

Albert Nobbs – Full Production Notes

Glenn Close's connection to the character of Albert Nobbs stretches back almost three decades to her 1982 performance in Simone Benmussa's theatrical interpretation of the short story, *Albert Nobbs*, by nineteenth century Irish author George Moore. "I think that Albert is one of the truly great characters, and the story, for all its basic simplicity, has a strange emotional power," begins Close, whose turn in the Off-Broadway production prompted rave reviews and garnered the actress an Obie Award.

Even as Close's career skyrocketed the character remained with her. "There's something deeply affecting about Albert's life," the actress continues, "She never stopped continuing to move me. I became very busy in my career, but always thought that Albert's story would make a wonderful movie."

Close has worked continuously on story ideas across the intervening years, developing a passionate attachment to the character of Nobbs; a woman living in 19th century Britain, who has survived by disguising herself as a man and becoming a waiter. As the story begins, we find her working at Morrison's, a reputable hotel in Dublin, where she has been for past 17 years.

"Albert doesn't want to end up in the poorhouse," explains Close. "At that time Ireland was extremely poor. Around the corner from the hotel was abject poverty. She knows that without her job that's where she could end up. And she knows anyone can get fired at any moment. There is a sense of fear among all the hotel workers."

When the audience meets Albert, the character has played her role as a male servant in Morrison's Hotel for so long that she has lost her own, true identity. "She doesn't even know her real name," Close says. "She was an illegitimate child, raised by a woman who was paid to take care of her and who never revealed Albert's true identity. I figure the woman was paid to not tell because family didn't want the child to, one day, show up on their doorstep. So Albert, who already didn't know who she really was, disappeared into the guise of a waiter when she was fourteen years old. When we meet her thirty years later, she is isolated and invisible, albeit an impeccable servant, having lived in hotels her whole life.

Benmussa's play adaptation of George Moore's *Albert Nobbs*, was minimalist, with a considerable

amount of mime used to tell the story, but, even so, Close believed that the tale's poignancy, heartbreak and humour—the latter realized by a wonderful collection of characters who people Morrison's Hotel—would fuel a film adaptation.

"The play was very austere," concedes the actress, "The power of the story is like a simple glass of water," she continues, "When light reflects in a glass of water, it creates something extremely complex. The story is simple and linear, but it touches on complex human issues that reflect on everyone's own life and everyone's own baggage, and gives them something to take away as well. I'm hoping it will be universally appealing."

Certainly producers Bonnie Curtis and Julie Lynn agreed, with Curtis responding to Close's passion for, and knowledge of, the character and the story. "One of the elements that interested me as a producer was Glenn's hands-on, nightly experience in the theatre with the story," Curtis explains. "Making this movie with Glenn made a lot of business sense to me."

Curtis met Close on the 2005 comic drama *The Chumscrubber*. "It was day two of her time on set," recalls Curtis, "and Glenn walked up to me, gave me a script, and said, 'I must play this part on the big screen before I die.'" She was looking me right in the eye and I said we should do it right there and then." Curtis laughs, "She suggested I might want to read it first."

The producer read the script that very night, "and it got inside me in ways I didn't even understand," she says, "and I knew it would be right. When someone like Glenn says that they must play a part before they die, you figure it's a good character and script. Albert has that struggle for identity and purpose and yet she hasn't been equipped with the tools to get there. I think that it is a really universal life experience."

Fellow producer Julie Lynn concurs. "The story is about a woman who is naïve, and is in her own bubble of loneliness because she's lived with her face hidden from the outside world for decades, as a means of survival and self-protection. When we first meet her, she has been separated emotionally from the rest of the world."

With the character and story resonating across the years, Close has sought out the best people to help her realise her vision for a big-screen adaptation. At the turn of the 1990s, when she was shooting *Meeting Venus* with Hungarian director Istvan Szabo, Close handed him the story and

received in return her very first treatment. By 2001 the actress, turned writer and producer, had a draft with which she was satisfied, and arrived in Ireland to scout locations. Among the buildings she found was Cabinteely House in southeast Dublin. Now, ten years on, the house is finally transformed into Morrison's Hotel.

Irish producer Alan Moloney explains, "Glenn suggested the main location. She had come here ten years ago and it's a wonderful choice. We also shot at Portmarnock Beach, Dublin city centre, but most of the piece unfolds in Morrison's. It really helps when Glenn Close is also your location scout!"

From her first scouting trip in 2001 through the start of production in 2011, Close refined and honed the script — most recently with input from acclaimed Irish writer John Banville — although it was only when shooting her second project with filmmaker Rodrigo Garcia, 2005's *Nine Lives*, however, that she settled on her ideal director.

Close recalls, "I had a wonderful time on Rodrigo's movies. He loves and understands women". (The pair also worked together on 1999's *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her*.) "It's beautiful to be on a set with a director who truly loves women. He is also a masterful writer and has written great female parts."

Colombian filmmaker Garcia is the son of iconic writer Gabriel García Márquez. "Rodrigo has that heritage," says Close. "Not only is he the perfect director but he's also deeply collaborative, and astoundingly open to my ideas."

The director remembers his first discussions with Close. "I was a little nervous about reading it," he concedes. "I love working with Glenn but what if I read it and felt as though I couldn't do it, or it wasn't my thing? I knew it was her passion. She'd done the play twenty years earlier and had scouted locations. So I went into it hoping that I could connect and I really did."

Garcia responded to the piece the moment that he began reading Close's script. "The themes are very contemporary although the story is very much of its time, late nineteenth century, and is very much about the inner life of a person and her problems with identity, erasing herself and living in hiding," he says. "But the story is also about a lot of characters and is very rich and full of drama, which is rare nowadays."

“Today in a lot of scripts characters talk about their problems. Instead of the audience being told a story, you hear characters bitching. This was the opposite. It had a very laid-out story that unfolded in a beautiful way and you were never ahead of it while you reading it. Five pages from the end, I still didn’t know what would happen. It seemed a great challenge.”

The director says that he found the themes of the story especially appealing. “One of the main themes is people’s dreams and what they want for themselves, their true ambitions and their hopes,” he explains. “Albert, like all the characters in the script, wants more for herself, and most of all, the characters want to be their best selves. A lot of them are trapped with low ceilings over their heads, masks and fake identities.”

“This is set in late nineteenth century Dublin where poverty and the threat of poverty had a huge impact,” he continues. “You could find yourself on the street within weeks of losing your job or losing a position. But it still feels contemporary: how can you find a way to be yourself? Living in secrecy and having to please others in order to survive, that has a universal connection for people.”

Producer Julie Lynn, who has worked with Garcia no fewer than seven times, believes that he is the perfect director for the film. “I cannot think of a bad thing to say about him,” she smiles. “He says that he does not know who the character is until the actor tells him. He used to be a DoP, and all his crew will tell you that he is their favourite because he’s such a collaborator. He’s always the smartest person in the room and was always so clearly in control of the vision for the piece.”

Garcia’s vision for Albert Nobbs is one that he shares with both Close and director of photography Michael McDonough. “I love period movies but I’ve never really thought about myself as a director of one,” says Garcia. “When Glenn showed me the script I thought that it had so many themes, was well dramatised and was funny, but we did think, “How are we going to shoot this so that it would have its own look and its own tone and is not just a period look? How would it have the ‘Albert Nobbs’ look, whatever that may be?”

“You want to try and shy away from something that is too stuffy, but on the other hand you don’t want to go too far the other way and make it too modern so that it becomes like a music video. One of the reasons I wanted to work with Michael McDonough was that he can find a new yet subtle way of looking at something.”

McDonough and Garcia opted for what the latter describes as “a contemporary feel but still believable for the period.” He explains, “You need to maximise your resources to make the piece as rich as possible. The movie is shot in a widescreen format and that does give you a bigger dimension. You put your money in a few key scenes that are larger scale, like the big party scene, and then our exteriors, which let the story breathe.”

“When you start thinking that you’ve been a while in the hotel and it’s all quite contained, you come in with bigger things that you can afford. That gives it some scope. The important thing for me though is that actors always take pressure away. People always say, “Do you feel pressure working with such accomplished actors?” But really the opposite is true, it takes pressure away from me. And alongside Glenn we have some really amazing characters and wonderful actors.”

The primary character, and the central point around which the story turns, is of course Albert Nobbs. Close notes that she’s able to carry off the role because of Albert’s position in the hotel. “The key is that Albert is a very good servant,” Close says. “Servants weren’t supposed to make eye contact so that was very much in her favour. There’s comportment, the way of moving, with pants that are a bit too long and shoes that are a bit too big, but I think the biggest challenge for me is lowering the voice and the accent.”

Alongside Albert is a clutch of workers at the hotel, many of whom find their lives affected by the quiet, withdrawn butler.

When looking for the right person with whom to share her life, Nobbs is drawn to the character of Helen, a maid working in the hotel, someone with whom Nobbs believes she can share a better a life, a partner to share dreams of running an independent business. Australian actress Mia Wasikowska, whom Garcia cast in her first-ever American production, “In Treatment,” plays Helen.

“I opened up my email and there in the inbox was an email saying it was from Rodrigo Garcia saying “Albert Nobbs job offer”, and I just thought, “Yes, I’ll do it”,’ says Wasikowska. “I didn’t even need to read the rest of the email! I knew I was going to do it straight away, but then I read it and it just got better and better, especially hearing that Glenn Close was so involved.”

“My character, Helen, is a young maid working in the hotel,” continues the actress. “She’s a spirited person and kind of cheeky but also there’s a soulfulness about her. She’s in her early 20s and has

probably been working in the hotel for years. She definitely has aspirations to work up the ladder in the hotel.”

When Nobbs begins gently courting Helen, the young maid is encouraged to show interest by her boyfriend, Joe. “Helen goes on these dates with Albert with the idea or intention of helping her and Joe get out of the hotel,” says Wasikowska. “Albert and Helen’s arc really grows, however, and their relationship changes as they go on these dates. Albert wants to form a partnership with her that can be safe and secure; Albert is courting her, while Joe is encouraging her to go on these dates to get gifts like chocolate and whisky and money.”

“Helen reluctantly goes to please Joe. They get to know each other and Albert reveals himself the most to Helen, and he, or she, has never done that before to anyone, and Helen takes that on board. She’s doesn’t like the idea of conning someone but she is in love with Joe and wants to do the best by their relationship.”

The bond between Helen and Joe was a feature of Moore’s original story, but here the producers note that the relationship is “boosted a little.” Julie Lynn explains, “Our ensemble is insanely good and we have such fantastic chemistry between the characters of Helen and Joe.”

“Joe’s youth is a real boon, too,” she says. “It means that despite some of the unpleasant things he does, you can understand him a little more and why he is making his mistakes. And it makes us much more likely to forgive him. And when you have an actor who is just 20 years old, it gives him a vulnerability and allows us to forgive him, in a way in which I’m not sure we could with an actor who’s way into his 30s.”

Joe, played by English actor Aaron Johnson, arrives at the hotel early in the piece. “Joe is going from job to job and stumbles across Morrison’s Hotel, blags his way into a job as a boiler man, and ends up taking a job there as a handyman,” explains Johnson. “Joe is ambitious and has high hopes and dreams that one day he’ll get out, go to America and make a life there. He’s not educated, can’t read and write but in his mind he thinks he can get to America and there might be an opportunity to do something great.”

As the story transpires, Joe is revealed as having suffered a troubled upbringing. “Joe has real ambition. He is a very clever boy, but is caught up in a cycle of abuse,” explains Johnson. “He was

abused by his father and will become an abuser if he leaves it the way it is. He desperately tries to break that; he doesn't want to become like his father. That's what he's fighting against. He can't advance himself or his family."

One of the most boisterous characters in the film is Doctor Holloran. Irish actor Brendan Gleeson takes on the role "Holloran, a medical doctor," explains the actor. "He came down from Belfast where he'd been living his with wife and having an affair. He loved both women but they wanted exclusivity and so he bailed out. He reveals that part of his life to Albert at one point. He may be drinking himself to death. I have a feeling he's someone quite bright and brilliant but never wanted to work too hard on anything, so had reached that place where he hadn't achieved a lot."

While Holloran offers himself to Albert Nobbs as a confidant, so too does the character of Hubert Page. "When the audience first meets Hubert he is clearly really chatty and is very together," says the actor. "He is a nice person and is quite funny. He's got a bit of an eye of the ladies and he finds life and Albert quite amusing."

Albert accidentally reveals his secret to Hubert although the latter pledges silence and the pair forge a bond. "There are certain themes in the film, obviously sexuality, that are very engaging," says the actor, "but really the biggest theme is poverty and what that does to people. Also it is set in a period that is before labels. Albert doesn't think of herself as a label; she's just a person who acts as a boy to get a job. I found those themes very interesting as well as the wonderful characters."

The actor notes that Hubert tries to help Albert: "Hubert says, 'Look, you are who you are and if you're lonely and you want to find someone to share your life with then go and do it. You're a really good person. Try and do what you want.' Whether Albert succeeds or not is the story of the film."

All the main characters in Albert Nobbs find their lives affected by the quiet, retiring butler, and while the film unfolds as a tragedy it plays with levity and lightness of touch. "The piece is not showy — Glenn's not that way — and there's an awful lot of fun going on," says Gleeson. "You can knock quite a lot of laughs out of something that is supposed to be very poignant and sad and tragic."

“It says a lot for Glenn’s confidence and her innate understanding that you don’t have to have a drear-fest to tell a tragedy. In fact the best way to tell tragedy is to find hilarity in it. When people have a twinkle in their eye the tragedy is doubled.”

Close says that she recognised the humour in the story from the very outset. “Through all these years of working on Albert Nobbs I knew that there was humour in it, even if other people didn’t see it,” she says. “It’s not leaping off the page – it’s not that kind of humour – it comes through the character and nuance and situation. I knew when people saw all these characters together that it is really fun. There are some beautiful moments.”

Producer Bonnie Curtis agrees. “Nobbs is so endearing,” she says. “The piece is a witty drama, a human comedy, and it’s also a love story. As a producer you’re trained to keep the message simple and sell it as one thing, but with this it is so rich and complex.”

Close concludes: “I’ve always thought that, if I could do the Albert of my dreams, without major compromise, with an impeccable team, then I could retire! The fact that this particular group of people finally gathered together to tell this particular story is truly wonderful. For years I struggled to make it happen but the time was never right. Then it happened. It was just meant to be—the perfect time with the perfect team. We made it!”