



Black Aertex skater, \$1,280, by Philip Armstrong at philiparmstrong.com; bone cuff, \$485, by Elsa Peretti for Tiffany & Co. at Tiffany & Co., Beverly Hills; Ritzo rings in 18K black gold with white diamonds, \$1,723 to \$5,170, by Colette Jewelry at colettejewelry.com.

# ARRESTING BEAUTY

AUSTRALIAN ACTRESS **ABBIE CORNISH** DOES HER DUTY IN THE UPCOMING **ROBOCOP REBOOT**.

By Andrew Myers  
Photography by John Russo  
Styling by Jennifer Kade

Shot exclusively at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, thewallis.org

"Awesome!" exclaims blonde, honey-eyed actress Abbie Cornish, her enthusiasm and Aussie accent cutting through the low murmur carpeting the patio at the Chateau Marmont. The kudo is a callout to the 31-year-old's forthcoming science-fiction actioner, *RoboCop*, a new rendition of the 1987 dystopian megahit that comes at the end of a long list of credits for which Cornish is asked to give an immediate one-word response to each title.

*Somersault*, Cornish's lead debut from 2004, for which she won a catalog of awards, including the Australian Film Institute's Best Actress in a Leading Role and the Film Critics Circle of Australia award for Best Actress, yields a response of "Cate," a kiss to the film's writer-director, Cate Shortland. *Candy*, dealing with the unsweetened world of addiction, which garnered the starlet a second Film Critics Circle of Australia award for Best Actress, produces her co-star's name, "Heath" [Ledge]; likewise, with *A Good Year*, comes "Russell" [Crowe]. *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, Cornish's first petticoat-period flick featuring gorgeous gowns and physical conscription, signals, unsurprisingly, "costumes,"

while *Stop-Loss*, in which she co-starred opposite former beau Ryan Phillippe, elicits "grit." *Bright Star*, which lyrically addresses the relationship between the great romantic poet John Keats and his muse and lover, Fanny Brawne, and for which Cornish received major Oscar buzz, is met with a Shakespearean "death." The girl power-driven *Sucker Punch* kicks off kinetic "imagery"; last month's TV series *Klondike* calls up "Earth"; and the forthcoming film *Solace* provokes "FBI."

But Cornish's first budget-be-damned tent-pole movie, *RoboCop*? "Awesome!" she says, speeding past the one-word limit. "The cast was great. The director [José Padilha] was the best—the entire experience [was] amazing through and through. And the result is equally terrific, with all the original's action, but with all [its] undercurrents better explored: the existential, man versus machine, mind versus soul, the political implications, as well as their impact on an individual family." This about a testosterone-fueled blockbuster from a thespian with major indie cred, acclaimed for her artistic derring-do and good grounded horse sense? Say what?

Black crepe studded cutout dress, \$5,995, at Michael Kors, Beverly Hills; Limpio rings, \$3,597 each, and 18K black gold Tin Top ear cuffs with white diamonds, \$1,240, both by Collette Jewelry at collettejewelry.com. Single drop earring by Yvonna Leu.



It's not as crazy as it might seem because Cornish understands the creative power of reconciling paradox—trusting her brain and her gut concurrently—and has long had faith in her ability to ride the resulting whirlwind.

Her introduction to deciphering that duality came early. "My first memory is totally mundane, but it underscored my sense of being a self; an independent person who was also part of a wider world," Cornish recalls. "I was on a carpet, crawling, and I was so little the carpet loops seemed big. I remember their color, their weave; I remember thinking my pinky would fit through one—which means I was calculating what I thought I could and couldn't do. Then I tried it; it worked; and I recognized at some primal level that I was an individual living thing, that I was adventurous, that my mind wanted to soak up information and expand." With a laugh, she concludes, "And that I'd just done something that affected my world!"

This impression of independence paired with integration was honed during her childhood and adolescence, when Cornish's world expanded to a 170-acre farm in Lochinvar in New South Wales' Hunter Valley, two hours north of Sydney. "It was quite a walk to any neighbor," she says, calling the farm a labor of love for her parents and an Arcadian playground for her and her four siblings. "My parents encouraged us to be independent and strong, and really, you can't overly nurture on 70 hectares when you have careers and kids."

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Idyllic but isolated, the farm fostered Cornish's profound appreciation for natural bounty and beauty; and an acute awareness of time, seasonal transition and temporal transience. It also stimulated her lifelong love of animals—a vegetarian from age 13, the actress has worked with the Australian animal rights group Voiceless since 2006. And the farm's remoteness strengthened Cornish's sense of connection to a much wider world—although, she admits with a sparkle in her eye, there were other points of reference. "This was way before the Internet and texting and social media, and I didn't read magazines or watch TV shows. Instead, I read the encyclopedia—we had a complete set, the old kind with the gold edges, and I thought it was the most amazing thing ever," recalls Cornish, confessing that she was also a junkie for foreign films. "I'd often stay up very late or get up very early, and because I couldn't play outside or make much noise, I'd turn on the TV. The only things on would be foreign films, and I'd watch them for hours. Russian films, French films, Italian films. I don't remember many of the titles, but I remember the stories, the styles, the characters."

If an early mediator between the island of the self and a "wider world," the farm also serves as a metaphor for what Cornish sees as a distinct Australian identity—one that comes from the island-continent's physical isolation alongside its increasing global integration. "Aussies have an unself-conscious, unpretentious sense of self. It's loose, practical and can-do to the

point it can be comical. Make an open fire and cook dinner over it? Build a house yourself? Dash off a book? Can do!" proclaims Cornish.

The can-do attitude helps explain Cornish's professional start. Both a tomboy and a scholar who skipped the eighth grade, Cornish was exploring her girly girl side by age 14. And so with friends, she entered a modeling competition and—drumroll—won. Part of her prize was an introduction to an agent in Sydney, which led to an audition resulting in a stint on the well-watched series salubriously titled *Children's Hospital*, with Cornish cast as a guest quadriplegic.

While many untrained actors would have found this prospect daunting, Cornish had the opposite reaction. "The character had been in a car accident, one that had killed both her parents, and I thought: There's plenty of emotional material here; it's going to be easy!" And, apparently, it was. "It was purely instinctual," she says of her performance. It was also exhilarating. Firmly bit with the acting bug, Cornish called her "mum," as she recounts, from set, and informed her that she was interested in pursuing performance. More TV roles in such series as *Wildside*, for which Cornish won an Australian Film Institute Young Actor's Award at age 15, soon followed.

Ask Cornish how she prepares for a role, and she'll point not to formal training, or any of the method-based American or British acting approaches for that matter. Instead, the actress refers to intellect and intuition, polar points diametrically positioned, that she melds

seamlessly together. "I'm a nerd; I can't help it. I love to research, to prepare, to immerse myself in as much material as I can find, and then I plug all of that into something inside," she explains, underscoring that it's an approach common in Australia, one she's learned by instruction, example and collaboration alongside the likes of Oscar-winning compatriots Heath Ledger, Geoffrey Rush and Russell Crowe, as well as directors Cate Shortland and Jane Campion.

"But really," she clarifies, "it's how I've worked since the beginning of my career. In *Wildside*, before my most difficult scene, where I had to identify a rapist, I remember the director telling me to chuck the script, to do whatever I wanted because I'd become the character, and so whatever I did would be real. We shot it in one take." Intellect and intuition, combined with the confidence that magic will then happen—and then happen again, and again—have defined her success. Dare we dub it the Australian school?

Consider Cornish's approach part of a wider professional view that also emphasizes collaboration, and which brings the actress full circle back to *RoboCop*. "When I signed on, there was no script. I was simply Mrs. RoboCop, and nobody even knew how many scenes I was going to be in. But José is so intellectual and visceral, so contemporary and cutting-edge. I knew it was going to be good.

And," she says with a full-wattage smile, "my instincts and judgment were right." **A**



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Jane soft bra, \$79, by Resul; Wear by dMondaine at Neiman Marcus; Farfameash suede ankle booties, \$1,195, at Christian Louboutin; West Hollywood; skirt by Sachin & Baba; Traina collar necklace by Dannijs.

Hair by Richard Marin at Rossano Ferretti Salons NYC & Beverly Hills; Makeup by Matthew VanLeeuwen for Clé de Peau Beauté at The Wall Group