

1883

magazine

J E S S

A L E X A N D E R

PHOTOGRAPHY MAKIYO LIO
STYLING MIRANDA ALMOND

1883

Alexander

DISNEY HAS A REPUTATION FOR MAKING THEIR VILLAINS
AS ICONIC AND ADMIRABLE AS THEIR PRINCESSES.

These villains often possess charismatic personalities, wicked wit, and a flair for dramatics that captivate audiences. They have become cultural symbols, recognizable through their distinctive appearances, catchphrases, and iconic songs. Their intricate backstories and motivations add layers of depth to their characters, making them more than just one-dimensional adversaries. This is especially true in the brand new, highly anticipated live-action remake of the beloved 1989 film *The Little Mermaid*, where British actress Jess Alexander portrays Vanessa, the beautiful, human alter ego of the villainous sea witch, Ursula (played by Melissa McCarthy). Although her appearance in the film is brief, it could be argued that Alexander's role is highly significant. Serving as a catalyst at the climax of the story, Vanessa's purpose is to prevent Ariel (played by Halle Bailey) from winning Prince Eric's heart by using her magical powers and the singing voice stolen from Ariel. She embodies the allure and danger of deception, contrasting with the innocence and purity of Ariel's character. Although the live-action version of her character stays true to the sultriness Vanessa exudes, Alexander brings a bit more femininity and charm to her version of the character. Unlike most young actresses whose dream is to play the beautiful protagonist, Alexander has always had her eye on the villain. She's built up quite a diverse resume of acting roles but is quickly gaining a reputation for personifying herself as an actress who thrives in controversial characters. Since 2018, she's played an array of twisted antagonists, including Olivia in the Netflix original series *Get Even* and the 2022 thriller *Into the Deep*, but landing the role of Vanessa in *The Little Mermaid* (which happens to be her favourite Disney film) is a new pinnacle for Alexander. A dream come true.

Sitting down with 1883 Magazine, Jess Alexander tells us the story of how she landed the role in *The Little Mermaid*, what it was like working with the iconic director Rob Marshall, and making Vanessa her own.

Red tulle dress **A-Jane**
Black satin bustier top
(worn underneath) **Rxquette**
Orange ankle boots **Kalda**





You got your start as an actress on the Italian Disney Channel teen dramedy Penny On M.A.R.S – what was your life like leading up to that moment? I was just really like any other teenager! I just knew I wanted to be an actor and I had been lucky enough to get scouted by United, my agency, who have been with me ever since. I was very lucky to have that happen to me when I was about 14 years old. I didn't go to drama school or anything! I wanted to, but my parents said no. I think they felt like it might just be a phase that I was going through and I'd probably be better off going to university, which I didn't do. I went to Italy instead!

But that show was a weird one. Honestly, it was sort of my first gig. It was nothing like what I expected, but it was a start. It was my first time being on a set and my first time living away from home, in a foreign country and looking after myself and I was the youngest person there. More than anything, I think that experience gave me an understanding of what acting is like– it isn't just about turning up somewhere and delivering. It is that, but it's also about being able to handle living in a completely foreign place for like four months with people you just don't even know. That was a learning curve!

Right, it pushed you out of your comfort zone a bit! Oh, God. It pushed me very far out of my comfort zone, that show. It still pushes me out of my comfort zone even when I think about it!

Can you pinpoint an exact moment that you decided you wanted to be an actress? Honestly, it's just something I've always said. There are lots of home videos of me saying something along the lines of "I'm going to be an actress!" I started going to a very sweet amateur drama club for kids in my local church hall about a 15-minute walk from my house and a 10-minute walk from my primary school. My mum or nanny would take me there every Wednesday after school. That was my favourite day of the week because I knew I had it – it was called MonsterCat. It was really sweet! I knew I had MonsterCat in the evening and I loved it. I started going to that when I was around 5 or 6 years old, so yeah, it's something I've always wanted to do and I just never let go.

ELATED, 20142, 25/14

Elena midi dress in
beige iris floral
De La Vall
Crystal mesh mules
NEOUS

Since your start in 2018, you've worked on many different projects, building quite a diverse resume for yourself so far. How do you feel you've grown as an actress since your first job? God, I think I've grown a lot. I think everyone grows with every job they do, especially if you are lucky enough to, as you say, I have done quite a lot of different work. I think that makes you grow even more because you just have to cover so much ground and tick so many boxes. I think a lot of it is just me having a lot more self-confidence, and self-assurance I have as a human being. Nothing to do with being an actor. I carry myself differently every time I finish a role. I think it brings a lot of strength to the way I just handle my day-to-day life. Like, sometimes I'll be in the gym and I'll look at a slightly heavier weight and be like, "I don't know if I can lift that thing up." Then I'll think to myself "well no, I can, because I delivered a really good exorcism performance in A Banquet, so I know I can do this." I think it's that, honestly. It does bring me a lot of confidence, and I wasn't always a confident person. I was deeply insecure and very sad growing up a lot of the time. So this career has done a lot for me. Every actor I know, when they come off a job and they play the character they love, they just have a shine about them, and I think that's what the job does. It does bring you joy.

That's an incredible way to look at what your career has done for you. You've played some pretty intense characters in your career – what do you think your most challenging role has been? I mean, other than Vanessa in The Little Mermaid because it was just so big that I was just quite intimidated by the scale of it, I did this really small South African Independent film called Glasshouse, which is to this day one of the weirdest films I've ever watched in my life. I agreed to do that and was on set within about a week, and I was the only British person there. I had to master a sort of vanilla South African accent and develop this character, who was completely insane, in less than seven days. That was pretty hard, but she ended up being a beautiful character.

It's a film that I kind of hope that maybe as my career grows, people will go and find it because it's tiny. I mean, we made it with no money. We made it on like three 300,000 pounds basically, and during Covid. It was pretty rough, and the character had lost part of her memory, so she was not there mentally. That was interesting to play. Then, having to do a South African accent as a British person who's never done a South African accent before, was interesting to say the least. But I think I pulled it off!

I will have to check it out!

Yeah, you should! If you like weird, twisted movies, then you would like Glasshouse!

Massive congratulations on your role in The Little Mermaid! I had the chance to see it last weekend.

Oh, you did?!

Yes!

Did you love it? Isn't it great?

I did. The Little Mermaid is my favourite Disney film of all time. I was also in a room full of media, all seeing it for the first time, and there were many tears and a beautiful standing ovation at the end.

Oh my God!

It was phenomenal! But yes, congratulations on the release! After working on this film for so many years, how does it feel that it's finally out? It feels amazing to me. I mean, it was a blessing to even land this job. When I was filming, it was intense, but I wasn't on all the time like Halle (Bailey) and Jonah (Hauer-King) and all these other guys were. I think for them, it's a huge release and a massive milestone that they get to celebrate and it is for me, too. I just feel proud to be a part of it and I keep saying that over and over and it sounds really cliché, but it's very true. For me it just feels cool because it kind of feels like a dream that I even got it. Then, you know, all this time has passed all these years. I kind of forgot that it was ever going to come out! Now obviously it's happening and it is definitely a little bit overwhelming, but it's mostly just exciting. I think I'm at a stage in my life now where I do feel quite ready to level up in my career and try the next challenges. I think this will hopefully, if I'm lucky, bring some. I'd say that's what I'm looking forward to the most. I'm mainly just looking forward to the rest of the world seeing Hallie and Jonah as Ariel and Prince Eric. They're just extraordinary and their chemistry is so good.

I do agree. Their chemistry was unreal. Like, I can't imagine Harry Styles playing Prince Eric!

Oh my God. I know. I know because I heard that rumour too at one point and I was like, what? I was so confused. Yeah, I'm so glad it was Jonah. He's absolutely perfect. Do you know what? Everyone in this film is just so lovely, but that's why it's been so nice over this period of the film release because when you wrap a movie, you don't see anyone anymore. You can still text and send Instagram messages and stuff, but it's so nice just being in the same places again and being able to hug each other and say congratulations. It's been a long time coming. It's been so nice.



Well, speaking of that, I know you recently attended The Little Mermaid premieres with the rest of the cast in LA and London. What was it like seeing the reactions from fans, friends and family? Honestly seeing it in LA was wild. It's like 3000 people at the cinema. There are a lot of people. Hearing everyone scream and their honest reactions after different moments of the film was unreal.

I remember the biggest one was when Halle does the hair flick during the sunset coming out of the water, which I heard her say took like an entire day to get right. That reaction was like... I literally could feel the walls shake and it was epic. The only time I've ever been in a cinema with reactions like that was like watching all three Spider-Man pop out of the flipping portal in the latest Spider-Man. That's the only thing I can compare it to. It was so cool to just feel like a part of that moment. As for my friends and family, I mean, when they saw me being the monster that is Vanessa's sort of climactic scene, it was just genuine shock. I feel like my family is genuinely quite disturbed by the acting that I tend to turn in. So yeah, there were a lot of dropping mouths! [Laughs] But they loved it. They thought it was hilarious. They were like, wow, you went for it.

In a recent interview you mentioned that the first time you watched the film, your cheeks hurt because you couldn't stop smiling. What was that moment like for you? Dude, I cried from the minute the flipping Disney 100 logo went up on the screen! Like as soon as I saw that castle, I just felt tears in my eyes. I think because it also felt so momentous for me as someone who has loved Disney for so long and always wanted to see that logo come up. It's such an iconic logo. I know that I was in there somewhere, it symbolized something to me. And then, just watching the whole movie, I mean, I'm sure like you've just experienced, it's so full of heart and joy and emotions. It's moving and I think everyone in the screening room who watched it was crying and laughing and I'm pretty sure audiences are going to be going through the same thing.

White lace and shell trim ribbon top
Zimmermann
White trousers
with cutouts
Rxquette



What was the audition process like? Being a massive Disney film, I can imagine it would be long and somewhat intimidating. Yeah, it was scary. I did a self-tape, which is how everything is done these days, especially since Covid. I did the self-tape and then did another one. Then, I kind of just didn't think anything of it. I put these two tapes in the submission and didn't hear anything. I honestly just forgot about it. I was like, "Well, there's no way I got it." They could have anyone they wanted in this role. Then I got a call saying that they'd like to meet me at the studio. I had about a week to prepare. That's when my wonderful manager, Charlie, decided to book me a singing lesson. I'd never had a single one in my life, and they are demanding that I sing in this audition even though I lip-sync Halle's voice in the film, which is much better than my voice, I can tell you that. I just went to the studio and it was all a bit of a blur, honestly. I was petrified. I just remember feeling my very sweaty palms when I was shaking everyone's hands. My ears go red when I'm embarrassed so they just were tomatoes, I'm sure. I just gave it all I've got. I'm like you, this is one of my favourite films of all time, and Vanessa was one of my favourite Disney villains, period. I knew that was my shot. I'm just going to take it and if it misses, then at least I feel like I've done everything I could do which is kind of the mindset I had to go into with every audition. Just give it your all, then if you don't get it, you can't sit around at home and think "If I only would have done this," or "if I had been a bit more confident with that line or this bit of the song." I can't do any of that if I just go for it. So, I just went for it and I got back home and was like, "Jesus Christ, I hope they call me soon else I'm going to go insane." It was a long wait with my phone ringer on loud for like a week.

What was it specifically about Vanessa that made you want to go for that role? It honestly was something that just came through my inbox and I was like, "Oh my gosh, okay, well this is something I'd love to do." I just tried to deliver a really good take. I mean, this was the first film I was ever offered. Back then, I had nothing to my name. I had done that Italian Disney show, and then I had done the BBC Netflix series that wasn't quite out yet. I had just finished shooting it and that was my first proper gig that paid me a little bit of money. I just was cautiously optimistic, I think. Obviously because of Covid, there was this huge time delay on the movie, so I managed to squeeze in doing a couple of indie films, which I thank God for because I think if I hadn't done those, I would've walked onto that Disney set so shook. I would've been way more scared than I was already. Imagine that's your first movie and you go onto a Disney set. Like, those sets are huge. That's not a joke.

It would've been a pretty epic first movie for you! I think I would've sweat through my costume. I did that anyway! [Laughs] My first day was scary but it was a lot of fun!

I feel like Disney has made their movie villains just as iconic as their princesses. Yes! Absolutely.

How does it feel that now you are part of the iconic Disney villains lineup? Oh, so cool. I love villainous women. I love Disney villains. I'm a massive Maleficent fan and you a huge Ursula fan. It feels cool and satisfying because I've worked hard to get here. It just feels like it's paying off. It also makes me happy thinking about how I'll be able to show my kids this movie, you know? To be able to say to them, "That's mommy, the hot girl in the purple dress is mum! I used to be quite cool." I mean, Vanessa is just an icon. I think all kids growing up, especially us queer kids, grew up thinking she was just like the hottest villain in town and she was. I think she still is!

I agree! She's a great villain. A likable one! And very different from the animated version. I do think she's a bit different in the live-action than she is in the original, even though she's in it for a very short space of time. I think we made her a little less one-dimensional. Well, not that she was one-dimensional in the first place, but you know what I mean. She was just like, "I'm an evil little sexy temptress" in the first one. Then this one, she's a bit more the perfect friend next door, until she just snaps.

At the LA premiere, you mentioned that you often play "demonic, unhinged women," which I love. That interview went so unnecessarily viral. I was cringing so hard the next morning. I was like, 6 million views? What the hell?

Honestly, you covered it beautifully! And what a great quote. How was playing Vanessa different from some of your previous roles? Firstly, because her screen time is small, you've got to know what you're delivering. You've not got a lot of time. I think it was about really not experimenting as much as I have been able to in some of my other dark roles. I also think she's a bit more womanly. She's still a woman and it was a bit more glam. I was in this amazing wig with this incredible dress by Atwood. My other roles – they're very ragged, raw girls who have greasy hair and no makeup on. So, it was nice to be similarly demonic with just a little bit more flair!



How much free reign did you have over this role? I would say free reign for anything directed by Rob Marshall would be a huge exaggeration because Rob and John are so specific, but in the most beautiful way. Watching him was like a masterclass in directing such a huge project. He just knew exactly what he wanted, down to the colour of the flipping curtains on a set. He would just look at something and be like, "I don't like that lamp, swap it out for something that has green on it." A big attention to detail. So when it came to the performance, he was very specific about that. He wanted her to feel very demure and the girl next door type for the first portion of her appearance, and then have her switch. I took his lead on that.

In terms of that big climactic scene, he did come up to me before the first take and said "Just give it what you got and I'll let you know." That was quite intimidating considering I was in a room of about 200 people who didn't know what I was going to do. So I just went rabid and Rob was like, "I love that. You went there. Let's do another one exactly like that, but go bigger with it." I was like, "Ok, you crazy man, I'm here for it." So I wouldn't say free rein, but they trusted me and that meant a lot. It still means a lot because I was fresh onto the set.

That’s so great that they trusted you and had the confidence in you to just go for it! Yeah! I heard Rob say in an interview that, when he casts someone, he hopes that the actor comes in and claims the role because otherwise, his job is just going to be hard. His job is going to be hard if you don’t just come in and own it. I think that’s what I mean about confidence. All these jobs and roles giving me confidence are like the two indies, Banquet and Glasshouse, the two films that I did before I went onto The Little Mermaid, gave me the confidence to give that performance. But it’s also because you’ve got an amazing team of people who are just there to support you no matter how crazy you go on camera right now. I knew I was in safe hands.

Being the human version of Ursula, were you able to work directly with Melissa McCarthy when developing your version of Vanessa? No, we met twice. We did a big opening day before we started production when we thought we were going to film in 2020 before Covid. We all met each other then. I’m pretty sure I saw her in a makeup trailer once, during some makeup tests. She shot at completely separate times to me, so I shot my performance in that scene before she shot her bit of that scene. We didn’t work together at all but we’ve since seen each other at the premiers and she did say to me that she loved my work. She was like, “You killed it, you really went there.” And that was very cool from Melissa McCarthy because I’ve always adored her. I’ve always loved what she’s done for women in the comedy space. I feel like she was one of the first bodacious, fearless, rude women in the comedy space, in mainstream Hollywood being that funny. We didn’t work together, but I wish we could have, and I’m just glad that she approved.

What a compliment to receive! It was so, very cool.

One change I loved in this film from the original animated version is that they re-wrote Ursula and King Triton to be brother and sister. Triton sent his sister away from the family to be isolated. I feel like this explains a lot about why she is the way she is. Knowing this, did that change the way you approached portraying Vanessa? Not really. I didn’t think about it that much. I think, if anything, it just raises the stakes. It just makes it all a lot more personal. I think that was very useful for Melissa and, in turn, probably quite useful for me subconsciously. I agree, it’s a way more interesting take on the whole thing. I would personally love to see an Ursula origin story about how they fell out and how she became the way she is. And if they ever wanted me to step in, I would gladly take on the responsibility!



I love that idea! I feel like Ursula deserves that. I think so too.

Melissa McCarthy stated in a recent interview that she feels like Ursula is misunderstood and she has empathy for her. Would you agree? Totally. I think if you’re going to play a character, you always have to be able to empathize and understand them a little bit. Even if they do things that you don’t agree with, you still have to understand why. If they’re that close to your heart, you’re going to understand why they’re doing these things. You’re going to empathize with them. I’ve been reading this book called Pandora’s Jar. It’s this book about all the Greek myths and all the mythology about women that were started early on, characters like Medusa, who I see as quite similar to characters like Ursula. A lot of women in mythology and all these fairytales are made out to be like really, really evil when they’re just sort of criminally misunderstood. So, I totally agree with that and I think it applies to a lot of women in folklore. I spoke about Maleficent earlier and what they did with having Angelina Jolie play her and looking into her story about why she is the way she is. They humanize that character. I just think Disney does a great job at that by bringing humanity to outlandish characters in crazy, fantasy worlds.

I have to bring up your iconic scream at what was supposed to be your wedding to Prince Eric. How many takes did you have to do to get ‘the one?’ Honestly, that day is such a blackout. I was so scared that I think I just blacked it all out. But remember I was never vocally trained, so I didn’t know how to project well at the time. I did not know how to project my voice like that, take after take, and not lose my voice. Art Malik who plays Grimsby and Noma Dumezweni, who plays Queen Selina, Prince Eric’s mom, are both total thespians and legends of theatre and were helping me that day. They were like, “You need to use your diaphragm, you need to not just be projecting from your throat.” You know, they were schooling me, and they helped me a lot that day.

That scene was filmed over five days, so I got a couple of different shots at it. But when it comes to things like that, I don’t think it takes me very long to get the one because, like I say, you just kind of go for it. You just turn into a little animal for a second and then you snap back into yourself! You can’t go small. I don’t think it took that many takes, but we shot it from so many different angles with so many different cameras just so as we covered. I think the biggest challenge was just maintaining my voice. I did sound like a man by the end of it, I sounded hoarse. I had the deepest voice on the planet. That’s quite sexy.

CLARENCE
MARTIN
ARIEL

This film is an homage to the original, but I feel like the story is so relevant today — two young people choosing to fight for the life they want to live instead of being assigned one. It must feel so special to be a part of a story that’s going to touch so many people’s lives and bring an entirely new audience of young people to the franchise. What does that mean to you? Oh, it’s just lovely, isn’t it? It’s just wonderful to be part of something like that. I think it’s amazing the way they updated it and made it so mutual between the man and the woman in this film. It could easily have been one-sided. I spoke about this in another interview recently, about how kids are so impacted. I mean, you can see that in the reaction of the kids all over the world just when they saw the first trailer when they saw Halle as Ariel. You can see what that is doing for children. I’ve seen the way kids are in front of Halle at the premieres, and they’re looking at her like they’ve seen a goddess. You can see their brain chemistry being rewired in that moment of like, “Oh my God, I can be a princess too. I should be as confident as that. I can have a voice.” All these things that they don’t even really understand, as you can see as kids, they’re working out.

I just feel very grateful to be in there somewhere. I guess technically my character is not exactly supportive of Ariel getting the life that she wants but as a person, Jessica, I’m very supportive of Ariel getting the life she wants. I think it’s wonderful. I think a lot of kids that have never seen The Little Mermaid yet, which is very hard for me to process, it’s just going to be a huge part of their childhood. Similar to things like Harry Potter and stuff for us growing up as kids. I think this is going to be one of the ones that sticks in people’s brains and in 10 years they’ll watch it and feel so nostalgic, remembering how empowered they felt watching it.

I completely agree, and we’re already seeing it in the Tiktok and Youtube reactions. It’s so incredible that a film from the 80s can be remade into something so fresh and relevant. Absolutely. It just goes to show that we, as humans, are always just going through the same stuff. It doesn’t matter what generation you’re born in, what body you’re born in, who you are, or where you come from — everyone is just going through the same shit... I think that’s why stories like this are so timeless. One that we will tell our kids about, and they will tell their kids, and their kids, and so on. I’m so proud to be a part of this.

The Little Mermaid is in theatres now.

Interview **Rachel Martin**
Photography **Makiyo Lio**
Styling **Miranda Almond**
Set design **Annie Alvin**
Makeup **Sara Hill** at **The Wall Group** using **YSL Beauty**
Hair **Davide Barbieri** at **Caren** using **Oribe**
Production **Jasmine Perrier**
Location **Roseate House London**

Red tulle dress **A-Jane**
Black satin bustier top
(worn underneath) **Rxquette**