

TELEVISION

Rachael Leigh Cook Conquers the *West*

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When Rachael Leigh Cook recently called **The Long-Islander** to discuss her intriguing role in *Into the West*, TNT's epic six-week television event centered on the opening of the American West, the excitement in her voice was immense. "I really wanted to do this project since I heard about it ... well, a lot of people wanted to, because when you say the name Spielberg [who is credited as executive producer] everybody wants in! It was just an incredible opportunity."

Into the West marks Cook's first work in a period piece. She began her acting career at the age of 16 when she was cast in *The Babysitters Club*. Her break-through role came with the teen-hit *She's All That*, starring opposite Freddie Prinze Jr., and she later went on to play Josie in *Josie and the Pussycats*. She also starred in *Anti-Trust*, with Tim Robbins and Ryan Phillippe; *Get Carter*, with Sylvester Stallone; as well as numerous critically acclaimed independent films such as *The House of Yes*.

In *Into the West* Cook plays Clara, a 15-year-old fourth-generation Wheeler daughter who is also an aspiring clothing designer.

Your work in *Into the West* is so different from all of your past performances. What made you decide to take on this role?

It's a really responsible story to tell. It's all about where we come from as Americans. I really liked the material, although the whole cast signed up for the project without having read the script. We only got our auditions and that was it. It was funny, my manager said to me, "They're not sure if you're gonna be too current." I said, "What does that mean?" So of course I'm trying to hide my short haircut and whatever else was going on, and luckily the audition went well enough, and I got the part!

What challenges did you face in working on a period piece?

There were a lot more restrictions than you would think. The terminology was very specific, not that I like to change the words on the page or anything. I said "alright"





Photo Courtesy Chris Large

Rachel Leigh Cook portrays the young Clara Wheeler in the TNT mini-series *Into The West*, running through July 24. Cook is also known for her past roles, which include *The Babysitters Club*, *Josie and the Pussycats*, and *Get Carter*.

I'm a pretty optimistic person, and she's unfailingly optimistic. So many bad things happen to this poor girl, and she manages mostly to stay afloat and sort of forge ahead. I think we have that in common. She sees the good in people, and I try to do the same.

Clara is really into fashion, and she even likes to make clothing. Was it easy for you to play a fashionista?

She's a dressmaker and an aspiring dress designer. Yeah, I love fashion and things like that. I am glad that I had the part that I did. I probably had the easiest (condition-wise) job on the show. She was a designer, then she runs the general store with her husband, and then she goes on to be a teacher. I was inside and dry, and very happy about it!

Clara ages over the course of the series, but when we first meet her she is only 15 years old. What was it like to play such a young woman?

It was difficult because I had to play her at an age that I don't really identify with anymore. It was a huge stretch for me because I'm 25. So that was a little odd.

What do you want people to take away from *Into the West*?

I want people to take away a better understanding of the people that founded this country so that it can be the way it is today. It's a very responsible storytelling about a Plains Indian's multigenerational family and a multigenerational settler family. And it's important to take in both perspectives and see how the issues they faced are really issues we can really learn from today. I really didn't know enough about Native American culture, so I hope that people pay attention and say, "Oh wow. Gosh, I'm glad I watched this for that reason." It's a beautiful depiction.

Next you're starring in a program that just got picked up by FOX. What is the premise of the show?

I'll start working on that in July. It's called *Head Cases*, and I really hope the title changes because I think it's a terrible title, but it's a really good show! It's with Chris O'Donnell and Adam Goldberg. It's sort of like a dramedy about two lawyers, one who's really kind of a crazy ambulance chasing, occasionally violent type, who's Adam Goldberg. Then there's Chris O'Donnell who's sort of a straitlaced guy who's had a nervous breakdown. It's about their sort of unlikely and amusing partnership. I think it will be a lot of fun. Adam Goldberg is hilarious, it's definitely worth watching.

*You can find *Into the West* on TNT on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays at 8 p.m. through July 24.*

thing like "I understand," and they were like, "Cut! Nope, you can't say 'all right.' 'All right' didn't happen until 1895." And they were really on top of the dialect and the 'Rachelisms,' and being consistent with the period. They were really, really thorough.

You wear some very authentic costumes.

Yeah, they were another challenge. At first my vanity really had a hold on me, and I thought, "There's no way, even though it's only 30 degrees outside, that I'm gonna put on these 12 layers. It's just not gonna happen, I'll look like a house. I can't do it." And I stepped outside and turned right around and put on the rest. I was grateful for the layers even though they're not easy to get around in. I mostly avoided the corsets, thank goodness.

Where were you filming in such cold weather?

We shot episode three in Calgary because they needed massive amounts of snow for parts of it, and that was sort of a guarantee up there. It was probably 40 below. We shot the rest of it in New Mexico, it was beautiful over there.

What was it like to work with your husband (actor Daniel Gillies) on *Into the West*?

Our story lines didn't really overlap. We definitely talked about [the project] when we got home and traded notes. We're in the same time period for a while, so we were there at a lot of the same times. We would have some time off together. It worked out really well. He booked it about three weeks before I did and I got a call from my manager saying, "Hey, you know they're still casting this thing that Daniel's doing?" I guess I'm following him! They didn't know we were married when they cast us. We're pretty private.

In what ways are you similar to your character, Clara Wheeler?