

On Stage

In full bloom

The Lovely Bones' Rose McIver makes her first professional theatre outing this month. By Sarah Lang.

BEING DIRECTED by Peter Jackson in a Hollywood blockbuster based on your favourite novel would be an unthinkable dream for most young actresses. As would sitting across the breakfast table from ab-rippled A-lister Mark Wahlberg, or having Hollywood grande dame Susan Sarandon crack an egg yolk on your head.

But West Auckland actress Rose McIver took it all in her stride while filming *The Lovely Bones* in Philadelphia in 2007. Starting out with braces and painted-on freckles, the fresh-faced New Zealander, then 18, played the murder victim's sister, Lindsey, during her adolescence, coping with her family's dissolution and becoming suspicious of the strange man across the road.

When we meet in an Auckland cafe, the 21-year-old looks younger but has the self-assured calm of an old soul. Perhaps it's that — plus the warmth of the heavyweight actors — which stopped her being overawed on set. Until Alice Sebold, who wrote the eponymous novel that McIver guzzled in one go, turned up at a premiere. "That's the most star-struck I've ever been!" laughs McIver, who got to walk the red carpet in designer dresses and even had a stylist for the US outings.

In a few months we'll see McIver on screen again in local flick *Predicament*, a dramedy based on the Ronald Hugh Morrieson novel in which a naive, small-town teenager conspires with two misfits to blackmail wealthy adulterers. *Flight of the Conchords'* Jemaine Clement ("he's just as funny as you'd expect") heads a cast that includes newcomers, veterans, a comedian, and musician Tim Finn. McIver plays 15-year-old Maybelle Zimmerman: "a stressed-out, 1930s-clad girl." The 30s fashion made a nice change from Lindsey's tracksuits.

But right now McIver's taking on a new challenge: her first professional theatre outing in the Silo production of multi-award-winning British play *That Face*. Penned by then-teenager Polly Stenham, it follows the fortunes of a fractured family as Gen Y-ers are forced to become parents to their own irresponsible parents. But the children bite back at the baby boomers.

Treading the boards with Jennifer Ward-Lealand (as a posh, pill-popping alcoholic) and a cast of young talent, McIver's excited about playing boarding-school bitch Izzy. "Finally I've been typecast! I'm used to playing the nice girl. Grounded characters. But Izzy carries her weight in her head — her nose in the air — so I have to walk as well as talk a certain way." As an alumnus of Avondale College, McIver is anything but a private-school brat, but she knows all about school cliques.

"The play really gets today's youth culture," she says. "The idea of being lost and found. Being in teenage groups and trying to



HUMBLE: Rose McIver, who was picked from young hopefuls worldwide to play Lindsey in *The Lovely Bones*, hasn't let fame go to her head.

find yourself. Find your identity." At 21, is she there yet? "No. I don't think I've found myself. I'm still looking."

An admission you don't expect from someone with this CV. Appearing in her first commercial at age 2 and as an angel in *The Piano* at 3, McIver has since starred in local TV shows like *Maddigan's Quest* and *Rude Awakenings*, commercials, short films, Disney shows and films, and even played Hercules' daughter in the TV movie. Last year, she starred as Yellow Ranger Summer Landsdown in West Auckland-filmed science fiction show *Power Rangers RPM*. Her young Disney fans have even created a Rose McIver tribute website. "I've been shown it and it's pretty embarrassing."

McIver's much more likely to be recognised overseas than at home. "Though the other day I was at Pak'n'Save in my yoga pants and baggy T-shirt and somebody called out 'She looks like the girl from *The Lovely Bones*'. They didn't actually think it was me."

After all, why would a Hollywood star be in

a West Auckland supermarket? Well, she'd call herself a regular student. Early acting work was fitted around school rather than vice versa, and now she squeezes in gigs between a psychology and linguistics degree. She shrugs off a question about putting uni on the back-burner while her acting career's so hot. "How much can you throw yourself into acting? When the work's there, the work's there. I don't like the idea of waiting around at all. I like to have something on the go, and for me studying is like reading a good book."

Astonishingly, McIver doesn't even call herself an actress. "It was always a hobby, never a career. Even now, I couldn't call myself an actress if I wasn't in a play." And there's no thought of uprooting to Hollywood. In fact, when *That Face* wraps, she's transferring her degree to Wellington's Victoria University for a year or so to immerse herself in the city and its arts scene.

This girl's so modest that it's easy to forget she was picked for *The Lovely Bones* from young hopefuls worldwide. Saying her

reaction was surprise is an understatement. "I'd completely written it off. I went to the audition in my trackpants and no makeup, no anything, and that turned out to be exactly what Lindsey was. Because it all happened quite fast and out of nowhere, it didn't really sink in for a while."

Although the polarising film got mixed reviews, McIver's performance was widely praised. Says Peter Jackson: "There she was, this young girl from New Zealand, working with a highly experienced American crew on a major Hollywood movie, and Rose stepped up and delivered a very focused and intelligent performance. She was fearless in front of the camera . . . Rosie has a spark that draws people to her — she lights up the screen, which is why I think we'll be seeing a lot more of her in the future."

Silo Theatre's *That Face* plays from March 19-April 10 at Auckland's Herald Theatre. *The Lovely Bones* is released on DVD April 30 and *Predicament* premieres May 27.