

A New Film Role for Joan Allen: Star



Marissa Roth for The New York Times

The actress Joan Allen at the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles.

By RICK LYMAN

HOLLYWOOD, Oct. 9 — What took so long? Astounding as it seems, Joan Allen, one of the country's most respected actresses for the better part of two decades, is only now seeing the release of an American film in which she plays the lead character.

In "The Contender," a political thriller set to open on Friday, Ms. Allen, a 44-year-old Tony winner and two-time Oscar nominee who has earned awards from national and regional film critics associations, plays a highly principled United States senator whose nomination for vice president stirs up a long-buried sex scandal.

"At least this time, instead of being married to the politician, I get to be the politician," said Ms. Allen, referring to her Oscar-nominated performance as the wife of the embattled president in Oliver Stone's "Nixon" (1995).

"I've let it roll, to a degree, as far as my career is concerned," Ms. Allen said over lunch recently at the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles. "I suppose I could try to make myself more visible, go to more events in Los Angeles, things like that. I don't know if it would make any difference. The truth is, I would rather be at home in New York or

with my friends. You could make an argument that it's bad for my career, but I don't care. I'm happy with the way things are going."

She ran her slender fingers through close-cropped curly hair, still damp from a shower that morning after a workout in the hotel's health club. Perhaps because she looked so lanky and long limbed in her well-worn blue jeans and yellow tank top, this actress with strikingly blue eyes seemed taller than her 5 feet 10 inches. She sipped slowly on her iced tea. ("It's not one of those fruit mixtures, is it?") But she dug in heartily when a bowl of fragrant chicken stew arrived.

Yes, she said, she would like to play more leading roles in films. And yes, it's not a bad thing that the Oscar talk is buzzing around her again. As Hollywood shifts into the awards season, her performance in "The Contender," which had its first public screening at the Toronto International Film Festival last month, is frequently mentioned among those that might draw an Academy Award nomination in February. She's been there before, nominated and not winning for "Nixon" and for "The Crucible" in 1997. But this time the role is not a supporting one.

"I try very hard not to think too much

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