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Dakota Fanning Grows Up

by *Gina Piccalo*



The child actress, now 15, has gone from a dimpled cherub to an undead evildoer in *New Moon*.

Puberty has been good to Dakota Fanning. Sure, she's had her rough spots—the braces, the unsettling precocity, that unfortunate turn in *The Cat in the Hat*—but these are minor setbacks for this child star. As Fanning, now all of 15, strode into the banquet room of the Four Seasons during the recent *New Moon* press day, her willowy frame teetering on four-inch heels and draped in an oversize leather biker jacket, there was a welcome insouciance in her bearing. Clearly, something shifted for her this year, something beyond making cheerleader and being elected high-school homecoming princess.



Kimberley French / Summit Entertainment

In *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, opening Friday, Fanning nearly snuffs out an entire childhood of sunnier portrayals when the camera closes in on the blood-red eyes of her sadistic vampire Jane. Though she's featured prominently in the movie posters, Fanning has no more than a couple of minutes of screen time at the tail end of this adolescent angst-fest. But it's so striking to see the winsome naïf of films like *Dreamer* and *Charlotte's Web* as the evil undead that her transformation almost trumps that of actor Taylor Lautner, who gained 30 pounds to play the lovelorn wolf Jacob.

Since she hit puberty, Fanning has been hell-bent on showing us her dark side.

"This might hurt," Fanning's Jane tells Kristen Stewart's Bella, before she shoots one of her pain-inducing looks at the heroine. "Just a little."

All that said, at the marathon press conference, Fanning struggled to look interested. Her wide-set eyes sometimes drifted to the middle distance as her co-stars answered questions. Even her responses to the adoring crowd of movie buffs and reporters felt uninspired.

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me to play a kind of feared character. It was different from what I've done before. And she uses her power—not for good, you know? And that was another thing that was kind of interesting for me."

Considering Fanning's last year, no one can blame her for being less than enthused. Just a few days earlier, she'd been crowned a homecoming princess at her North Hollywood high school. And that was a pedestrian event compared with the glamour of the past few months.

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"The highlight of playing Jane was getting to wear that costume and getting to have the red contact lenses—I was really excited about that—and getting to play an evil character," she said, the twang of her Conyers, Georgia, hometown replaced with a Valley Girl patois. "It was fun for

After spring in Tuscany and Vancouver filming *New Moon*, she'd spent the summer in Los Angeles decked out in knee-high platforms and a killer platinum shag, channeling the hell-

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raising lead singer Cherrie Curie of the 1970s girl band The Runaways opposite Kristen Stewart's Joan Jett for the biopic due out next year. And

though she's too young to drive, Fanning managed to sneak out with Stewart to the Roxy one night, riding shotgun, trailing paparazzi all the way. Then it was back to Vancouver for the next *Twilight* film *Eclipse*.

It's all pretty hip stuff for a kid who until recently was showing off her head gear for Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*. And what an admirable rebound after that messy controversy over *Hounddog*, a.k.a. "the Dakota Fanning rape movie" that earned the director death threats and protests from religious groups. For a minute there, it looked like Fanning's precocity might have gotten the best of her.

But then she joined a \$400 million franchise and decided the time was right to have "the high-school experience."

"It's something I really wanted," she said. "I think it's really great to have that balance of the completely normal life and a completely abnormal life. I didn't see a reason I wouldn't be able to do both."

Fanning's evolution from dimpled cherub to bonafide movie star has been coming for a while. There was the Marc Jacobs spread she did in 2006, photographed at age 12 in grownup fashions around the same time she appeared as Fern in 2006's *Charlotte's Web*. The juxtaposition was too much for some. Blogger Perez Hilton called the campaign "wrong on so many levels."

But since she hit puberty, Fanning has been hell-bent on showing us her dark side. She played drunk for the first time on screen this year as the saucy street urchin Cassie in knee-high boots and mini-skirts in *Push*. And she voiced the title character of the animated feature *Coraline*, about a surly little girl who gets trapped in a nightmarish alternate reality.

At the press conference, Fanning shared a dais with her fellow vampire royals played by Michael Sheen, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Cameron Bright, who were clearly more prepared for the punishing banality of the affair. Or perhaps just more motivated.

Sheen seemed especially up to the task, riffing irreverently off every question. When asked about his role as Aro, the man who commands Fanning's Jane, he quipped, "It's quite thrilling to have Dakota Fanning call you 'Mah-stuh.'" The crowd got a good laugh out of it.

And the varsity cheerleader inched that much closer to the dark side.

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Gina Piccalo spent a decade at the Los Angeles Times covering Hollywood. She's now a contributing writer for Los Angeles Magazine and her work has appeared in Elle, More and Emmy. She can be found at ginapiccalo.com.

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