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BACK TO THE FUTURE



LEA THOMPSON MAKES THE FIFTIES A TIME WORTH RETURNING TO

BY NANCY MILLS

"Teenage girls had a very different way of thinking back in the Fifties," observes Lea Thompson, who was born two years after the decade ended. But after spending the last eight months stuck in 1955 for her leading role in *Back To The Future*, she has become an expert on her parent's generation.

Thompson has a dual role in the Steven Spielberg executive-produced time-travel comedy. In the present-day portion of the film, she plays the

mother of teenager Michael J. Fox. In the 1955 portion, she's the same lady but 30 years younger. When her son is accidentally transported back in time and turns up at the high school where she is a teenager, she gets a crush on him without knowing who he is.

"The Fifties were a sweet, joyous period of time," Thompson discovered. "To get in this naive frame of mind, I read all the period magazines—*Life*, *Modern Screen*—and

studied the ads. Also, I looked at a lot of old pictures of my mother. She wore all this red lipstick. Yuck. The hairdos were so different. They made me put my hair up in pincurls."

An Eighties girl, Thompson twirls her blue-frame sunglasses and fidgets in a chair in her publicist's office. "If I had been a fifties teenager, I'd probably be married and have a few kids by now." Instead, the 23-year-old actress is dating actor Dennis Quaid



and making her sixth movie.

"Here I am in high school again standing by my locker," she grins. "Since I've become an actress, I've played only 17-year-olds. I would like to graduate and go to college pretty soon."

Thompson has been building up her film biography rapidly since she started acting just two years ago. She played a water skier menaced by you-know-what in *Jaws 3-D*. After escaping unharmed, she went to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to be Tom Cruise's girlfriend in *All The Right Moves*.

Then, director John Milius enlisted her to play a freedom fighter in *Red Dawn*. In *The Wild Life* she worked behind a doughnut counter in between brief encounters with a policeman in the storeroom. She plays a rich Beverly Hills brat in the upcoming *Yellow Pages*.

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

"Several personalities roam around under the guise of Lea," the actress says, explaining how she can look so

different in each role. "Certain costumes just change me. This is my 'be comfortable, mobile and friendly' kind of costume," she says, referring to her worn jeans, wrinkled blue and white striped shirt and silver tennis shoes. "I like clothes that make me laugh."

Thompson had researched the Fifties before, although not on purpose. "Filming *All The Right Moves* was like being in the Fifties even though it was set today," she says. "I went to school there and studied those girls. They were still in the Fifties, down to their hairstyles."

"*Back to the Future* is a bit more of a fantasy. It's a little bigger than life. The director (Bob Zemeckis) worked really hard to make it early Fifties, which I guess was more like the late Forties. The costume designers didn't go for stereotypes. There's not a single poodle skirt in the whole movie, and nobody makes any jokes about hula hoops. I didn't have to wear saddle shoes. I wear white bucks.

"I was surprised I was cast in this," she adds. "I didn't see myself playing a

Fifties girl or a mother. But it's really neat when a director sees something in you that you can't see yourself. Usually it's the other way around. Bob could see some silliness in me."

Thompson decided to be an actress when she gave up dance. "I finally rebelled against it," she says of her 11-year ballet career. By the time she was 20, she had danced with American Ballet Theatre's second company, Ballet Repertory and the San Francisco Ballet.

"I had always had such guilt mechanisms about dance. I could never go on vacation because my body would start to stiffen up. Your body drives you crazy if you lose even a little bit of what you've worked so hard to get.

"I was in so much pain it was remarkably easy to stop. But I do miss the discipline. It was like being a kid. All you had to do was get up and be there at nine. Then they'd push you around all day.

"I have cousins (Matt and Neil Barry) who are actors in New York. They thought I should do commercials,



(Below) Crispin Glover and Lea Thompson save the future and change their lives without every realizing it in the smash hit Back To The Future!



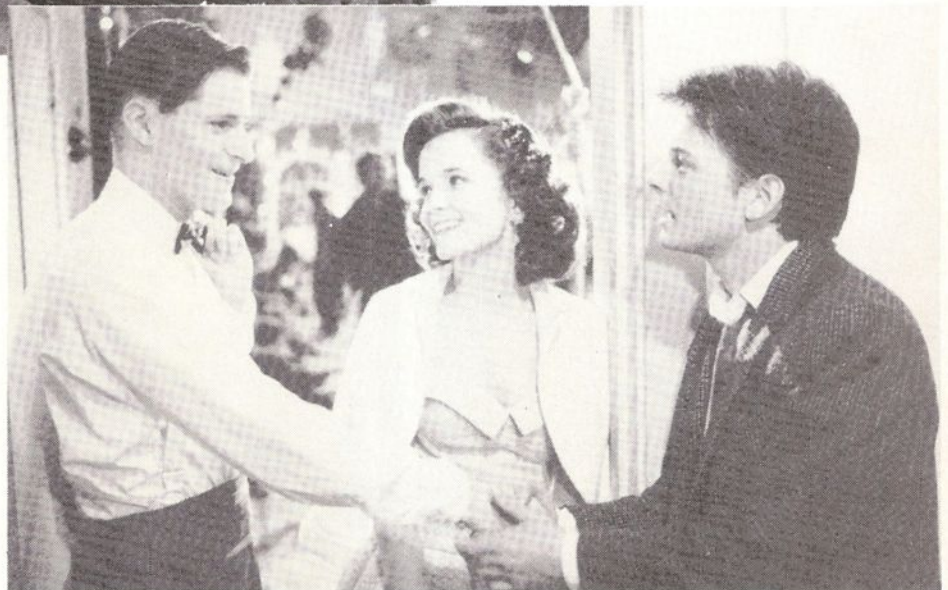
With echoes of Oedipus Rex, our hero, Michael J. Fox, returns to the past, meets and almost romances his own mother (Lea Thompson) and helps Dr. Brown (Christopher Lloyd) invent his time machine.

so they introduced me to an agent. I did well because of my 'Midwestern look.' That's how I got my start in acting."

Although Thompson has the open, fresh face that seems right at home on a cereal package, she knows little about the great outdoors. "I was one of those professionally motivated kids," she explains. "I really wanted to be a dancer. When I was 12, I was crazed. 'My arabesque isn't high enough!' I'd scream.

"We were really poor, so that motivated me. I had to earn money to get my own point shoes. I needed a scholarship in order to study dance. That meant I had to be one of the top two in my class."

Thompson skipped two years of high school and graduated when she was just 16. About that time her mother, a professional painter, musician and songwriter, left Minnesota for Montana. Thompson chose to stay in Minneapolis and get her own apartment. "By then, I was dancing with a professional company and earning my own money," she explains.



Although Thompson had no actual dramatic training, she was attracted to the idea of acting. "In dancing it's hard to act because everything is given to you—the cock of your head, the turn of your wrist. I'd always worked on my acting so I tended to stand out and not be bland like all the others.

"When I was 16, a director at a children's theatre in Minneapolis said, 'I've seen you dance. I know you're a good actress. Will you do the lead in 'The Little Mermaid?' " Four years later, Thompson decided acting offered her a better future than dancing.

"When I was a dancer, I was willing

to do it all for \$75 a week—destroy my knees, wreck my ankles, starve myself." Movies pay much better. "Money is a blessing," she admits about her new-found financial security, "but I was never prepared to deal with it. It's great that I'm learning about my acting and getting better while people keep giving me work.

"I'm the youngest of five. I started out wanting to keep up with my brothers and sisters. I was motivated to get their respect. Now the roles are reversed and they're a little surprised. I'm the one with all the money."

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