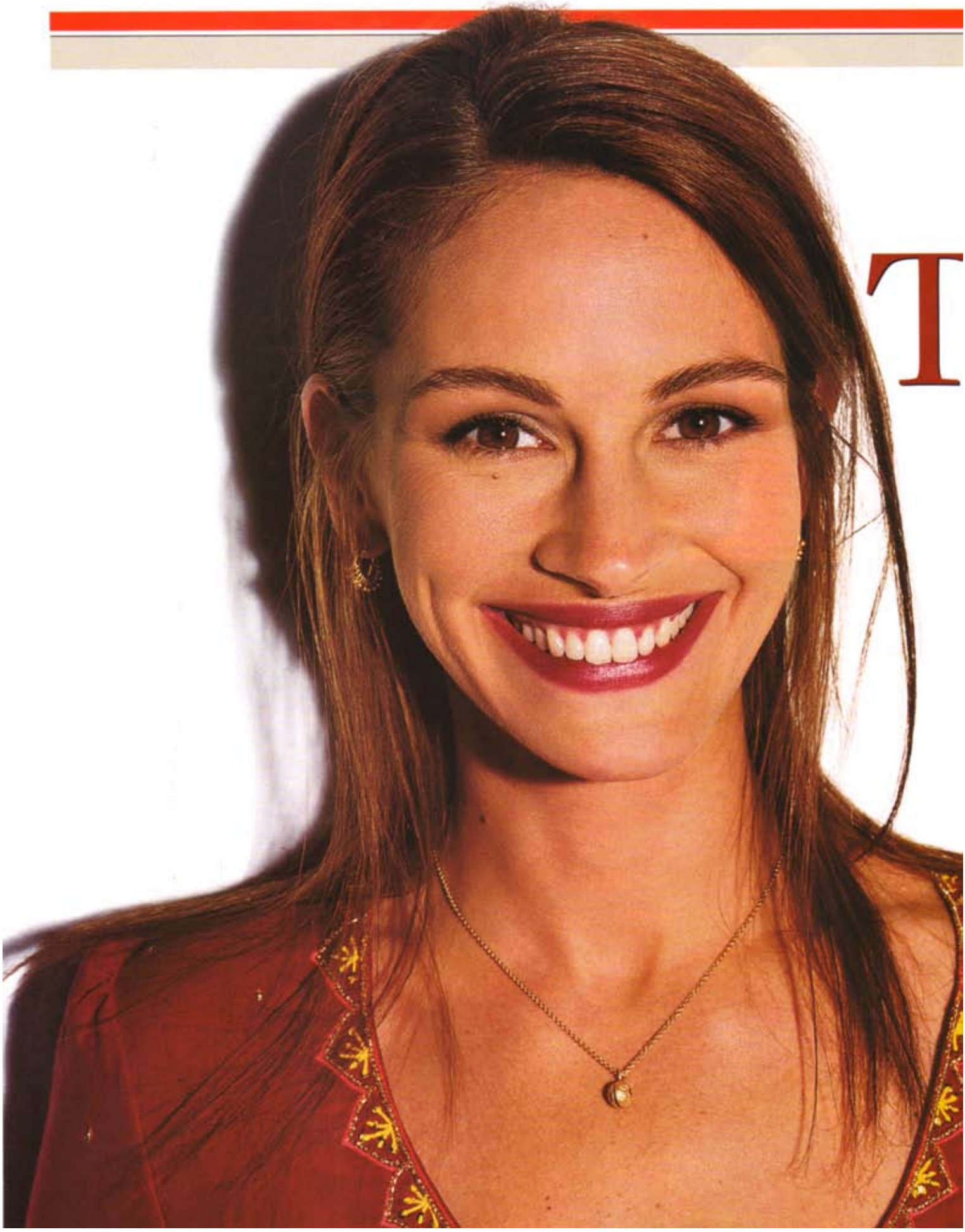


T

At 32, Julia Roberts is the most powerful—and the highest-paid—actress in Hollywood. The star of the triumphant new movie 'Erin Brockovich' talks about the view from the top. BY JEFF GILES

'he 20 Million Dollar Woman

THE FIRST TIME YOU MET HER SHE WAS 21 and had a real mouth on her. She smoked. She swore. She kept grabbing your arm when she talked. You asked if she'd left Georgia because she wanted to be an actress, and she said, "Well, *and* I didn't want to stay in Smyrna and be a dental hygienist." It was the summer of 1989, in Manhattan. Julia Roberts had surfaced in the beguiling sleeper "Mystic Pizza." She'd just finished filming "Steel Magnolias," and was about to shoot a movie with the working title "Three Thousand." ("I'm so scared of it," she said. "I play a young prostitute.") Otherwise she was just looking for work. "I've gone through a phase of meeting people that haven't given me jobs," she said. "But some of them have written me notes—you know, 'It was nice to meet you, and I'm sorry it didn't work out.' And that makes me feel really good. I

ERIN BROCKOVICH

(Above) Roberts as Erin—testing the dress code at the law firm Masry & Vititoe

LEFT TO RIGHT: MICHAEL THOMPSON/JED ROOT INC.; STYLED BY INGE FONTEYNE/THE AGENCY; MAKEUP BY LAURA MERCIER; HAIR BY SERGE NORMANT; TOP BY MATTHEW WILLIAMSON; JEWELRY BY ME & PO; BOB MARSHAK

ON THE SCREEN: Salary-wise, even Meg and Jodie are chasing Julia's limo from a distance, each having made *only* $15 million a movie

mean, I figure if they're going to write me a note they won't forget me. I have a big paranoia about people forgetting me." Soon the interview would end and Roberts would walk down Broadway, stopping to buy two bouquets of flowers—one for her boyfriend, Dylan McDermott, and one for you to take home to your girlfriend. For the moment, though, she sat in a café and waited endlessly for the check to arrive. Roberts swiveled her head around. "Our waitress has *completely* f--king ignored us."

Eleven years later, the check arrives after brunch at a restaurant near the Hudson River. Roberts, now 32, fights to pay. You forbid her, even when she brandishes a credit card with an American Airlines logo and pleads, "But I'll get the miles!" It doesn't matter anyway, because the waitress says the middle-aged couple at the next table would like to pay for Roberts's brunch. The actress lets them treat her and thanks them effusively. The man tells her, "You're terrific—just *terrific*—and you and Benjamin make a lovely couple." Then he shoots you a look: "Write her up good!" Outside, Roberts walks a few blocks with her sunglasses on, but it's getting dark, so she takes them off. A minute and a half later, two shaking young women stop to tell her *oh-my-God* how *awesome* she is. Roberts whispers to them sweetly. They chase her half a block, then stop and stand and just watch her go. On the way to her house, Roberts drags you into a lingerie shop and tries to persuade you to buy a nightgown for your wife for Valentine's Day. ("How about this one? Silk. Nice low back. Sexy, not raunchy. Whaddaya think?") Later she takes your arm and crosses Union Square. It's cold. The wind is really going. Roberts knows you were a bit disappointed by the interview over brunch—she's become exponentially more wary of reporters over the years, but we'll get to that—and now she's doing the full-on "Notting Hill" charm thing. Which works, frankly. "So at the expense of making this sound like a really strangely constructed date," she says, "do you want to see me again? Just checking. I didn't want to assume that you did. Or that you didn't. I mean, you don't *have* to."

It's been a long time since anyone could resist Julia Roberts. Three of her most recent movies—the spunky "My Best Friend's Wedding," the adorable "Notting Hill" and, let's not just kiss her ass here, the toweringly crappy "Runaway Bride"—made a combined $1 billion or so worldwide. Last week Forbes named her "the most powerful celebrity on the planet" in its Celebrity 100 list. And Roberts recently became the first woman to ever get paid $20 million for a movie, when she signed on for Steven Soderbergh's terrific new film, "Erin Brockovich." (Even Meg Ryan and Jodie Foster are chasing her limo from a distance, each having reportedly made $15 million a picture.) "Brockovich" is what executive producer Carla Santos Shamberg, who launched the project at Jersey Films, likes to call " 'Rocky' in a miniskirt." It's the

EVERETT COLLECTION

MYSTIC PIZZA

Roberts first turned heads in this charming ensemble picture, in 1988. She got $50,000 for the role.

EVERETT COLLECTION

STEEL MAGNOLIAS

She was the rookie in a star-studded cast—and she snagged an Oscar nomination

EVERETT COLLECTION

MARY REILLY

One of the biggest flops of her career, the film made $5 million. Roberts's salary: $10 million.

EVERETT COLLECTION

FLATLINERS

Oliver Platt, Roberts and Kiefer Sutherland had a modest hit about morbid young medical students

PRETTY WOMAN

Roberts became a superstar playing the prostitute who warms a tycoon's cold heart (Richard Gere). She got paid $300,000.

EVERETT COLLECTION

EVERETT COLLECTION

NOTTING HILL

Audiences loved Roberts as a spoiled superstar who falls for Hugh Grant's Brit charm

EVERETT COLLECTION

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING

Roberts got $12. 5 million for conspiring against Cameron Diaz's happy nuptials

true story of a broke, gloriously foul-mouthed single mom working a low-level job in a little California law firm. Erin discovers that the utility company Pacific Gas and Electric has contaminated the groundwater in Hinkley, a tiny town on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Hundreds have since been struck by cancer, among other things, losing their breasts, their uteruses, their children. Erin and her boss, Ed Masry (played by Albert Finney), spark what turns into a record-setting $333 million settlement, and Erin never stops swearing or wearing a push-up bra. After an early test screening of "Brockovich," one audience member weighed in with the following: "The 100th time I saw Julia Roberts' breasts was too much. The first 99 were OK."

It's hard to imagine "Erin Brockovich" without Roberts's Roman-candle performance. All her charm is in evidence, as well as a surprising gravitas. People familiar with her salary negotiations say that Universal was reluctant to pay her $20 million, a figure that's become a benchmark for male superstars. Rumor has it that Roberts's agent, Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas, gently (or not so gently) pointed out an industry double standard. Actors like Adam Sandler and Leonardo DiCaprio were commanding $20 million after a single $100 million hit. Roberts had *five*. Both sides quickly got on the same page. "Julia earned it a long time ago, as far as I'm concerned," says Stacey Snider, who's the chairman of Universal Studios and who helped reignite Roberts's career by personally pitching her the script for "Best Friend's Wedding." "And I think the studio was actually applauded for doing something that was deserved. It's not like people are saying that giving Julia Roberts $20 million is like curing cancer. All we did was confirm that there shouldn't be a gender bias." Because Roberts was so well liked by the "Brockovich" team—"Oh, God, the crew would hurl themselves in front of subway cars for her," says Soderbergh—the worst her salary elicited was an admiring disbelief. "Julia was on the set 10 weeks," says a source. "I kept thinking, 'This girl is getting $400,000 today!'"

Roberts's career is having such an astonishing heat wave right now that it's difficult to imagine there was a time when Hollywood was ambivalent about her. She be-

came a superstar in "Pretty Woman," but for a couple of years in the early '90s she declined to star in a movie. Roberts returned with the $100 million hit "The Pelican Brief." Then she went years without making a smash—or an unequivocally good flick. "She didn't want to work that much, and there was all that romantic stuff," says a Hollywood executive. "After her relationships with Kiefer Sutherland and with Patric—what was his name?—Jason Patric, there was this sense that she wasn't our darling anymore. Whenever a star with a huge persona stumbles, the studios step back and watch very carefully. It's the same way with Leonardo right now, with 'The Beach' and the nightclubs and the partying. Sometimes it's a case of someone just not wanting to be famous. I think there was a jury's-out feeling about Julia. People were thinking, 'Maybe she'll be our movie star again—or maybe she just doesn't want to do it'."

You ask Roberts about those years before "Pelican Brief," when she was 23 and people were saying she'd fall off the A list if she didn't make a movie fast. Did she feel a lot of pressure? "No," she says. "Not at all."

MOVIE REVIEW

A Trash-Talking Crusader

Move over, Norma Rae. Roberts fires up 'Erin Brockovich.'

BY DAVID ANSEN

BOB MARSHAK

JULIA ROBERTS IS flat-out terrific in "Erin Brockovich." She's playing a brash, tenacious, trash-talking heroine unlike any she's played before, and she's utterly convincing in the part. At the same time you never forget you're watching Julia Roberts, possessor of the most incandescent smile in Hollywood. This is not a dis: it's just further proof that she's a bona fide movie star. Stars, by definition, do not change their essential properties, that force of personality that connects them to an audience with an almost familial intimacy. Roberts has wasted her effervescence on many paltry projects, but she hits the jackpot this time. Erin, single mother of three, a former Miss Wichita who improbably rallies a community to take on a multibillion-dollar corporation, is the richest role of her career, simultaneously showing off her comic, dramatic and romantic chops.

It also happens to be a rousing, hugely entertaining movie. Director Steven Soderbergh, on a roll since "Out of Sight," takes a genre that can easily fall prey to self-importance, and gives it a fresh, spontaneous spin. Like "A Civil Action," "Erin Brockovich" (opens March 17) is a fact-based story of industrial pollution and an attempted cover-up: Pacific Gas and Electric used a deadly chemical in its plant in Hinkley, Calif., that seeped into the water and resulted in hundreds of cases of devastating illness. Like "Norma Rae," this is a story of an unlikely and uneducated heroine who spearheads the fight for justice. But Soderbergh's film is neither a courtroom drama nor a standard Hollywood exercise in liberal self-congratulation. Pungently written by Susannah Grant (with an uncredited rewrite by Richard LaGravanese), shot with unglossy immediacy by Ed Lachman, "Brockovich" moves and outrages us as such tales of public villainy ought to. What's surprising is how funny and light on its feet it is. Roberts and Soderbergh aren't just giving us hagiography: Erin is both a courageous crusader and a pain in the ass, and her embattled relationships with the men in her life—the veteran lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney) for whom she works, and the biker George (Aaron Eckhart) with whom she falls in love—give the movie its comic electricity.

SINGULAR MOM

A down-on-her-luck ex-beauty queen turns her life around by going to war against a multibillion-dollar Goliath

Erin, penniless, bullies her way into a job at Masry's small L.A. law firm, where she first stumbles on the pro bono case involving the residents of Hinkley. Her female co-workers are put off by her eye-popping, cleavage-heavy wardrobe. (Jeffrey Kurland's wittily tacky costumes could be nominated for best supporting actress by themselves.) She's a constant thorn in Masry's side until he realizes the enormity of the evidence she's dug up against PG&E. From then on, they become odd-couple partners. Finney, with his boiled-potato face and alarmed eyebrows, is a masterful comic foil for Roberts's needling, lower-class rage. They're a great beauty-and-beast team.

Just as satisfying is her complex relationship with the biker next door. Almost unrecognizable under his beard, Eckhart bears no relation to the cads he's played in Neil LaBute's movies. George, like Erin, belies his outer appearance. Great with kids, he becomes Erin's lover—and full-time babysitter, a role he begins to resent when she becomes too obsessed with her cause to notice him. Eckhart should have no trouble getting leading-man parts after this: he's sexy and tender and funny, endowing this scruffy Harley dude with a delicate mix of yin and yang.

Even the smallest roles in "Erin Brockovich" jump out at you. (Cherry Jones and Marg Helgenberger, as two Hinkley plaintiffs, are among the standouts.) There's a momentary sag late in the tale, when Erin's crusade to get the plaintiffs' signatures becomes repetitious, but the movie makes a quick recovery. Like its rowdy, firecracker heroine, this movie gives off too many sparks for anyone to get bored.

Which, being cynical, you write off as b.s. But if she didn't make movies, she wouldn't have hits and ... "And what? Would I vaporize? Hopefully, 20 years from now I can stand really confidently by my career and know that I made all the decisions by myself—that I didn't get *feared* into anything." You ask Roberts if she got nervous when movies like "Mary Reilly" tanked. You want her to admit to some tiny heart murmur of anxiety. She doesn't. "Every time a movie of mine does well, I consider it a blessing. You've got to. Otherwise you're just asking to be terrorized by the numbers, and I just won't be. I just *won't*. Math was scary enough in high school."

Friends of Roberts's confirm that she has a lot fewer issues than you'd expect—especially now that she's dating the erstwhile "Law & Order" star Benjamin Bratt, the mention of whose name causes her to blush and look away and makes the artery that runs vertically through her forehead bulge like it's responding to an experimental drug. "I'm far more neurotic than she is," says Richard Dean, a close friend since he did Roberts's makeup on "Sleeping With the Enemy." "I consider her the Anti-Neurotic." In general, people talk about Roberts in a comic torrent of praise. Here's a medley of effusions drawn from a dozen interviews: "She comes to the set every day bright and alive—and she ain't hard on the eyes ... She has a kind of incredibly humane directness ... She loves to knit ... She cooks Thanksgiving dinner all by herself. She gets up, makes the pies. She doesn't really like to have people help in the kitchen ... For many years, she's written poetry. She has a really powerful sensory ability ... She's one of the few superstars who've never done a TV commercial in Japan ... She's an adventurer. She's somebody wild with curiosity. She's like a modern-day explorer!"

At Soderbergh's request, Roberts met the real Erin Brockovich only in passing—they shook hands in the makeup room when Brockovich came to shoot a cameo as a waitress—but the actress has captured her essence. One morning Brockovich and Masry, her boss, sit in the conference room at their law firm outside Los Angeles. They are great friends. They begin swearing almost immediately. "When I heard Julia Roberts was gonna play Erin," says Masry, 67, "I thought, 'This movie is going to be a *disaster*.' I couldn't imagine Julia Roberts saying

Erin Fights Goliath

The 'real' Erin Brockovich returns for another round against a California utilities giant

BY DONNA FOOTE

ERIN BROCKOVICH IS A DYSLEXIC LEGAL INVESTIGATOR WITH NO TECHnical expertise. So she tends to trust her gut. In 1992, her gut told her that something at Pacific Gas and Electric's Hinkley Compressor Station was making folks in that California desert town sick. Four years later a court found that residents suffered contamination by chromium VI, or hexavalent chromium, a known human carcinogen that PG&E had added to its towers for years to inhibit corrosion. PG&E agreed to pay the injured a record $333 million to settle the suit that is now the basis for the movie "Erin Brockovich."

But Brockovich didn't stop there. In 1994, she had a hunch there was similar trouble at another PG&E facility in Kettleman, Calif. She and her boss, L.A. attorney Ed Masry, drove up to the plant in the San Joaquin Valley to have a look. They inspected four huge towers used to cool natural gas before it is piped throughout the state—and the nearby employee housing. Masry saw no evidence of contamination. But Brockovich noticed something. The needles of the area's tamarisk trees were coated with the same white powder she had seen in Hinkley. Next, she headed for the Water Board, where she discovered a 1964 letter from the Department of Interior notifying the utility of excessive chromium VI in the well at Kettleman. From her work at Hinkley, Brockovich also knew that exposure to the toxin could cause a variety of ailments ranging from nosebleeds to lung cancer. Brockovich spent $10,000 copying every document she found.

WINNING TEAMS

In the movie, Los Angeles legal-eagle investigators Brockovich and Masry (above) are played by star twosome Roberts and Finney (left)

Today 900 former residents and workers at the PG&E plants are suing for personal injuries they allege resulted from the contamination of their water, ground and air with chromium VI. The Kettleman plaintiffs contend that the mist spewing continuously from the company's cooling towers was laced with chromium. PG&E refuses to discuss the case, but in company documents, it acknowledges that the well was contaminated with up to 17.5 parts per million of chromium (the allowable drinking standard is .10 ppm).

Plaintiffs say that the contaminated well was constantly used for drinking and bathing. Ruth Ann Vaughn spent 10 years at Kettleman as a child and remembers hot summers there fondly. "I'd hook my dog to my red wagon and park under the mists from the cooling towers," says Vaughn, 47, who now suffers from Crohn's disease. Everybody at Kettleman complained about their health, she says, but they thought the nosebleeds were due to the dry weather; other complaints were put down to hay fever.

After investigating Kettleman for nine months, Masry and Brockovich believed they had enough evidence against PG&E to take the case to a jury. The trial is set for November. Erin has a personal stake in the outcome. She's been diagnosed with a benign growth in her nose. Her gut says she was exposed to chromium VI while on the PG&E sites. This time she hopes she's wrong.

GETTING PERSONAL: Just hearing her beau's name makes her beam. 'I've been on the phone six times today, going, "Whatcha doin'?" '

'blow job' and 'f--k.' She's like the Virgin Mary! When I saw the movie I was literally stunned. The only difference between Julia and Erin is that Erin wore her skirts shorter." Brockovich, 39, laughs. "My bras didn't hang out, though," she says. Masry nods. "No, the bras didn't hang out, but some of the girls in the office were really aggravated."

The tension between glammed-up Erin and her colleagues punctuates Soderbergh's movie. Now Brockovich talks about the time a woman "lost" her paycheck—"I said, 'You *lost* my f--king *check*?' "—and about the time staffers literally measured her skirt to prove it violated an ancient office memorandum and demanded that she be fired. "For years, I would come in on holidays and everybody's office would be decorated but mine," she says. "Sometimes I would cry. They made me feel very, very bad. I wasn't *born* a bitch. I learned to become one."

When you finally ask Erin Brockovich the most obvious question in the world—what's it like to watch a movie called "Erin Brockovich"?—you get the sense there are dozens of answers. She's thrilled that the plaintiffs' story is being told. But she gets wistful because two of her own children have gone through some heartbreaking stuff since the years that the movie depicts. "It's a million things," she says. "An absent mom, a divorced family, drugs. But now they're getting on the right track." Brockovich says the movie has made for only a handful of surreal moments. One time her 8-year-old, Elizabeth, was on a tram ride at Universal Studios with some friends, saw her mom's name on a poster and shouted, "That's my mommy!" You suggest that Universal make an Erin Brockovich ride for its theme park. You ask Brockovich what it would be like. "A nightmare. It would be one long roller coaster: *up*

JAY GARAL—FILM CAL ELLA

Life Under the Glass Ceiling

Not every woman in Hollywood has broken through

By Yahlin Chang and Ray Sawhill

Now that Julia's the first actress to muscle her way into the $20 million boys' club, the big question is this: are women behind the scenes in Hollywood getting the same treatment as men? The signs *look* good. Women run three of the seven major Hollywood studios (Sherry Lansing at Paramount was the first). The Sundance Film Festival this year was hyped as the "Year of the Woman," with more than two dozen films submitted by female directors. We're treated annually to media celebrations of "women in Hollywood," which would have been unthinkable 15 years ago. But how good is it for women, really?

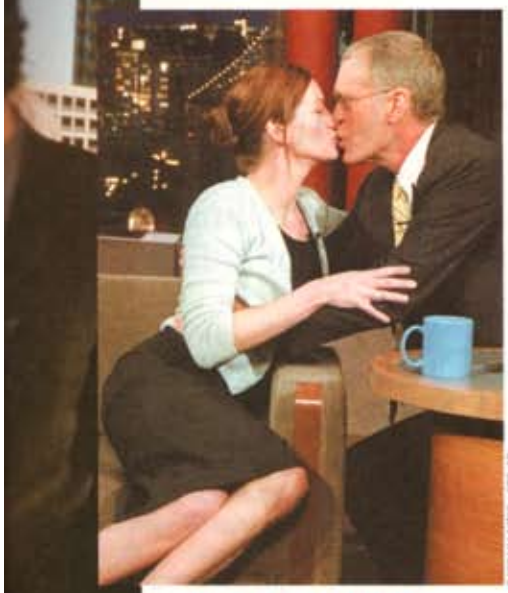
Though women at the very top of the food chain tend to think the battle's as good as won, many beneath them—those who don't make the annual power lists—are still pretty angry. Female film directors work roughly 5 percent of the days that all directors work. Roughly 13 percent of screenwriters are women. "Change," says writer Robin Swicord ("Little Women") "is moving at glacial speed."

For female screenwriters, the big fight is to prove that they can write more than just "chick flicks." Studio executives, they say, think women can write only about women—and films with female leads are still the exception rather than the rule. "My husband, [screenwriter] Nicholas Kazan, is never offered the dog movies and the sister movies [that I am]," says Swicord. "He gets gritty news stories and legal stories. He gets offered expensive books. I get books with girls in them."

Female directors say they're still laboring under the myth that women simply aren't tough enough to handle the pressure that comes with a big-member crew and a $50 million budget. Despite the Nora Ephrons and Penny Marshalls of the world, and the dramatic inroad Kimberly Peirce has made with her Academy-nominated debut, "Boys Don't Cry," the directors' ranks are still very much a male stronghold. "It's the legacy of the '70s auteur directors. You have Quentin Tarantinos and Paul Thomas Andersons, but it's difficult for women to be christened the hot new director in the same way," says Rachel Abramowitz, author of the forthcoming book, "Is That a Gun in Your Pocket? Women's Experience of Power in Hollywood." And women directors continue to battle the most backward stereotypes. "The arguments used against them are: Can she fight the boy's game? Is she strong enough?" says James Ulmer, creator of the Ulmer Scale, which measures the bankability of actors and directors. "Will she have a nervous breakdown, will she scream on the set and be too emotional?"

STEVE GRANITZ—RETNA

Women who have made it in



DYNAMIC DUOS

(From left) Roberts lights up at a première with Bratt, smooches a recovering David Letterman and steps out with Mom

and down, and *up* and down, and *up* and down." Masry throws his head back and laughs: "*I* wouldn't get on it!"

At heart, Roberts seems as earthy as Brockovich. Still, she's become so careful with the press, so reluctant to give ground, that interviewing her can be like driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic. The second day you see the actress, she greets you warmly in her office and says drolly, "I feel no dread when I have to see you." You tell Roberts that she can talk about anything she wants. You ask her to pick a "Jeopardy!" category: career, family or love. She laughs a little, a very little, and says, "Asia for 500, please." Instead you bring up a few touchy subjects, and she answers cautiously. Yes, it's true that she and her brother, Eric, have been estranged for years. Yes, her divorce from Lyle Lovett was painful, but they're friends now: "There was certainly a period of grief. But people always view getting divorced as this great failure, this blight on their lives, and there were just too many positive aspects to our relationship to let it turn into something doomed and regretted." She warned you back in 1989. "I'm not big on regrets," she'd said. "I'm a real fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kind of gal."

Roberts—who just signed on to make a small-budget caper movie, "The Mexican," with Brad Pitt—talks a while and loosens up. Soon she's turning the tape recorder off every so often to tell funny, scandalous stories. (You hoot when she calls somebody "a whorebag," and she quickly covers her mouth.) Roberts has a wonderfully feisty and combative streak, so you bait her about random stuff just to try and get a rise out of her. You insist she's never been dumped in her life. "F--k, yes!" You insist she's never been insecure about her looks. "What—I'm in a movie called 'Pretty Woman,' so now I can never think I'm unattractive?" You insist that she's never had to do jury duty, never had to wait for a table ... She smiles in disbelief. "What I wouldn't give for you to be me for a day, and feel the cold-water shock of perspective. You think it's all dreamy and levitating. You think they carry me on a throne down Fifth Avenue!" You tell Roberts that if you were her for a day, the only person who'd be in for a cold-water shock would be Benjamin. This gets a big laugh, and that artery in her forehead starts jumping.

Roberts softens now. She says that even in relationships she used to demand a lot of time to herself. "Now that all goes to s--t. He left town yesterday, and I've been on the phone six times going, 'Whatcha doin'?' " This morning she said something that made him laugh in this very specific way that she loves. "It's carried me through the entire day." We all know the feeling. There's been a great many times when *her* laughter has carried us through ours. ■

WINNER'S CIRCLE

(Left to right) Gwyneth Paltrow with Paramount's Lansing, Hilary Swank with Peirce at the première of 'Boys Don't Cry'

Hollywood tend to do it in production offices and executive suites. And it can seem to women on the creative side that women on the money side have no desire to go out of their way to help them. In fact, some female executives insist that they won't give a woman special treatment; they hire, of course, on the basis of who's right for the job. And they can find the whining from their younger counterparts just irritating. "These women are just looking for an excuse for their struggles," says one top executive. They never had to face the really blatant sexism of 15 to 30 years ago, says legendary editor Dede Allen ("Bonnie and Clyde," "Wonder Boys"). "They think they can start at the top."

Female executives might try to pretend they're genderless purely as a matter of survival. There's still a perception that girl movies don't make as much money as boy movies, despite the recent successes of "You've Got Mail" and "Runaway Bride." Action-adventure flicks can translate overseas in a way that romantic comedies don't, and overseas box office is of increasing importance to a studio's bottom line. ("Armageddon" made $353 million overseas; "Stepmom," $69 million.) High-ranking female executives "don't want their achievements to be considered women's achievements," says Abramowitz. "They think too much attention has been paid to this. To them, saying Hollywood is sexist is like saying the ocean is blue. Let's just get on with life." But for a writer or director struggling to get her next job, that's exactly the problem. She can't.