

Interview: Elle Fanning, Nicolas Winding Refn on ‘The Neon Demon’

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- [Amazon Studios](#) [2]
- [Beauty](#) [3]
- [Bella Heathcoate](#) [4]
- [Bronson](#) [5]
- [Christina Hendricks](#) [6]
- [Dakota Fanning](#) [7]
- [Drive](#) [8]
- [Elle Fanning](#) [9]
- [Fear X](#) [10]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [11]
- [Interview](#) [12]
- [Keanu Reeves](#) [13]
- [Modeling](#) [14]
- [Nicolas Winding Refn](#) [15]
- [Only God Forgives](#) [16]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [17]
- [Pusher](#) [18]
- [Runway](#) [19]
- [Steven Spielberg](#) [20]
- [Super 8](#) [21]
- [The Neon Demon](#) [22]

CHICAGO – The contemplation of beauty gets a little more truth in a new film by Nicolas Winding Refn (“Drive”) entitled “The Neon Demon.” It features Elle Fanning as Jesse, a naive girl who wants to break into the world of modeling, and does so in an unexpected way. The symbolic film has both strange drama and touches of horror.

Director Nicholas Winding Refn has been a known cinema force since his breakthrough with “Drive” in 2011. The Danish born filmmaker began his career in his native Denmark with the film (and subsequent trilogy) “Pusher” (1996). He built his reputation film-by-film, as the John Turturro starring “Fear X” (2003) next got him noticed. The Sundance Film Festival gave praise to “Bronson” (2008), nominating the film for the Grand Jury Prize. The breakthrough film “Drive” came three years later, and garnered two Oscar nominations. “The Neon Demon” is Refn’s tenth feature film.



Elle Fanning and Nicolas Winding Refn Relax on the Set of ‘The Neon Demon’

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

Elle Fanning has made a name for herself that rivals her older sister, actress Dakota Fanning. She began her career by portraying a younger version of her sister in “I Am Sam” (2001) at only three years old. As a child actress, she had significant roles in “Reservation Road” (2007),

"Phoebe in Wonderland" (2008) and "Somewhere" (2010). Her acting style, naturalistic and memorable, was highlighted in J.J. Abrams' "Super 8" (2011), and highly praised in the independent film, "Ginger & Rosa" (2012). "The Neon Demon" is Elle Fanning's 23rd feature film, with an astounding eight films yet to be released. Not bad for an 18 year old.

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Nicolas Winding Refn and Elle Fanning during a promotional stop in Chicago.

HollywoodChicago.com: Elle, In an atmosphere like the competitive world of the film business, how do you at a young age come to terms with the concept of beauty, and how did working on this film alter or make clear that concept for you?

Elle Fanning: Beauty is a complex theme, for sure. We all have a different concept and opinion regarding it, but we all like to look at things that are aesthetically pleasing. I had the typical high school experience, where you question what is beauty, and you're comparing yourself to others, it was just part of growing up.

There is also an awakening to beauty, because when you're really young you don't have that concept or opinion in place, so you make your own discoveries. It's different now with technology, and the constant bombardment of images. It's part of my life and my generation – for example, we're constantly taking pictures of ourselves. It's a bit scary, because images are essentially dead, so we judge beauty on something that isn't alive. My Mom will think something is beautiful, and I might not, because we have a different take on them based on our generation. The film is really about all of that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Nicolas, you took your story concept and added two women screenwriters to bring it to form. What was important about having a female perspective in a story such as this?

Nicolas Winding Refn: First off, I'm a man. What I found in developing the story was to feed off as many women as possible – for example, my cinematographer was also female [Natasha Braier]. Because if you create something that is essentially alien to you – as a man – and make a film about woman, the more I can surround myself with woman and combine it with my soul's point of view, the more I become a stranger in a strange land. That forced me to look at things in a different way.

The idea, when I wrote the story, was how many women can be infiltrated into this process? And that all came down to who was going to portray Jesse. I was consuming a broad base of perspective until I found Elle, and then my focus became much narrower. Because of all the women around me in the pre-production, none of them were a 16 year old girl.

That is what I needed – to get to that 16 year old girl, both inside of me and inside the film's DNA. When Elle agreed to the film, all the other points of view I had received previously were erased – because none of the other opinions mattered anymore – and what was in front of me was 'The Neon Demon.' Whatever came after that point, would be the right thing to do for the story and the film.



The Star Rises: Elle Fanning in 'The Neon Demon'

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

HollywoodChicago.com: Elle, you have an old soul naturalism in your performances. What kind of personal work did you do, beyond the production itself, to find the core element of the Jesse character?

Fanning: We filmed in chronological order, which I had never done before, and I could access Jesse's transformation because of that process. – and the way that Nic works, things are changing constantly. It wasn't like the initial script, because we were discovering new things about the character as we were filming.

I daydream a lot, and working with Nic closely allowed me to express those images I was thinking about, and often they became part of a scene. There was constant evolution and change, based on the filming of previous scenes. It was like a free fall, [laughs] but I trusted Nic and I trusted the process. That's the main thing you have to have...trust. Mainly because I didn't know where we were going to end up.

HollywoodChicago.com: Nic, the characters in your films are often symbols for larger themes or concepts. How do you think the art of cinema creates opportunities to explore human personality that is different than any other art form?

Refn: Cinema is mass media, it is both overtly gross and exciting. It is our great mirror of society. In this film, I can say that everyone in it was an archetype, whether it was the women or the men.

Jesse begins as the classic 'A Star is Born' character, coming to the big city...it's almost a sub genre. Ruby, the make-up artist, is all about inner beauty and purity. The supermodels were about age and reconstruction, trying to create beauty. The photographer becomes a portal between aesthetics and obsession. The boyfriend is normalcy, but he is hypocritical. And then there is the Keanu Reeves character, who comes off as a sexual predator. All those characters are part of the Jesse DNA. They each point in different directions from her.

HollywoodChicago.com: Elle, which scene or scenes in the film felt most personal to you, and made you feel exposed or vulnerable, and how did you overcome that feeling in performance?



Nicolas Winding Refn & Elle Fanning in Chicago
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Fanning: One of the most challenging scenes took place on the runway. It was her pivotal change. It was two days in a studio, and there is no dialogue, it's just me. There was also a technical side to it, at one point I had to walk on a treadmill for close-ups, and I could have easily could have just thought of that.

I had to forget everything, and concentrate on how she felt, falling into the pond of narcissism. That was the theme of the scene, that Greek myth. Nic also played a lot of music, dream-like songs that were pretty and girly, and eventually shifted into a more demonic tone.

HollywoodChicago.com: Nic, how important was casting this film? Beyond Elle's role, what were you looking for specifically in combining the concept of high level model beauty and the type of acting that was necessary to communicate this story?

Refn: Number one, I needed those good actors. The casting of any film is around 60% of the film, but it's also about the right casting insight. It's a bit like a house of cards, everyone has to match up in a certain way so the whole structure is grounded. So that's essential, and yes, it's about finding the right people and the right constellation around the lead character. I always think once you have the lead protagonist, you cast around that character.

HollywoodChicago.com: Elle, you experienced portraying characters from different eras in time. When you experienced a bit of living in a different time period as a teenager, as in your role in "Super 8," what do you think were the major advantages and disadvantages of being a teenager in the 1970s versus today?

Fanning: In a funny way, I like the past, I'm a very nostalgic person. I get very emotional about time periods I never lived in, but I have a weird connection to them. The mystery of it becomes about hearing the stories of those eras, and creating nostalgia from those stories.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Super 8' was filmed in my mother's hometown of Weirton, West Virginia...how did experience that town?

Fanning: I loved that place! It is one of my most favorite places I've ever been. I don't know why, I just love it.

HollywoodChicago.com: My grandmother's house, which she lived in from 1929 to 1984, made an appearance in the film.

Fanning: That is crazy! We would go to this restaurant in Weirton called ‘Eat’n Park,’ and I loved it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally Nic, like a rubber bracelet that has ‘What Would Jesus Do?,’ which director would you have on your bracelet when you get into a creative jam, as in ‘What Would ____ do?’

Refn: [Laughs] I would just probably just say, ‘F**k it, I’ll do what I want.’

“The Neon Demon” opens in select theaters on June 24th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Elle Fanning, Christina Hendricks, Bella Heathcoate, Alessandro Nivola and Keanu Reeves. Screenplay by Nicolas Winding Refn, Mary Laws and Polly Stenham. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Rated “R”



[23]

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