

River

By Tara Dilullo

Life's never dull on *Serenity* - especially when the super-powered refugee River Tam is around... Actress Summer Glau talks through her experiences of working on the movie.

With her big, expressive eyes and gracefully thin dancer's body, actress Summer Glau hardly seems a likely candidate to become the next big screen female action hero, capable of clearing out a room full of men with her awesome kung-fu grip. But that's just what she does - and then some - stepping back into the role of River Tam, the strange girl with otherworldly powers running for her life in *Serenity*. On the series *Firefly*, Tam's history had barely unraveled by the time the show ended. All audiences knew was that this once brilliant girl was held at The Academy, where they brutally experimented on her brain like a lab rat. Her brother Simon saved her and together they sought sanctuary with the crew of the *Serenity*. Now the film, River Tam's history and destiny take center-stage with The Alliance bent on getting this powerful girl back in their clutches.

Only her second professional acting role, Glau says playing River has been an amazing personal and professional journey which she is still overwhelmed by. "I did have a connection to River from the very beginning and I think that was the miracle that got me the role," the soft-spoken actress reveals. "I had so little experience, but I just felt for her so much. I had a very hard time during my teenage years. I was very lonely and isolated, because I was dancing in a company and didn't go to a regular high school. I didn't have very many friends and I went through a very hard depression. I felt like I knew things that were a burden to me. So, I feel like that's how River is - isolated and alone and she knows things. She's wise beyond her years and yet awkward. It was therapy to me to use all those memories for expression. I remember [cast-members] coming up to me and saying, "I didn't know how you were going to handle that scene because it was so weird!" I think it was because, for me, River may seem really weird to a lot of people, but she wasn't for me. It worked."

Yet with the end of the series, the continued exploration of Tam's and the rest of the cast's characters seemed break. For Glau, the blow was particularly painful. "I think I definitely wailed the most of everyone," she laughs lightly. "Joss felt so bad for me, because I'm the new kid and he doesn't want things to hurt me. He knows everyone else is more used to it. But he promised me and everyone else that he would figure something out. He kept checking on me and building my faith. We all believed he would make something happen and he made the miracle happen. Finally, I remember the moment he told me, I remember where we were and the shoes I was wearing when he told me it was a go and we were making the movie. He took me to get hot tea. He always has English Breakfast and I had my Earl Grey," she giggles.

With *Serenity* greenlit, it was just a matter of time before the cast reunited. "It was just like it used to be on the series," Glau enthuses brightly. "I remember the first day we came back to do a table read, it was like we'd never left. It was like putting on a pair of jeans and it was exactly the same fit as before. I know Joss was proud that he'd gotten us all back. The set was bigger and better and we had a very, very talented crew."

The movie did mean there were going to be some serious changes for Glau, in particular. River Tam is a full-fledged fighting machine in *Serenity*, which meant the actress has to step back into the intense discipline of her dance background to prepare for the physical requirements of this new side to her character. "Right after Joss told me it was a go, he found me a trainer and got me into that intense schedule before I even knew what the story was about. I had no idea how intensive it would be in the movie! I was in shock." Glau also admits it was intimidating. "From the beginning of the series, I worried about my other cast-mates trusting me to do a good job, because I was new and I have so

much respect for them. So of course, my first feeling was, 'Oh, no! Are they going to be worried I would mess this up?' But they were so supportive and had faith in me.

"It was three months of training pretty much every day," Glau details. "I started doing the martial arts training, where you go to the gym, put on your gear, warm up, and you kick your booty for an hour. You cry a little bit, you sweat a lot and there was so much comfort in that. It really made me feel like I was earning the opportunity to be in the movie because I was doing the day-to-day grind of preparing. I will never forget how special that opportunity was. I mean, yes there were days when I was at the end of my rope, because they were working me real hard. I have such a huge respect for those guys. They were patient with me. My body is strong, but it's not designed for the snapping movements. They had to restructure my movement so I would look lithe and powerful. It was a big transition for me. They gave me an amazing education, Chad [Stahelski, stunt co-ordinator] and Hiro [Koda, co-stunt co-ordinator] and my stunt double, Bridgette [Riley], who worked out with me every day. They made me believe I could do it. I really went in there and put my pride aside and tried to do it for real. It was really exciting."

With several key action sequences showcasing River in the film, Glau says she felt the pressure to get them right. "The hardest thing about the fight scenes was that I learned them like dance choreography, from beginning to end, which is kind of unusual. Chad thought that was best for me, so that people would know I was doing it myself. The main problem was they couldn't hire all the stunt guys for my rehearsals. So when I got on-set there were like 30 guys, but I had learned the fight with five guys! It was like getting used to five partners and then having to meet 25 more on the same day. They all expected different things, so we were all learning. The terrain was also very difficult, because there were stairs and stones." With a breathy sigh, she smiles and says, "There were a few times when Joss walked me out to the golf cart and I would sit there and cry a little bit. He'd pep talk me and we'd go back in and I'd have a better attitude. I felt so overwhelmed. All these grown men were waiting for me to get where I needed to be. I wanted so badly to make Chad and Hiro proud because they had worked so hard to train me to do everything on my own. The adrenaline of doing that was amazing, so it was a proud moment for me."

Asked if she got any war wounds, Glau laughs, "Oh yeah! I got kicked in the head and I have some scars. I got a really bad gash on my leg that got infected and I couldn't walk for a few days. And there was one stunt that was supposed to be a running split. We rehearsed it and it was great, but when we got to the set, it was a much smaller set than the gym. I was running, and it's much easier to come up from the split when I have enough time to come up gradually, but on the soundstage, I had to get into the split and then jump right back up and I pulled my groin so bad! It was embarrassing. I had ice between my legs! It got pulled [from the movie] in the end too!"

Aside from her impressive beat-downs, Glau says the revelation of River's story was an incredible gift to play too. "Joss has such a way of bringing humanity into a story. He was leading up to [River's connection with the Reavers] a bit in the series. River felt so much around the Reavers, so I really loved being able to explore that. In the end, when I fight the Reavers it's a culmination of me being able to keep my sanity, when I'm around so much insanity. I'm fighting to the end and not giving up, so I can move on in my life and be set free from the fear and uncertainty that came from all that mental and emotional agony that the Academy put me through, that was amazing."

Yet for all of her River moments in the film, Glau says her favourite moment came from a scene with her beloved cast. "One of my very favourite moments in the film is during the funeral. I remember just looking at everyone, and we're all so close in real life, that standing there together, [grieving], was so powerful. We were out in the middle of nowhere, it was 115 degrees, the wind was blowing and then that sunset was such a

deep orange and just cast a beautiful glow on everyone. Even though no one spoke, it was probably the most important scene for me. I cried after we were done shooting it and was crying on the way home."

Now with *Serenity* complete, Glau says she is just so grateful to have experienced this character, cast and crew so early in her career. "I felt like we made it to the top of the mountain when people kept pushing us down. The fact that we made this movie, a complete, amazing, beautiful movie... it feels like we won already. If it doesn't become a mainstream success and people don't get it, I feel like it's their loss, because it's a very special, special story. I hope we get to make more.

"The entire cast agrees we never have as much fun anywhere else. But we have to share Joss with the rest of the world, so I'm not getting my hopes too much. I don't want to put pressure on him to do more, because I feel like it's a miracle that we made it this far. I just hope that people recognise what a unique movie it is."

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Summer Glau: There are a million moments that I'm really proud of for everybody. Nathan [Fillion] is brilliant in the way that he can make this character so stark and so hard and be funny. He has much tenderness that he doesn't usually let people see. He would cry just talking about the scene where Simon gets shot. He's a very special person and he's a great actor to show that contrast. Adam [Baldwin] steals every scene he's in. He's so funny and makes every detail of his character so specific. He'll mess with his clothes and his props to get it right. I love all my scenes with Sean [Maher]. Doing the scene when he gets shot, we weren't supposed to do it that day and I hadn't emotionally prepared to do it all. We decided to do a rehearsal and he just went for it and did it and everybody on set lost it. He's such a powerful actor. He inspires me so much. I'm so lucky to play his sister."

JOSS WHEDON ON RIVER

"River was a wild card [who] became the adolescent with superpowers, because apparently I can't ever write anything without an adolescent girl with superpowers, and I just have to accept that about myself and be at peace. In a weird way, she was coming to represent the audience's voice, because she soaked in everything that everybody did so tactily and so emotionally that she was almost kind of the narrator. But she was also the propulsion of what was going to happen, because she had a mystery behind her and the movie is about the mystery."

RIVER TAM

Profile: So smart she makes her brilliant brother look like an "idiot child," River was a genius at everything from school studies to music and dancing, until The Alliance enticed her into what they told her family was a special school, and started messing with her brain. Though still brilliant, she now appears more than a little crazy and completely unpredictable. She can swing from playing games with Kaylee, to shivering and screaming with terror, to violently attacking anyone around her. And she's a killing machine, as *Serenity's* crew has seen on past occasions. Inside the psychoses and the programming, the real River is an insightful young girl who has a way of seeing the truth inside the truth, no matter who's trying to hide it from her. That gift alone would be enough to make her dangerously to many.

Job on *Serenity*: Passenger; trouble magnet; psychic security system

Loves: Simon, dancing