

The Good Girl

Jennifer Aniston tries to shake her familiar TV persona in Miguel Arteta's quirky new film

by Laurel DiGangi

First off, *Friends* star Jennifer Aniston must quash those crazy yellow journalism rumors and Internet inaccuracies. She explains to a full table of journalists at the Four Seasons Hotel that she does not stay physically fit through cardio-striptease classes. Nor does she keep her scalp healthy by dissolving aspirin in her shampoo. And no matter what we've read on IMDB, the Internet Movie Database, Aniston does not, we repeat *not*, have a role in Guy Ritchie's upcoming *Swept Away*, starring Madonna.

(Aniston is, however, willing to share a real scoop after a journalist asks her something strange about herself that *is* true. "I sleepwalk," says Aniston. "I set off our [burglar] alarm once, and I was outside. The alarm scared the shit out of me. I woke up by the pool equipment in back." Her husband, Brad Pitt, was also freaked out. "He was terrified," Aniston adds, "because he heard the alarm and I wasn't inside.")

One thing that definitely *is* certain is

that Aniston is gracing the big screen as Justine, a depressed, small-town Retail Rodeo clerk, in *The Good Girl*, directed by Miguel Arteta (*Star Maps*, *Chuck and Buck*) and written by Arteta's *Chuck and Buck* collaborator, Mike White. Aniston's Justine is frustrated with days spent at her dead-end job and nights spent with



Aniston's Justine is weighed down in *The Good Girl*

her pot-smoking, housepainter husband, Phil (John C. Reilly), and his omnipresent buddy, Bubba (Tim Blake Nelson). She finds comfort and adventure through an extramarital fling with her young coworker Holden (Jake Gyllenhaal). Ultimately Holden's passion ventures into

emotionally dangerous territory, and Justine must face some difficult—and often darkly comic—choices.

Aniston admits that as an actor she was challenged by the opportunity to explore the melancholic part of herself, drawing upon past experiences when she had low-level jobs similar to Justine's. "I was a telemarketer in 1989, selling time shares in the Poconos," she explains. "I was the worst telemarketer because I'd get yelled at [by a potential customer], then I'd apologize and hang right up."

In preparation for the role of Justine, Aniston worked with her acting coach while wearing ankle weights so that her body language would communicate Justine's gloomy state of mind. (She emphatically denies wearing ankle weights on set.) In addition, she admits that just wearing Justine's drab wardrobe was enough to invoke malaise.

For most of the time she was shooting *The Good Girl*, Aniston was on hiatus from *Friends*. But for a couple weeks she shunted between the two gigs, a schedule she admits was "pretty grueling," but made

easier by the fact that slipping back into her role of Rachel Green was like "a comfy pair of shoes."

Aniston, however, tried her best to have audiences disassociate her from her perky *Friends*' persona. "When a part like this comes along, it gives me the opportunity to go deeper into some other character," says Aniston. "The jobs that I've had so far haven't presented that opportunity, and if I wasn't on a TV show I'd just be another actor doing a job."

Says costar Tim Blake Nelson, "It takes a lot of courage for someone like Jennifer, who's been so successful in creating this image of herself in our culture, to dispense with all that and perform this role in a way that considers the character in Miguel Arteta's movie first, and Jennifer Aniston, the movie star, second."

In *The Good Girl*, Aniston is surrounded by a sea of offbeat, interesting characters, including Reilly, Gyllenhaal, Nelson, White (as the store's Bible-thumping security guard) and Zooey Deschanel, Justine's friend and coworker who manifests her creativity—and hostility—on customers seeking beauty makeovers. Yet Aniston feels no fear of being upstaged and welcomes the opportunity to play a "straight" role. "It's like anything you get to do that you aren't always allowed to do," says Aniston. "I remember Miguel saying, 'Are you going to be OK? Knowing that you're going to be at the center of the group of very funny characters, but you're

not going to be able to do that?' It was fine by me. I don't have anything written on me that says I must do comedy."

According to Arteta, Aniston's *Friends* image actually resonated within *The Good Girl* by helping make Justine a more sympathetic character. "Justine is doing so many morally insane things, but to have somebody so sweet and funny makes you go along with it more and not think so much about questioning her choices. It's really a credit to her talent," says Arteta, adding, "She brought such a grounded



Arteta lines up a shot on his third film

feeling to the role and she kept her comedy very sparse, which I thought helped the film a lot. She really prepared for the role and she was a great collaborator."

Initially, Aniston was not the first actor considered for this role. "I didn't write it with a specific actress in mind," says screenwriter-actor White. "We thought a lot about different actresses, and the first people who came to mind were actresses who had done projects like this — indie movies, dark movies." Yet White and Arteta were searching for a fresh casting choice, somebody who would bring a different quality to the film. "When we stumbled on [to] the idea of Jennifer Aniston," says White, "it seemed like an exciting combination." Fortunately for Arteta and White, Aniston was a big fan of *Chuck and Buck*. "We sent the script to her and she read it overnight and did something that people don't do in Hollywood," says Arteta. "She called us the next day and said, 'I love it!'"