



Call it a revival, her big return, or even a Reese-surgence. The Oscar-winning actress's second act has seen her shift from leading lady to Hollywood power player, who is determined to fight for better roles for women. By Elaine Lipworth

It's a typical LA morning: cloudless, bright and hot, but awaiting the arrival of Reese Witherspoon inside an aggressively air-conditioned photographic studio, you'd never know it. The atmosphere thaws instantly as soon as the Oscar-winner and mother-of-three strides into the windowless room, in a cream Emporio Armani top, swishy Roland Mouret skater skirt and striped Louboutin heels. In contrast to the spartan surroundings, she's a burst of sunshine, all glossy blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes and Southern warmth.

The 39 year old is in excellent spirits and with good reason, given her recent accomplishments: the Oscar nomination for her performance in last year's drama *Wild*, based on author Cheryl Strayed's memoirs, and the success of *Gone Girl*, the David Fincher thriller she produced, which also led to an Oscar nod for the film's star, Rosamund Pike. Plus there's a new film being released this month - *Hot Pursuit*. "It's been exciting, a really great, creative time for me," says the actress. "You have times when you are not as inspired as others and the past two years have been a period of growth and inspiration."

Over coffee and Hershey's Kisses chocolates, scattered liberally on the table, our conversation ranges from her Southern childhood ("I was a happy little kid, running around and climbing trees and playing with the neighbourhood kids") to the joys of family life ("I love Sundays, when I get to hang out with the kids ... just being lazy"). The actress has a 15-year-old daughter, Ava, and an 11-year-old son, Deacon, from

her first marriage to actor Ryan Phillippe, and a two-and-half-year-old son, Tennessee, with her second husband, talent agent Jim Toth.

But what Witherspoon really wants to talk about - what she is clearly passionate about - is addressing the lack of quality roles for women in Hollywood. "[We] represent 50 per cent of the population of the world and we should be representing 50 per cent of the protagonists in movies, but there aren't a lot of great leading roles for us. We deserve better," says Reese, who launched a production company, Pacific Standard, with her Australian business partner, Bruna Papandrea, in 2012, specifically to redress the balance.

Because, as Witherspoon points out, apart from the obvious names - Meryl Steep, Cate Blanchett and, at the younger end of the spectrum, Jennifer Lawrence - great female parts are rare. "If you think about it, there are only about six of us who are starring in movies, and there should be more."

Wild and *Gone Girl* were Pacific Standard's first projects. The former, chronicling Strayed's life-changing 1800-kilometre hike, was transformative for Witherspoon too, who trekked through remote terrain in Oregon in the role, weighed down not only by a gigantic backpack, but also by the powerful inner journey her real-life character endured. "It was emotional for me, dealing with [Strayed's] grief, loss, divorce, drug addiction - some aspects

were very personal. I had more response for that movie from my fans than any I have ever done ... in that a lot of people found a touchstone for their own lives."

Witherspoon and Papandrea's new company was always going to be a risky proposition, but it has paid off handsomely - *Gone Girl* raked in nearly \$400 million at the global box office. Their latest film is the uproarious buddy-comedy, *Hot Pursuit*, directed by Anne Fletcher (*The Proposal*), which sees Witherspoon returning to her comic roots. She plays an uptight cop, on the run with the ultra-sexy widow of a drug lord (*Modern Family*'s Sofia Vergara), whom she has to protect from despicable crooks and gunmen. "She has

48 hours to escort her from San Antonio to Dallas and literally everything goes wrong," laughs Witherspoon, pointing out that this is not her most glamorous role to date: "I am short,

dowdy, unattractive, bad haircut, no make-up, bad underwear. My husband saw the film and he goes, 'Who is that weird person?' I have to stand next to Sofia who is gorgeous and comes to work fully beautiful, hair blowing in the wind."

The actress's enthusiasm about the film is contagious. "There's a scene where we climb through a window, it's dark and Sofia's boobs get stuck." For another memorable moment: "We had to kiss for three days and on the third day, I called my husband and said, 'I have to kiss Sofia all day today. He goes, 'Hmm, nobody feels bad for you!'" >

“I had more response for *Wild* from fans than any movie I've ever done”



Witherspoon reels off a list of funny women she admires that includes Rebel Wilson, Melissa McCarthy and Kristen Wiig. “*Bridesmaids* and *The Heat* proved that there is a huge audience for films starring women that are not centred on whether we get a guy.”

The star’s fledgling company isn’t her first venture behind the camera. While still in her 20s, she ran Type A Films, the now-defunct production company that was responsible for a handful of films, including *Legally Blonde 2* and *Penelope*, a 2006 rom-com starring Christina Ricci. This latest endeavour is more significant though, restoring her status as a leading actress and establishing her as a tour de force in Hollywood – with the clout and consummate skills to change the status quo. “I feel like my perspective matters for the first time,” smiles the actress.

What’s interesting is that the company was inspired by Witherspoon’s own salutary experience over the course of an extraordinary career. It began at age 14, with a highly impressive debut in *The Man In The Moon* (1991), and was followed by a trio of indelible performances in the late ’90s with *Pleasantville*, *Cruel Intentions* and *Election*. Two years later, her role as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* led to international stardom and \$15–20 million pay cheques, among the highest (for women) in the industry. Vivacious, super-smart and funny, she was inevitably labelled “America’s Sweetheart” (the latest one!). There was another hit with *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), before her riveting 2006 Oscar-winning turn as country singer June Carter in *Walk The Line*. At which point she was still only 29.

But the Oscar did not result in more roles of the same calibre and complexity as her part in *Walk The Line*. “It’s not like your choices are wildly different after an Oscar because the films being developed for women are slim to none, especially as you age. There’s a weird deficit of parts between [the ages of] 30 and 40. I got frustrated that I was seeing incredibly intelligent women play wives and girlfriends, which is a huge aspect of life, but it’s not the only thing we are.”

While going through a divorce, a slew of her films – *Four Holidays*, *Just Like Heaven*, *This Means War* and *Rendition* – were written off by the critics.

It was her second husband, Jim Toth, who encouraged Witherspoon to take matters into her own hands. “Three years ago I got remarried, to a man who is incredibly supportive of me,” she says, breaking into a smile. “That made a big difference in my life, as I was trying to accomplish my dreams. I would tell him the things that would bother me and he would say ‘Well are you going to do something about it?’ And you know, my mum has always said: ‘Don’t be part of the problem, be part of the solution.’”

There was also the realisation that without dynamic female characters on the big screen, teenage girls were being robbed of role models. “You can’t be what you don’t see. I want my daughter to see scientists and athletes, women who are accomplishing things because that’s reflective of what I see every day – women CEOs, lawyers, doctors – and we are not seeing them on film.”

Is she optimistic about the future for women then? “I think it’s a great time to be a young woman, but it’s important to instil in our daughters an appreciation that they are born into a life of opportunity that a lot of women in this world do not have. I try to teach my daughter that and how our rights, even in America, are tentative and we are certainly not paid equally.”

Growing up in Nashville, there were many powerful female influences. Witherspoon’s mother, Betty, was a nursing professor and her grandmother, Dorothea Draper, “believed women could do whatever they wanted”, she says. However, acting wasn’t initially encouraged. “My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but I was a storyteller from the time I was a little girl. When I was 12, I started getting interested in acting and then I was rabid about it, going to classes for four hours every Saturday.”



WALK THE (TIME) LINE
 1991: *The Man In The Moon*
 1998: *Pleasantville*
 1999: *Cruel Intentions*, *Election*
 2001: *Legally Blonde*
 2002: *Sweet Home Alabama*
 2006: *Walk The Line*
 2014: *Wild*
 2015: *Hot Pursuit*

It was a happy childhood, with a close-knit family and strong values instilled by her parents, who, she maintains, never spoiled her. “I remember really wanting a bag when I was 15, and my mum said ‘OK, you can babysit to pay for it.’ She made me buy it with my own money. That’s such a gift. Spoiling

kids is like robbing them of lifetime experiences. I want my children to know the value of hard work and a dollar and that sense of self that comes from being able to afford your first apartment.

My parents never gave me any of those things and I think you’re better for having to figure it out yourself.”

A hands-on mother, Witherspoon deals with the inevitable juggling act faced by all working parents: “It’s challenging for anyone who has three kids and a job, doing the best they can; it’s overwhelming sometimes. But I love it, I get so much energy out of being with my kids – they help me focus on what’s important in life. I love my work too, going to the office and talking about movies and being on-set making movies.”

“Do I feel powerful? No. But as I get older, I am more comfortable in a room of studio heads”

Fiercely proud of her Southern roots, the actress and her husband recently launched Draper James, an online fashion-lifestyle brand that sells products made in the South by local artisans. “The South has an incredible sense of style; it’s very classic and lady-like,” says Witherspoon.

But her primary focus comes back to her production company. There are more than a dozen projects in development including a military drama, *Ashley’s War*, based on the book by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon about Ashley White, the first female soldier to die on the front line in Afghanistan. Also in the works, with Nicole Kidman, is a TV adaptation of *Big Little Lies*, a novel by Australian author Liane Moriarty.

Witherspoon is well on the way to changing the male-dominated landscape in Hollywood. “Do I feel powerful? No,” she says. “But as I get older, instead of being shy and apologetic I am more comfortable in a room of studio heads, going: ‘I have a good idea and I know how to execute it.’” She unwraps a chocolate kiss and pops it in her mouth. “You know, I am at a place where I actually feel like I know what I am doing.” And of that, there can be no doubt. □
Hot Pursuit is in cinemas on June 11.

MATT IRWIN/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM/SNAPPER MEDIA