" in a voice reserved for adorable toddlers and small mammals.

Ms. Dawson, who lives with the actor Jason Lewis (Smith ferret, the dimwitted hunk with a heart and abs of gold, in "Sex and the City"), said she had always been a performer. As a child she found family members to sit through exhausting renditions of "Sesame Street" songs. She wrote her first number — "I Want to Party!" — at the age of 6. (It sounded very similar to Eddie Murphy's hit "Party All the Time," she said, giggling.) Yet nine years later, when Larry Clark found her on that stoop and gave her the part of a promiscuous foul-mouthed teenager in his controversial film "Kids," she thought little would come of the opportunity. "My feeling at the time was that if you're casting off the street, this is not going to go anywhere," she said.

"Kids" was critically acclaimed, but not all of Ms. Dawson's films have been winners. "Alexander" was a commercial and critical dud. Now Ms. Dawson, who recently started her own production company, Trybe, is looking forward to creating her own opportunities. She will produce and star in "Descent," a rape revenge thriller. "It's going to be very heavy for people to watch," she said. "It's pretty harsh." Last month she began rehearsing for both "Killshot," a thriller based on Elmore Leonard's novel of the same name, and Kevin Smith's follow-up to his cult hit "Clerks."

"As an actor there are times when you're sitting around and wishing you were working," Ms. Dawson said of her hectic schedule. "So you've got to just take it when it comes."



Michael Fuchs for The New York Times

Rosario Dawson, back on the streets of the West Village, recently left her native New York for Los Angeles. Ms. Dawson is starring in the film adaptation of the musical "Rent," opening Nov. 23.

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Hollywood's Asian gamble, by David M. Halbfinger. Page 4.
Ziyi Zhang, right.

