

Thandie Newton's Law of Gravity

In 'The Pursuit of Happyness,' the actress faces the serious side of Will Smith BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Actress Thandie Newton says — half seriously — that she doesn't really know Will Smith, even though they both star in "The Pursuit of Happyness," the true story of a semi-homeless man who becomes a millionaire stockbroker that opens Friday.

"To work opposite Will in this way, I knew it was special, even though part of me was pretty bummed out," says Newton about the drama that showcases a new side to the famously likable megastar. Smith's performance as Chris Gardner is sober, subtle and was reportedly a labor of love. Newton co-stars as Linda, the wife who abandons Gardner — and their child, played by Smith's real-life son, Jaden Smith — when times are tough. Newton and Smith's scenes together are not the easiest things to watch.

"How come I get to work with Will and we shout at each other every day?" Newton says, smiling. "I arrive on set and everyone is like, 'Oh, this is going to be so sad....'"

It was that intensity that leads her feel she doesn't know her co-star as well as those who worked with him in action comedies or romantic comedies.

"At the end of the day, when we've been horrible to each other, it was very hard to then just be sweet and nice, because we had to channel so much s— to do it. We never got to know each other as who we are. He is Chris Gardner as far as I'm concerned. Will's a completely lovely guy, but I didn't get to know that. I sacrificed that in order to give him what he needed. I really felt my job was to give Will and give the story what it needed. It had to be pretty rough.

"That's my gift to it and to him, although I wish I could have been in 'Hitch!'"

Elegant and funny, the 34-year-old Newton is on a roll, thanks to "Happyness" and co-starring in last year's Best Picture winner, "Crash" (in which she had one of the most memorable scenes, when her character was saved from a burning car wreck by a cop played by Matt Dillon). She does have a lighter side (highlighted in two upcoming comedies, including one with Eddie Murphy), and the British-born Newton is poised and polite — except when given a bad cup of tea, as she receives mid-interview.

"Oooh, that is vile!" she laughs good-naturedly. "Such awful tea!"

Newton was worried people might have the same violent reaction to Linda in "Happyness," a mother who leaves behind her son with a man who has no source of income. She was determined to create "cracks



INDEPENDENCE DAY Thandie Newton plays the wife who walks out on husband Will Smith in "The Pursuit of Happyness."

where people can feel compassion, as opposed to judgment."

Capturing the worn-down look of a woman working double shifts and facing a husband who can't feed himself, much less his family, was made easier by the fact that Newton is a mother herself (her daughters are now 6 and 2 years old).

While making the movie, "I was already very, very thin, because I'd been nursing my child for 15 months. And when I nurse, I lose weight, which is just me," says Newton. "It was good to be looking kind of strung-out. No makeup, except for dark shadows under my eyes. I didn't do anything with my hair. And I had a mean mouth."

The result is that the glamorous star of "Mission: Impossible II" and "The Truth About Charlie" truly looks like a woman beaten down by life. Newton — who came to attention in serious fare including "Jefferson in Paris" and "Beloved" — was leery of doing press for the film, worried that everyone would see her character as "the bad guy." Yet the chance to work with Smith — even if they didn't get to bond — was simply too good to pass up.

"Whatever he touches does turn to gold," says Newton. "So to be around him when he's stripping down that 'Willness' we all know and love and expect and showing every dimension of this man, was wonderful." ♦

After roles in 'Crash' and 'Happyness,' she's on a roll.

