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'Twilight' stars become teen idols

Pattinson uncomfortable, while Lautner embraces lack of clothing

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By Gina Piccalo
For the AJC

Robert Pattinson, the gorgeous and maudlin vampire Edward of the "Twilight" franchise, is pretty scruffy up close, a bit unshaven and yes, angst-ridden, but in a completely charming way. His undulating coif — a feat of styling genius itself — is pretty compelling, too.

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Pattinson's presence often sends 12-year-old girls — and their 40-year-old moms — into quivering hysterics. And at a Los Angeles news conference for his latest film, "The Twilight Saga: New Moon," which opens Nov. 20, the 23-year-old actor had a crowd of grown-up bloggers and journalists eating out of the palm of his hand, quizzing him on romance and swooning slightly each time he ran his hand through that impressive mane.

"Have you ever gotten your heart broken like Edward when he left Bella?" one young woman asked, hopefully.

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Pattinson furrowed that vast brow of his and studied the carpet. The room held its breath. Then he said, stifling a nervous chuckle, "No I don't think so."

Pattinson could be just another young actor with that brand of androgyny teenage girls find irresistible. Instead, he is the leading man of one of the most successful franchises since "Harry Potter." "Twilight," the story of a teenage girl named

Bella and her lustful — yet platonic — relationship with a teen vampire (Edward), has earned nearly \$400 million worldwide. And there are at least three more films to come, all based on author Stephanie Meyers' blockbuster novels. More than 70 million copies of the books have sold worldwide since the first one was published in 2005.

And yet, Pattinson never has been especially comfortable with the whole teen idol aspect of this franchise. He doesn't like to be perceived as starring in "a kind of animated Tiger Beat."

"I've never played [Edward] thinking, 'Oh, I'm in a series of girls films' or doing something just for girls," the Brit told a banquet room of about 100 reporters. "I felt like a lot of the story line in 'New Moon' is very heartbreaking and true. I didn't think I was doing something just for the sake of romance."

That might come as a surprise to some "Twi-hards," as fans of the series insist on calling themselves. They live for the melodrama. And it drives them to buy "Twilight" merchandise faster than China can ship it. "New Moon" will only stoke that fire.

This latest film is all about Edward as heartbreaker, the guy who loses his beloved teen virgin Bella (Kristen Stewart) to the amiable young Native American-turned-werewolf played by 17-year-old Taylor Lautner, who happily strips off his T-shirt in almost every scene.

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It's worth noting that Lautner was Hollywood's version of a 90-pound weakling before he landed the role. And he worked hard for those abs, munching beef patties, sweet potatoes and almonds every two hours for months while pumping iron five days a week. At the news conference, he laughed off his character's willingness to strip down when one reporter poked fun at him. But like Pattinson, Lautner is serious about his craft, and he felt compelled to map out his character's motivations for the crowd.

"Here's the thing," he said, earnestly. "There's a reason he's not wearing clothes all the time. One, when he transforms [into a werewolf] all his clothes get shredded. He can't help it. And when he goes into the woods to get something to put on so he's not naked, it's just a ripped pair of jean shorts. He's also hot. He's 108 degrees. So that's another reason. And the thing is, I love this character and I love this story, and putting on the weight and not wearing much clothing was required by the role."

All this posturing is admirable. But even "New Moon" director Chris Weitz acknowledges he and "New Moon" writer Melissa Rosenberg deliberately crafted their script to capitalize on moments that could inspire young girls to weep and scream. So Jacob and his "wolf pack" strut around shirtless for most of the film. And, in one climactic scene, Edward slowly unbuttons his shirt, casts it off and suddenly we're struck by Pattinson's jutting pelvic bones. Of course, that's when Bella jumps into his arms. (Cue screaming girls.)

"There's this wonderful audience that appreciates what we do and wants us to do well and really wants to engage in an emotional experience," Weitz said. "To me, it made sense to be unashamed of the emotionality of the piece. There are werewolves fighting each other. Vampires fighting each other. Vampires fighting werewolves. All kinds of great stuff for boys as well. But the girls needed to be given their due. And I think we deliver on that."

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