

Interview: Michelle Monaghan Gets Right to the ‘Source Code’

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- [Chicago](#) [2]
- [Duncan Jones](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Interview](#) [5]
- [Jake Gyllenhaal](#) [6]
- [Jeffrey Wright](#) [7]
- [Michelle Monaghan](#) [8]
- [Moon](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Source Code](#) [11]
- [Vera Farmiga](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Michelle Monaghan is surprising in person. Known for playing pragmatic supporting roles in such films as “Due Date,” “Somewhere.” “The Heartbreak Kid” and “Made of Honor,” her bubbly, attractive enthusiasm is charming and infectious.

“Source Code” is her latest effort, a tense, exciting and vivid story about humanity in the midst of a science fiction experiment. She is not “alive” in this film, only a mirror image of what she was, a victim in a commuter train bombing. Jake Gyllenhaal is special agent that is placed over and over into the train’s dilemma, always eight minutes before the explosion takes place. His mission is to find the bomber. Her mission is to create a memory with those multiple circumstances.



Michelle Monaghan (Christina) and Jake Gyllenhaal (Coulter) in ‘Source Code’
Photo credit: Jonathan Wenk for © 2010 Summit Entertainment

Monaghan was born in small town Iowa, and studied Journalism in Chicago. Modeling helped pay for college, and the expansive world it opened up convinced her to evolve into acting. After making her debut on the TV show “Young Americans” in 2000, she played a bigger role two years later as Kimberly Woods for one season on “Boston Public.” This led to film roles, including the female lead opposite Tom Cruise in “Mission Impossible III.” She continues to work steadily, featured in seven films over the last four years, including an executive producer role in “Trucker” (2008).

Monaghan was in Chicago recently to promote Source Code, and in anticipation of the film’s release spoke about her career so far.

HollywoodChicago: You are familiar with the sci-fi technological action film, having done ‘Eagle Eye’ and ‘Mission Impossible III.’ What are the particular challenges for an actor in these types of films?

Michelle Monaghan: First and foremost, you have to get behind the science you’re selling. For me I believe these things are entirely plausible. At the same time, it can’t be just black and white. I like material science fiction that is a little bit gray, thought provoking and provocative, that people will ponder once they leave the theater. And so when I say that it means there should be some character driven conflict, a moral or ethical issue. I think that is definitely apparent in Eagle Eye with the loss of privacy, and how far does government take that.

In Source Code, there is the political and moral issue of 'do you sacrifice one life to save a thousand?' How far do you take eight minutes in the past to save the future? Is that the right thing to do? People having to make those decisions, that is the important part for me. I need that weight to it.

HollywoodChicago: The 'source code' is defined in the film as the life essence briefly left behind after a person expires. Is that code, in your opinion, something that we can recognize in our interpersonal relationships, or is it just stamped to an individual like a fingerprint?

Monaghan: I absolutely believe that it can be recognized in our relationships. I believe in the spirit that is left behind. That is why there is a spiritual question in this film. That's what I love about it, people do talk about it. This film begs to ask a lot of questions about the life essence and the political, ethical and moral challenges in accessing it.

HollywoodChicago: What kind of back story did you create for Christina and her relationship with the Jake Gyllenhaal's train character? Was it something that you discussed with him and director Duncan Jones or kept to yourself in developing the character?

Monaghan: A little bit of both, actually. There is not a lot on the page for her. I knew there had to be something that would motivate me in each eight minutes. In the first couple of source codes, we don't even connect, we're not in the same reality. It's only as we move forward and progress, that our realities begin to converge.

So basically I thought, I'm a gal on the train from Northbrook to Chicago, who takes the train everyday. My job kind of sucks, my home life does as well, I'm not living my life to full potential. Sometimes you just strike up a conversation with people, and sometimes you're more honest with strangers than we are with ourselves and our friends. So this guy and I are just shooting the sh*t, and he is saying why don't I quit that job, why don't I go to India and why are you with a loser. Sometimes it takes somebody who doesn't know your at all for you to see things clearly. The way he reacts is what gives me the opportunity in the moment. I wanted her to be Hitchcockian, to be a more mysterious character.



Michelle Monaghan Yuks it Up with Ben Stiller in 'The Heartbreak Kid'
Photo credit: Zade Rosenthal for © 2007 Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago: You've done a couple of films set in Chicago. Since you lived here for awhile, what kind of personality do you think the city gives to a film when it is set here?

Monaghan: It's such a beautiful city, with an extraordinary energy. But it's also really grounded in a real graciousness. People here are really nice, grounded and down-to-earth. It's also really vibrant and multi-cultural. I wish there were more films and TV shows shot here.

HollywoodChicago: What part of your small-town Iowa midwestern roots serves you the best in the rigors of navigating big time show business?

Monaghan: Hard work, plus please and thank-yous go a long way.

HollywoodChicago: Does your obvious nice persona contrast to the ways and attitudes in Los Angeles?

Monaghan: Sometimes, there is a sense of entitlement there. If I ever behaved like that, I have so many people who would cut me down to size again. At least I wouldn't be invited back home again, and I like my mother's cooking. [laughs] Hard work is something my parents instilled in me, and that's really incredibly important to me.

HollywoodChicago: Since you began studying journalism, what has served you the best in your training and development as an actor, certain techniques and classes over the years or the tapping into the large variety of your life's journey?

Monaghan: The interesting thing when I left college, I thought why did I spend that much money and waste all that time. And then I was preparing for a role in 'North Country,' and I was writing about the character, as I do, and I realized I was doing the who-what-where-when-how that I learned in journalism. I grinned from ear-to-ear, and realized nothing is wasted. That made me happy.

That kind of investigation of a character, of course my life's experience and most paramount, my instincts, that's what I rely on as an actor.



Michelle Monaghan in Chicago, March 15, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago: One of your upcoming films is the oddly titled and story of 'Machine Gun Preacher.' What was different about this particular film in which you play the wife of the title character?

Monaghan: That is an amazing drama based on a true story, oddly titled indeed, but aptly named. It's about a husband and wife, Sam and Lynn Childers, who did some questionable things in their early days and got in trouble with the law. This led to them finding God and starting a church, which then had them going to the Sudan to be missionaries to start a church there. They discovered all the victims of the child soldiers from the Sudanese war in Darfur, and opened an orphanage. Still to this day they are feeding, housing and schooling thousands of children.

At the same time, the film is great, directed by Marc Forster, and contains a bit of gray. They sacrificed a lot at home as a result, and again you think do you sacrifice your family to save a lot of families? It's a really powerful film. I hope it inspires a lot of people. Gerard Butler is extraordinary in it.

HollywoodChicago: You were the executive producer on the 2008 film, Trucker. How different was that experience because you had that extra credit or responsibility?

Monaghan: Not necessarily, it's wasn't a nuts-and-bolts position. But it did allowed me to be privy to information that I didn't know before, to dip my toe into things like casting, which I never had an opportunity to do.

Right now I'm producing another film, which I optioned the rights to from a book called 'The Blonde.' It's 'The Bourne Supremacy' meets 'Run Lola Run.' I'm excited about that and want to continue developing projects.

HollywoodChicago: Since you played a role in it, do you think the film 'Somewhere' accurately reflects a certain lifestyle in Los Angeles, based on your observation, and what kind of actor's director is Sofia Coppola?

Monaghan: Yes, it is a reflection of a particular aspect of Hollywood, and Sofia Coppola is brilliant. When I got script, it was only forty pages, and I thought how is this a feature length film? That's the beautiful thing about Sofia Coppola, that she can take this small premise and create a whole other world. She is really unique and I'm proud to have been a part of that great film.

"Source Code" opens everywhere on March 25th. Featuring Michelle Monaghan, Jake Gyllenhaal, Vera Farmiga and Jeffrey Wright. Screenplay by Ben Ripley, directed by Duncan Jones. Rated "PG-13"



[13]

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