



AnnaSophia Robb

Surfs from the Soul

words by Elizabeth Johnson, photo by Mario Perez, Courtesy of FilmDistrict

AnnaSophia Robb does not shy away from physically or emotionally challenging roles in her already substantial film career. Just 17 years old, she realized she wanted to act from a very early age. She dove into acting classes and got an agent in Denver around the time she turned eight years old. Soon after, she landed her first film role in Wayne Wang's *Because of Winn-Dixie* in 2005 with Jeff Daniels and Cicely Tyson and was nominated for a Best Young Artist's Award for her performance. Her other credits include: *Race to Witch Mountain*, *Jumper*, *Sleepwalking*, *Spy*

School, *The Reaping*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

The last time we chatted in 2008 (when *Sleepwalking* with Charlize Theron came out) she was juggling eighth grade homework and a film career; now she's a junior in high school, still living in Denver, and working on college applications. She is incredibly grounded, committed, and wise — and she gives you the feeling that if you put your mind and soul to it, you can pursue every single one of your dreams, all in good time.

This characteristic surely served her well in her most recent role, portraying champion surfer, Bethany Hamilton, who made a phenomenal comeback after losing an arm to a shark, to continue her career as an award-winning and awe-inspiring professional surfer. It's an incredible story with a mix of positive messages, amazing surf scenes, and memorable performances from AnnaSophia, along with her onscreen parents Helen Hunt and Dennis Quaid. You can tell a lot of love and care went into this film and from it also grew a personal passion for surfing, soul style, amongst the cast.

h: Last we spoke, you weren't even in high school yet, now as a junior, where are you thinking of going to college?

ASR: I am excited about college, but it's weird because I started looking at colleges freshman year, I was really into it sophomore year, now I'm freaked out. Now every time I think of it as a junior, my applications are coming right up, I'm nervous about it. I'm thinking about maybe Brown, Northwestern, or Stanford. I don't really know where I'm at with it, so I'm trying to figure that out and I'm just trying to keep my options open and kind of see where life takes me.

h: And then how did *Soul Surfer* come to you?

AS: My agent brought the script to me, I read it and I wanted to take a meeting on it. It's really a small world though. Just a couple of weeks before, my friend actually said to me, 'AnnaSophia you have to read this book [*Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*], it's so great, I love it and it's really inspirational.' Obviously, I knew of Bethany's story, and then I got a call that I had a meeting on it, and I was having lunch with that same friend! It's just such a small world and such a strange coincidence. What really brought me into Bethany's story was her strength, plus I was curious as an actor what it would feel like to go through losing an arm, and where do you get that strength and courage to go back out and go after your dream.

h: Had you ever surfed before?

ASR: No, I had a two hour surf lesson with my dad — and that was it. But I trained for six weeks before we actually started shooting and then I trained every single day. I changed my diet so I would have more muscle and look more like a surfer. I had several surf coaches, so it was a lot of fun, and Bethany always came out with me and helped me surf, it was a good time.

h: Where did you train?

ASR: We stayed at Turtle Bay, and we had a couple of surf spots we would go out to, where I would paddle surf and long board. I remember one day, in particular, I was with my surf coach, Noah Johnson, and it was a really windy day out — it was totally blown out and I was just fighting for my life to stay on the board. I felt like I was paddling forever and getting nowhere, and I remember a couple of days later, Bethany came up to me, poked my arm and said, 'Hey, you have surf muscles,' and I was so excited.

h: What is your relationship with the ocean like now after having done *Soul Surfer*?

ASR: I feel like when I grow up, I won't be able to live too far from the ocean, because surfing clears your mind out and it's a spiritual connection and something I want to be able to do for the rest of my life. It's such a beautiful, peaceful thing and it's fantastic exercise. But most of all, it's just — I don't know, it's just, once you've tried it, it's a completely different experience, you can't really get a rush like that anywhere else, because when you're out in the water, there's only one thing you can think about and you can't focus on anything but the moment you're in. I think it's the equivalent of meditation, which I have a really hard time doing in my yoga classes.

h: How long was the shoot in Kauai?

ASR: I think we only shot for six weeks, no four weeks, I think it was only a month! It was a pretty ridiculous amount of time to shoot a feature film, so it was a lot of work. I remember it was some of the best moments of my life, but I literally worked my butt off. I worked every single day, we had six day weeks and on top of that I was in school at the same time and training, it was definitely intense, but it was worth it.

h: Did you shoot all of the surf scenes or did you have a double?

ASR: That was definitely not me, I'd love to take credit for that, but most of the one arm surfing was Bethany. She was my primary double, and then for a lot of the maneuvers, the more up close ones, there were two other girls who are also phenomenal surfers, they're both younger than me, they are truly talented. But the duck diving, paddling, that stuff was me.

h: Walk me through how it worked with shooting you so it looked like you had one arm?

ASR: Every day I put on a prosthetic, we called it *Stephanie*, that's what Bethany calls

her arm and it looked just like that. And we had a great prosthetic guy, he painted a green strip and then I would wear a green sleeve, and then for most of the scenes I would tuck my hand behind my back, so that the CGI guys would have an easier time taking it out, and then they had to touch it up and paint in the background.

h: Was it uncomfortable?

ASR: I got used to it. Sometimes I would be in a position for a while, but it never lasted too long, so I didn't have my arm stuck behind my back the entire day.

h: What did you learn about functioning with one arm through Bethany?

ASR: You know Bethany says you can really do anything if you put your mind to it. She functions better with one arm than I do with two on any given day, she just takes control of the situation, and her one arm is strong

"She functions better with one arm than I do with two on any given day"

and so capable of almost anything. I mean life is really what you make it. She does not look at missing an arm as a disability at all, she looks at it as a blessing that she is able to share with people.

h: It must have been an incredible experience working with Bethany, are you two friends now?

ASR: We're really good friends now, I really looked up to her in the beginning especially as an actor and a person. It's weird now, I'm still constantly amazed, but it's just Bethany, that's just how she is. She's one of the coolest people I know truly, but yeah, we're really good friends now and we love hanging out together. And Kauai is such a small island, everyone knows everyone. I've pretty

much met all her friends there, she takes me out surfing and she goes on the baby waves so it's really nice of her, she shows me the ropes, and pushes me to catch bigger waves!

h: Was it a challenge to portray her because her story is so well known?

ASR: Yeah, it was hard. The first challenge was I wanted to make sure she was okay with my performance. I wanted to be her eyes and ears and voice on set, so it's good that we're friends, but I wanted to respect her story and hopefully portray her as truthfully as I could. But it was also really nice because there were certain things I needed to adapt to be her, and she's happy with the performance, and I can stop thinking about that because I'm happy she's really content with it.

h: What was it like to work with Helen Hunt and Dennis Quaid, I heard he got the surfing bug too?

ASR: Yeah, definitely, Dennis is pretty much obsessed with surfing. He's also a big golfer and we were staying at one of the best golf resorts in Hawaii, but he gave up golf to surf. The one day off we had, the cast and the crew, we'd all surf together. They were great, they are the strongest parts of the film I think, and I learned so much from them. It was really special, we became like a family, and it was a very supportive group.

h: How did *Soul Surfer* shift your perspective on your own life at this point?

ASR: I definitely took away kind of what I'm looking at right now, like which college to go to, and to stay in school, to not go out to L.A. and be working all the time. I truly feel that everything happens for a reason, and it's just kind of all in God's plans, that's what's getting me through junior year! (laughs)

h: What do have you brewing next?

ASR: I'm really focused on school right now, there are a couple of things in the works, but I've got to get through this year and then I'll be able to start going for stuff.

h: So do you think you'll be a life long surfer?

ASR: I sure hope so! I hung out with Bethany over winter break, and Rip Curl sent me (via Bethany) a wet suit, so maybe if I get some free time, out in L.A., I'll go out there (as cold as it is). I've been spoiled with the Hawaii water, I might be too chicken to go out. ■

Soul Surfer opens in theaters on April 8: See review page 68.