



Latina magic in a bottle: Jenna Ortega is the ultimate Wednesday



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It's a pre-spring day in Hollywood, and Netflix is hosting a rare Q&A with their hottest star, Jenna Ortega.

It's a Screen Actors Guild Award season event, Ortega is nominated for the SAG Best Actress in a TV series. Stage-mothers pulled their kids out of school and stood in line for over an hour to attend a

screening of “Wednesday” Episode one titled, “Wednesday’s Child is Full of Woe.”

I promise you, everyone there had seen the show. They came for a glimpse of Jenna Ortega. I’m taken aback to see how many guests are dressed in their version of Wednesday, lots of kids, adolescents, and ‘grown-ups’ in black.

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A white-haired man pushing sixty in a black sequined jacket and bow tie, suburban moms in black T-shirt and jeans with their 8-year-olds in chunky, studded Doc Martens and black chiffon skirts, a transgender woman in blazer, pearls, and pleated skirt.

A cute box lunch is served with soft drinks -no booze- it’s 3:30 p.m. and kids are present. I am struck by how young the attendees are, but I soon discover why. The success engine of Wednesday runs on a secret fuel: kids.

Netflix’ Tudum Theatre reception area is delightfully, decadently garnished with ‘dreary chic’ red and black floral arrangements and standing coffin bookshelves behind the coffee bar. It’s crowded in the outside area; I sit on a ledge. Lila, a 10-year-old Latina, and her mom bring their lunches and sit next to me. They drove from The San Fernando Valley.

I ask Lila if she’s watched the whole show. She nods.

“I’m only allowed to watch TV on the weekends, but it came on at Thanksgiving [Nov. 23] and I was sick

that weekend so I watched it eight times.”

I want clarity. I ask again.

“You mean all eight episodes, right?”

Lila nods. She replies: “all eight episodes, eight times.”

That’s 64 times. One little girl.

So yeah, Netflix has a secret weapon. Wednesday kids. Watchers with time, undemanding social lives, no driver’s licenses, and all kinds of devices.

The incredible thing is how these devotees, mostly girls but including boys, prepubescent and older relate to the strong, independent, cynical, smart, disciplined, ambitious and brave character Ortega inhabits.

After the Nov. 23 release, in its first week, Wednesday set fire to the Netflix English language record with 1.02 billion hours viewed, surpassing and crushing the record of “Stranger Things 4” and achieving the #1 spot in 90 countries. Millions upon millions of viewing hours of a young Latina finding her way in a school full of misfits aided by Mexican supernatural elements.

Beautifully cast, directed, written, designed, and shot, Tim Burton’s irresistible Wednesday struck a deep nerdy nerve. Seeing the first episode for the second time I was again struck by how much Ortega got to do in 39 minutes. She fences, plays the cello, kicks Pilgrim butt with kung-fu, fixes an espresso machine, writes a novel, redesigns her half of the dorm room, avenges brother Pugsley, escapes a murder attempt, almost escapes the school, finds two suitors and discovers her own psychic powers.

The show packs a clever punch. The screening ends.

Ortega enters. She’s fragile, and still appears tiny even in 5” platform Mary Janes. Humble, delicate, gorgeous, blazingly smart, forthright, Ortega’s a brave talent with a mission, and a distrust of social media. She admits the attention has been unsettling.

“It’s ... to be honest been a really stressful time. I don’t think I was anticipating that many people tuning into the show nor the reaction being so positive. I think at first it was kind of the surprise. I’m just not used to that kind of attention and it’s exciting and I’m really, really happy, you know, like my cast and crew knowing how hard everybody worked on that show that they’re getting the recognition and offers and things like that, that they deserve, but then yeah it’s very startling and it’s definitely takes some

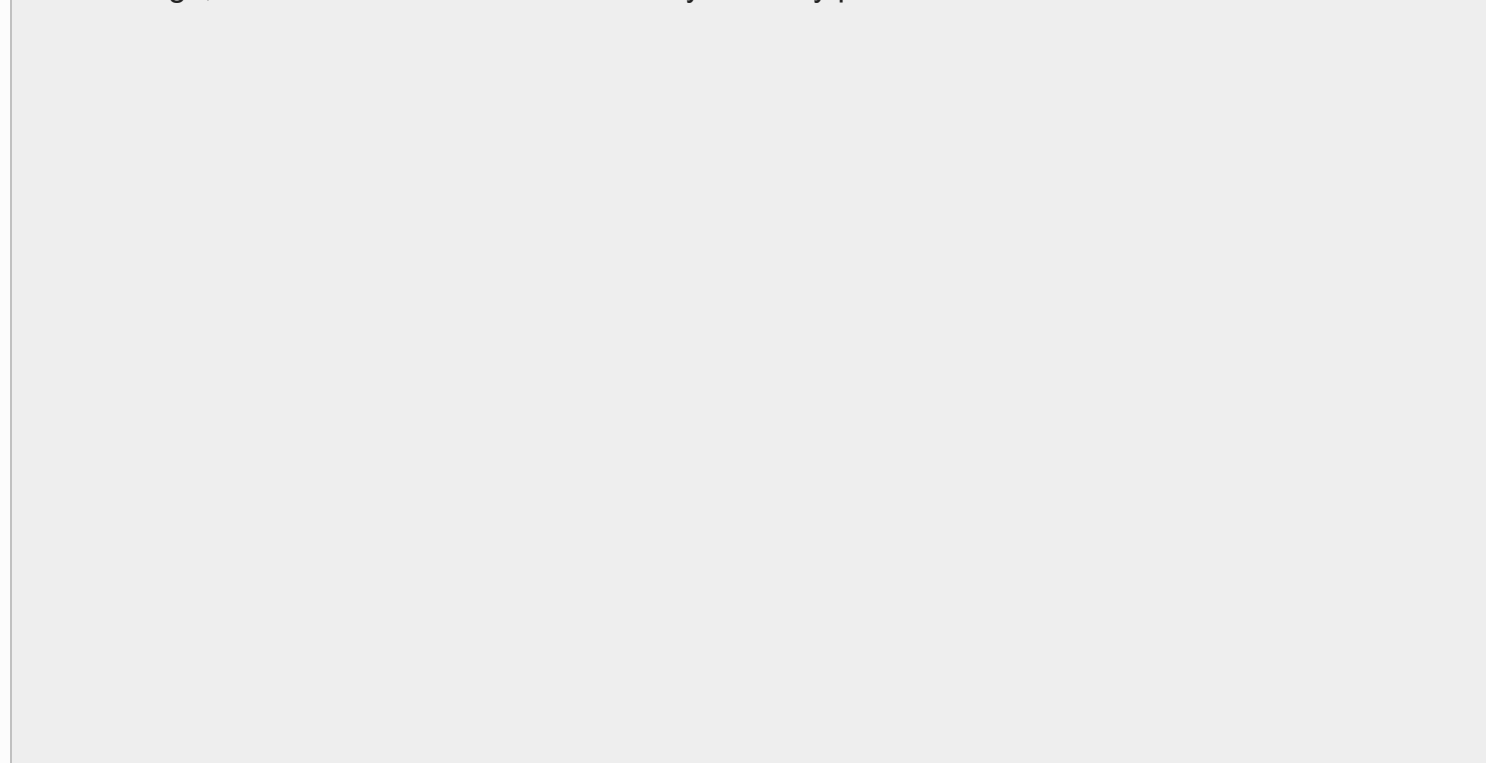
getting used to.”

Ortega first turned it down, afraid she'd ruin it

“I was very hesitant to do the show. I actually kind of turned away from it a couple of times because it's been done so perfectly. First of all, the 60s show is incredible. It's the only time we've seen Wednesday that young. Lisa Loomis makes you realize she's a legend.”

The 90s established a whole new Wednesday we have never seen—that deadpan and sarcastic.

Jenna Ortega, in a scene of Netflix's Wednesday. Courtesy photo.



Jenna Ortega, in a scene of Netflix's Wednesday. Courtesy photo.

“The Wednesday that everyone is obsessed with now is something that Christina Ricci created when she was 11 so I didn't feel like ... I just I didn't want to ruin that. I think the thing about making Wednesday a teenager is ...” Ortega hesitates, then explains her take. “It's really funny when an 8-year-old is saying really morbid horrifying things because all they're so cute, but then when you're 16, it's ... get a grip! You should know better. You're rude and no one likes you. So how do you still make her charming? I realized there had to be a naive nature to Wednesday so that she truly did not understand what the problem was so that she didn't come off like she was trying to get under people's skin or was toxic and manipulative for specific reasons. She had no other way of operating, just had poor social skills and navigating.”

Ortega obsesses a lot about how to keep Wednesday believable.

“But then, yeah, to have an emotionless character not necessarily completely emotionless but deadpan character with an emotional armor, serious, and never betraying her natural instinct was really difficult. That was a conversation that we were having every day on set. I can truly say I don't think there was a single time where I came home from work and felt at peace with good decisions that I made. This job has kept me from sleeping ever since because I just lay awake staring at my ceiling, ‘oh why didn't I make this decision or why didn't I do that like that?’”

Staying in character is not easy

“It was difficult because I am naturally very expressive. I think my face makes a lot of reactions before I even realize it, and I know ... it's not Wednesday! I fortunately knew I was doing the job a couple of months in advance so I would walk to the grocery store as Wednesday.”

Ortega looked for ways to bring the cartoon element to the role.

“Maybe my eyes will notice something before my head does, because she had been a cartoon strip before. I wanted everything about her to be different and for it to kind of be like a cartoon, because I also feel like when you do something supernatural like this, especially with a teen series, if you take everything too seriously and everything is too realistic then it's a bit melodramatic.”

“I played into the fact that this all was absurd and clear. They've heavily leaned into the 90s films with the fencing sequences and things like that. I just felt OK. Well, if my movement feels as unnatural as possible to me that's probably a good thing.”

“It didn't make me feel better on the day because it didn't feel natural. This show was really exciting for me because I got to challenge myself in that way.”

Full of wonder

The real-life prodigy Ortega is flexing her Latina power, in the nicest way, but making it clear that typecasting Latinos as the ‘sidekick’ in ‘supporting’ roles to meet ‘diversity’ quotas is offensive.

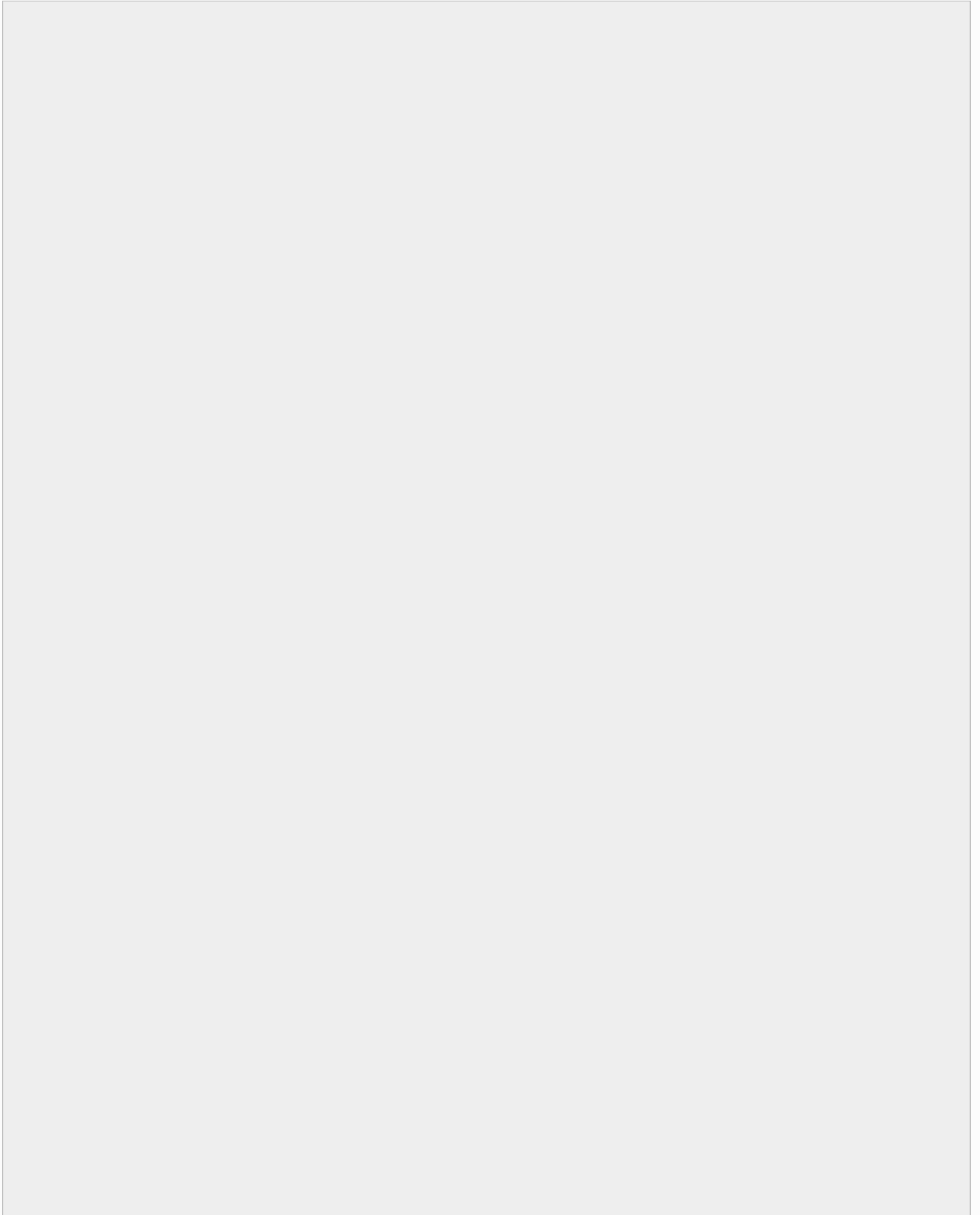
Representation was a key factor in why she finally said yes to Wednesday.

“I can't think of a Latina character who has the same reach as Wednesday Addams does. I definitely want to accomplish with my career, give representation to people of color for them to be shown as positive lights and are not, how can the side character carries their flag on their shoulder and it's their entire personality and there's nothing interesting about them other than the fact that they're Hispanic and then also possibly gay because they like to check two boxes!”

A proud Mexican-Puerto Rican from Coachella Valley, California, Ortega's very close to her parents, Natalie an ER nurse, and dad Edward. One of six kids, Ortega's parents have supported their daughter's acting ambitions since she began at age nine, through her 46 roles on TV and in films.

But they have reassured Ortega, now 20, that she can quit anytime she wants. Quitting seems highly unlikely.

Ortega's on a serious roll. She's won the Imagen Award, MTV Award, and has been nominated for a slew of others including a Golden Globe, and a SAG Award. She's appeared in iconic TV series roles like “Jane the Virgin,” “YOU,” “Ritchie Rich,” “Stuck in the Middle,” horror films including “The Babysitter: Killer Queen,” “Scream,” “Scream VI,” “X.” Her role in “Yes Day” as Jennifer Garner and Edgar Ramirez' teen daughter was a departure—a rare ray of smiles and sunshine for the scream princess.



Jenna Ortega accepts the accepts the award for most frightened performance for "Scream" at the MTV Movie and TV Awards on Sunday, June 5, 2022, at the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica, Calif. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello)

In a departure from her comedy and horror ‘wheelhouses,’ Ortega’s 2021 HBO MAX movie “The Fallout,” is a timely psychological drama about a student’s high school shooting PTSD. Ortega’s mainstream fare “Iron Man3,” “Yes Day,” and “Little Rascals Save The Day” seem almost alien to the intense personality revealed in the brief but impactful interview.

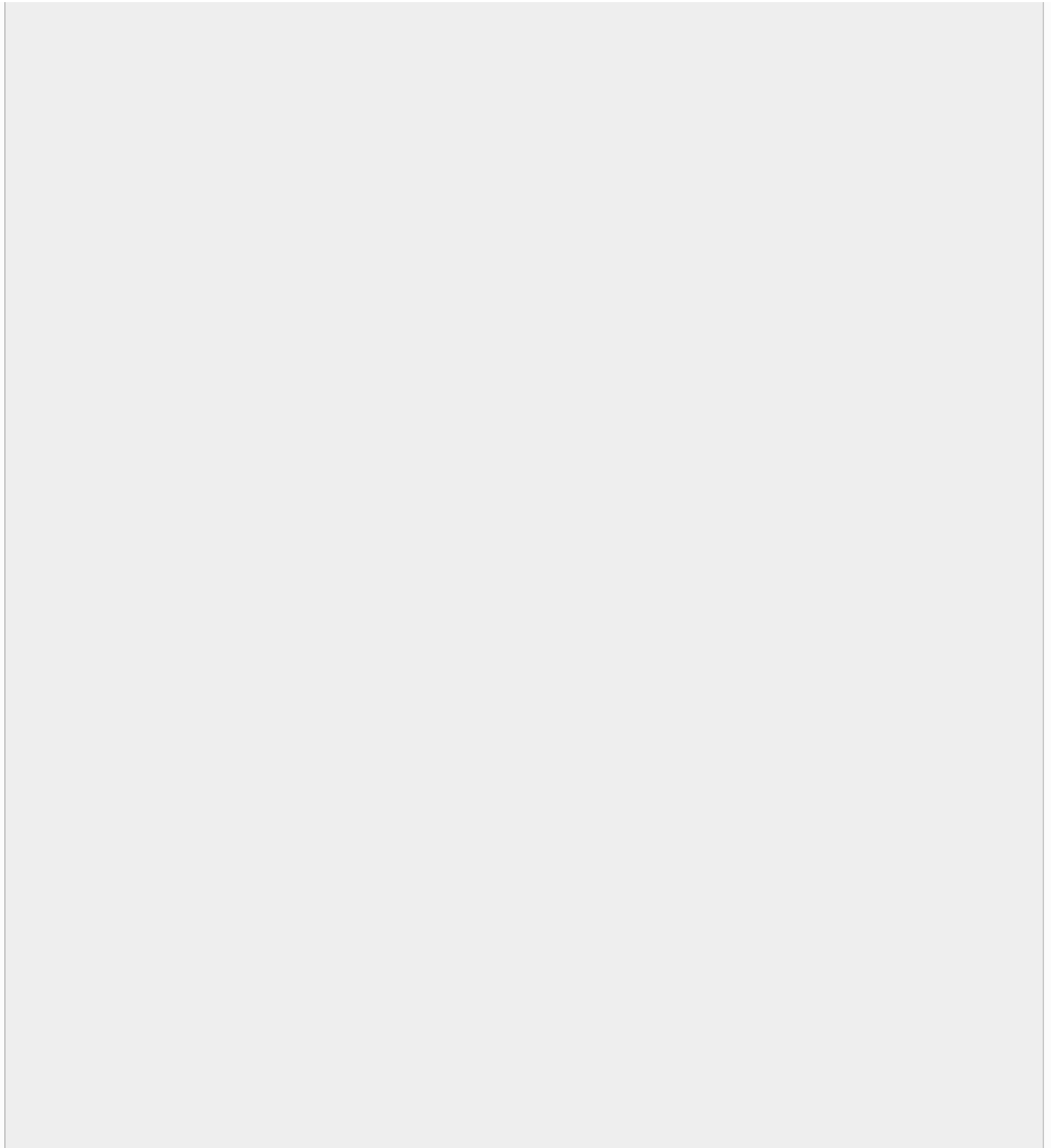
Clearly, she’s a super-talented actor, but in “Wednesday” Ortega found a shadow-self, an old soul, a uber-achiever, an unfiltered outsider who totally embraced and owned her eccentricities. Of course, this is the essence of the Addams Family magic; it’s worked like a charm for a half a century since the original oddball cartoonist Charles Addams created the cartoons that launched numerous TV, film, and Broadway versions.

In the golden hands of director Tim Burton, 2023’s Addams Family remains totally relatable to a vast and diverse audience that feels somehow disenfranchised, misfit or just plain weird. And despite her love of all things dark, Ortega had her reservations about taking on the pig-tailed protagonist.

She knew in her tiny bones that this was a tall order— a crushing legacy that could eat her alive if she got it wrong. But horror princess Ortega is not so very different from her deadpan alter-ego Wednesday Addams. Ortega challenges her phenomenal death-loving character to dance with life.

A chance to work with Tim Burton

For the uninitiated Ortega, seems to have sprung from nowhere. Her horror pedigree reaches back and laid the foundation for her stoic portrayal of Wednesday Adams in her most flushed out incarnation.



American actress Jenna Ortega wearing Versace and American filmmaker and artist Tim Burton arrive at the World Premiere Of Netflix's 'Wednesday' Season one held at the Hollywood American Legion Post 43 at Hollywood Legion Theater on Nov. 16, 2022 in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California, United States. (Photo by Xavier Collin/Image Press Agency/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images)

The word macabre doesn't get used much these days but it fits Wednesday Addams like that custom Nevermore blazer to perfection. Ortega has a bit of a fascination with all things dark and gory.

As the daughter of an ER nurse, she's no stranger to tales of blood and guts. This deepens her fascinating performance, combined with her doll-like beauty and mastery of the deadpan delivery.

Take into consideration that Ortega's 20. She's stopped growing, and won't, as the industry rudely puts it, 'age out' of the role anytime soon.

Ortega's playable age-range is easily 14 to 16 and as such there's no better choice to play Wednesday Addams. Netflix and the Internet agree.

To her absolute shock confusion and astonishment, Ortega was offered the role by the brilliant and iconic director Tim Burton. She wavered, having seen all the iterations of Wednesday including recently departed Lisa Loomis, the OG Wednesday.

Christina Ricci, also a much-loved Wednesday Adams, was recast in this series as a quirky guidance counselor, a sweet nod to her years long involvement and the brilliant way of tying in older audiences loyal to Ricci.

Wednesday's emotional core

Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, the creators and showrunners of the series talked about when developing Wednesday it was very important to them to avoid the typical shy to confident arc of teenage female protagonists. They created this Wednesday as a character who starts strong and stays strong in the series. Ortega was on board with that.

"Wednesday was an opportunity where OK, she's an iconic character and yeah I just wanted to be able to show that side of her because it is there."

"I don't think I've ever come across a teenage girl character that I played that wasn't strong — I feel like they've kind of always had that quality. I think just growing up as a woman especially in this day and age where everyone is so much more vulnerable with social media and you know everyone across the globe being able to connect to you somehow, but after Wednesday it was a bit different. I guess because there's so much about the show that doesn't naturally make sense. For one, she's trying to battle a serial killing monster the whole time. I don't know, there's a lot of aspects to where her being nasty or her natural morbid taste could be distasteful, so I think for me the balance wasn't 'oh she's weak, she's strong' ... she's consistently strong."

"Strong people can cry, can have emotions, can finally give their roommate a hug after knowing them for

six months. It's just a matter of making sure that everything wasn't jeopardizing why everyone loves Wednesday as a character and her being so cold and not nasty. There's a lot that you have to take on in this role! I mean there's canoeing, there's fencing and there's speaking German, there's playing the cello!”

Fencing, cello ... How Ortega got it all done

For doubters about the authenticity of the cello and fencing, just accept that Ortega is young, smart and a fast learner who works very hard to get it right.

“I started fencing and cello lessons two or three months before we started the shoot and then I continued them throughout the eight-month shoot in Romania.”

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Ortega was under the gun constantly. As the star, she was in nearly every shot. In between, she was learning new skills that usually take years to learn.

“We had a lot more fencing sequences, but they had to be cut because of time. It was whenever we could get a lesson in. I know we hit the ground running. We had two weeks of rehearsals and that's when we were doing the archery, canoeing, fencing. I didn't start doing the German until a week or two before we actually shot that scene.”

“I would say that the first piece that I played on the cello was “Paint It Black” [The Rolling Stones version used in the Danny Elfman score]. I had not touched a cello until about two months prior and the score that Danny wrote I got maybe two weeks before we shot it. I had to practice with a second Romanian cello teacher so that was already weird switching teachers but also the piece is made for two cellos, not one! I have to pretend like I'm playing, and I didn't know where my hands were even supposed to go! I did not get any sleep. I pulled my hair out. There's so many FaceTime calls that my dad answered with me hysterically crying. I remembered him saying, “Don't worry you're gonna do great, it's gonna look great.”

“I put such pressure on myself because I wanted cellists to be able to watch it and feel like it was actually done right because I can't imagine how annoyed string players get with that sort of thing!”

Eventually ‘doubles’ [actors to stand in for Ortega when the camera is not on her face] came in handy.

“The thing with the show is we started running out of time because Wednesday is in pretty much every scene! Toward the end as the episodes go on they had to start using stunt doubles or occasionally a cello double if they didn't have time to get hands. But I was very adamant about being as well prepared as possible because I wanted them to be able to use myself, because that's so much more believable. Because you're facing the right shots.”

The show's been renewed, so Ortega can pick up where she left off.

“I actually would love to start the cello lessons as soon as possible, because we had to cut so much because again we didn't have time, so I have like three other cello pieces prepared that were cut and we didn't even get to shoot so I'm ready to do those songs whenever! I've been traveling around shooting and I haven't been in the same place.”

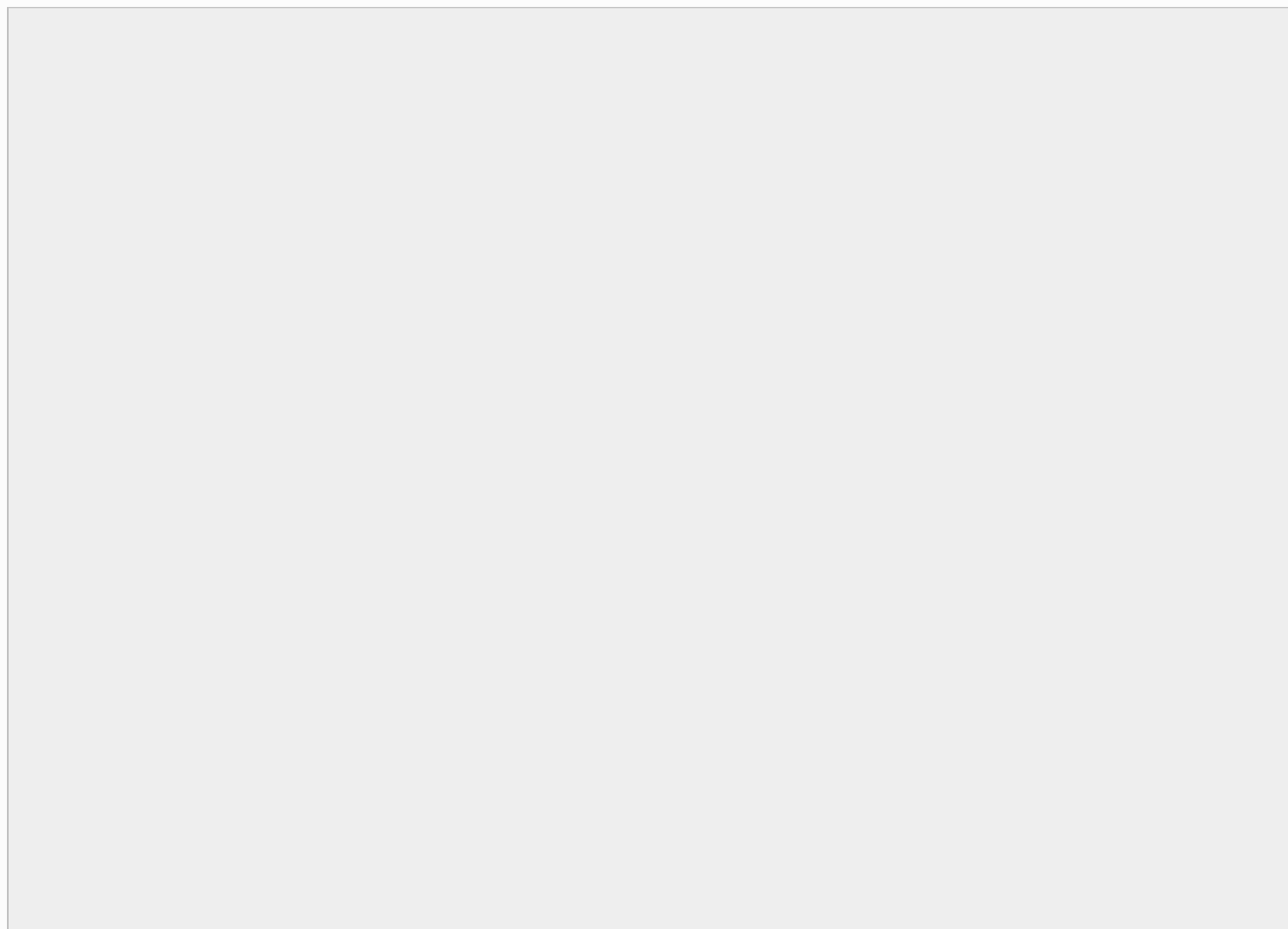
“I still know Paint It Black like the back of my hand. I could do that one in my sleep! For sure I know The Four Seasons, [by Vivaldi] not well, but I can do that.”

Ortega tackles her doubts head-on.

“I know when I take on a story that I've never done before, or if it's just the magnitude of the project that there are different insecurities.”

The horror genre as a second home

"I just really love being traumatized. I really love going to work and being scared. I love it when people ask me to lay on the floor and cry. I love having blood on my face!"



Jenna Ortega attends the world premiere of "Scream VI" at AMC Lincoln Square on Monday, March 6, 2023, in New York. (Photo by Evan Agostini/Invision/AP)

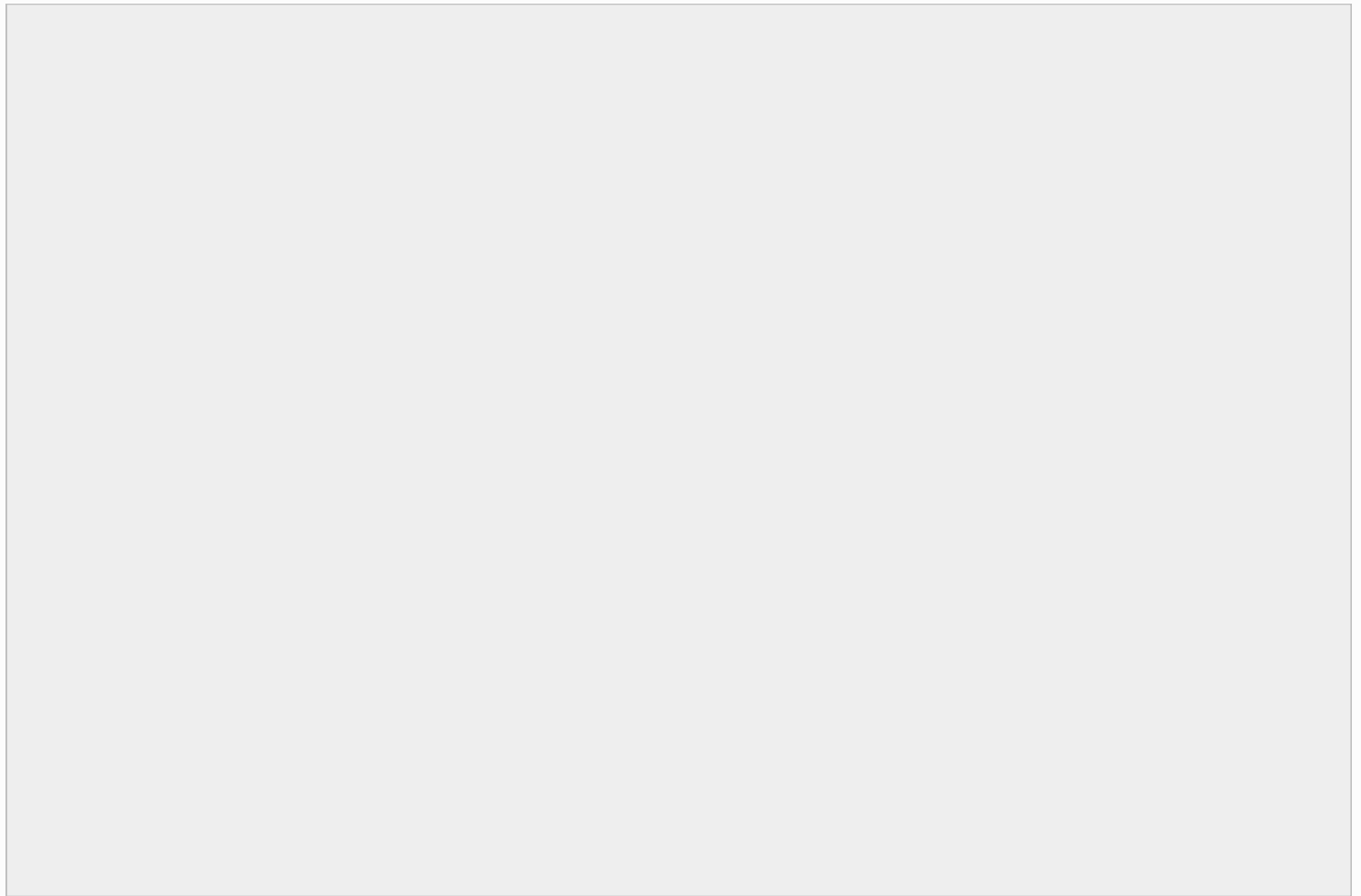
"I think my favorite thing about being a woman in horror especially is because they're always written so strong because you're put in unbelievable situations and horror is a really great opportunity because it's pure entertainment! They try to throw as many genres into one so you get to do the comedy, drama, romance. There's a lot of different degrees to a proper horror film and I feel really lucky to have read a lot of horror scripts. I think I'm just really interested in anatomy and things; my mom is a nurse, so I always heard stories. I like to see that stuff."

Mr. Burton is a magician

Certainly, the rich, dark, quirky, and perfect, meticulously detailed aesthetics of Wednesday are classic Burton, and although Netflix TV budgets are a taboo discussion, one imagines there was enough to go around for the eight-month long shoot, and post production. It clearly paid off. Ortega had a great time.

“Tim Burton directed four of eight episodes. He is so nice! I think that that was something that surprised me. He's a legend! I hadn't worked with someone with such a resume, and I remember being really overwhelmed by how kind he was but then also being really scared working with him because he's such an incredible collaborator that I couldn't tell if he was directing me or not!”

“I would go to work and ask for criticism because I always preface it with the director ‘hey if that was God awful, I need to know like just tell me what's out and we'll fix it.’ But Tim was always so supportive and so encouraging of any sort of decision you made you could do one take one way and then the next take a completely opposite route!”



Wednesday. Jenna Ortega as Wednesday Addams in episode 101 of Wednesday. Cr. Vlad Cioplea/Netflix © 2022

“He was really hands-on. We would be shooting in Romanian forests at 4:00 in the morning in winter and oh, where's Tim? He's carrying two trees and throwing them on the ground and like throwing rocks this way and painting actors with blood himself and saying, ‘oh give me some more in my cup, I'm thirsty!’”

“It was very, very funny, very charming. But then also he always wanted to make sure you were good! Coming to the trailer in the mornings and saying ‘hey is there anything on the sides that you're uncomfortable with or you don't feel like Wednesday would say?’ We would go through, we'd cross out lines and would rewrite lines together and things like that! He did not need to be as fair to me as he was. He was really wonderful.”

And if something *is* wrong?

“Well, you can usually tell when something is wrong when you hear him start mumbling to himself.”

Burton is, unsurprisingly, a lot of fun to work with.

“It's so entertaining because sometimes he's like a little kid and he's laughing when he has to keep himself from you know, engaging.”

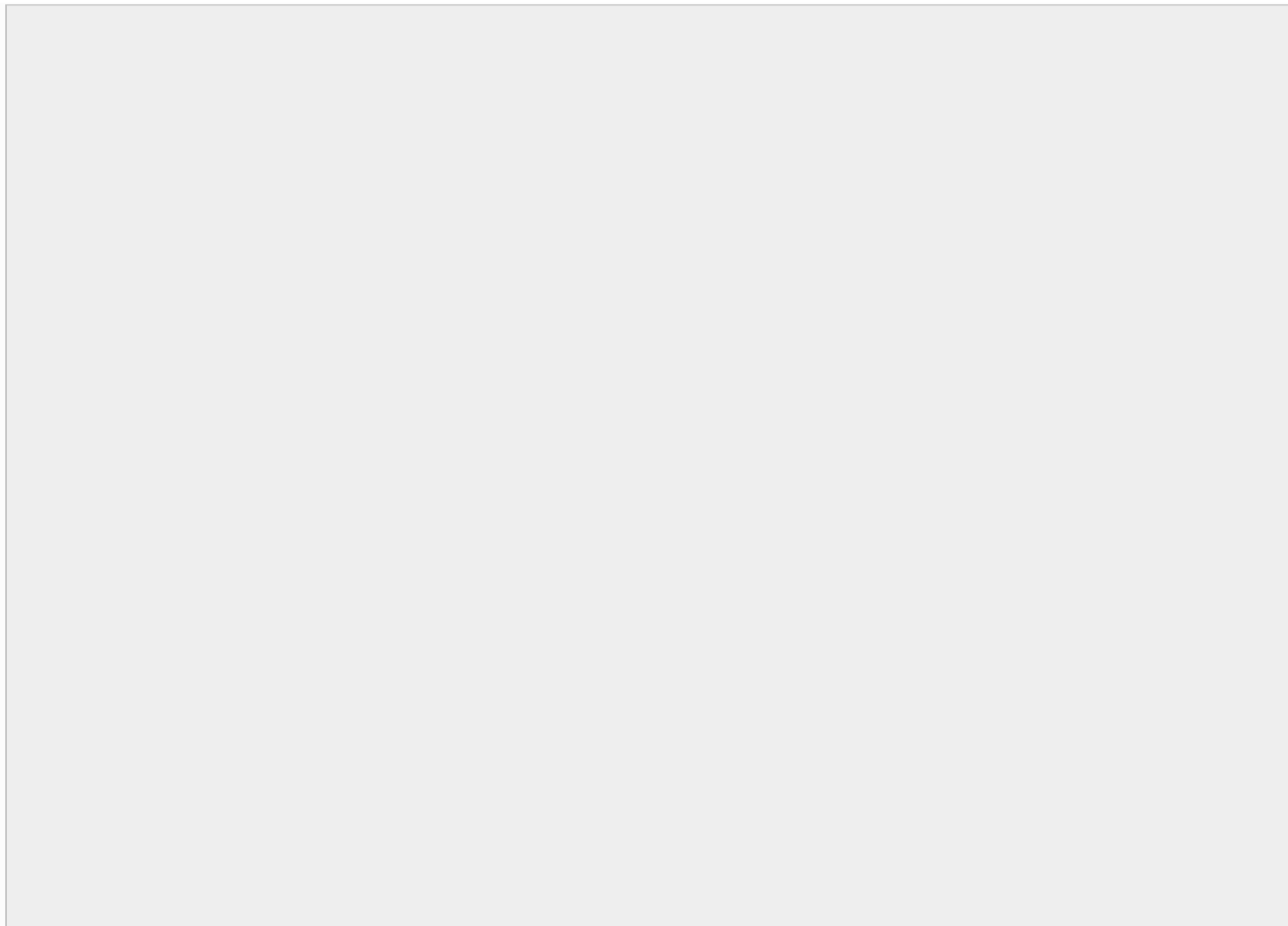
Burton kept the anxious perfectionist Ortega in the loop, ensuring her best work.

“He [Burton] would draw little images before I came on set, on the back of his sides [script pages] and then he would show up and say, “This is the shot that we're doing right now. He's just constantly drawing.”

Ortega also credits the series' Creators Alfred Gough and Miles Millar with “brilliant writing.”

Forget the monster in the woods, its social media that terrifies Ortega

“I try to ignore social media as much as possible. But it's getting harder and harder because yeah now people are coming up to me and talking about me. I've always been scared of social media in that way because the only part of life my job that I truly love is ‘action and cut’. In between, during the scene, I ‘blackout.’ I'm just focused on listening to what the other actor is saying.”



Jenna Ortega arrives at the 33rd annual Imagen Awards on Saturday, Aug. 25, 2018, at the JW Marriott L.A. Live in Los Angeles. (Photo by Richard Shotwell/Invision/AP)

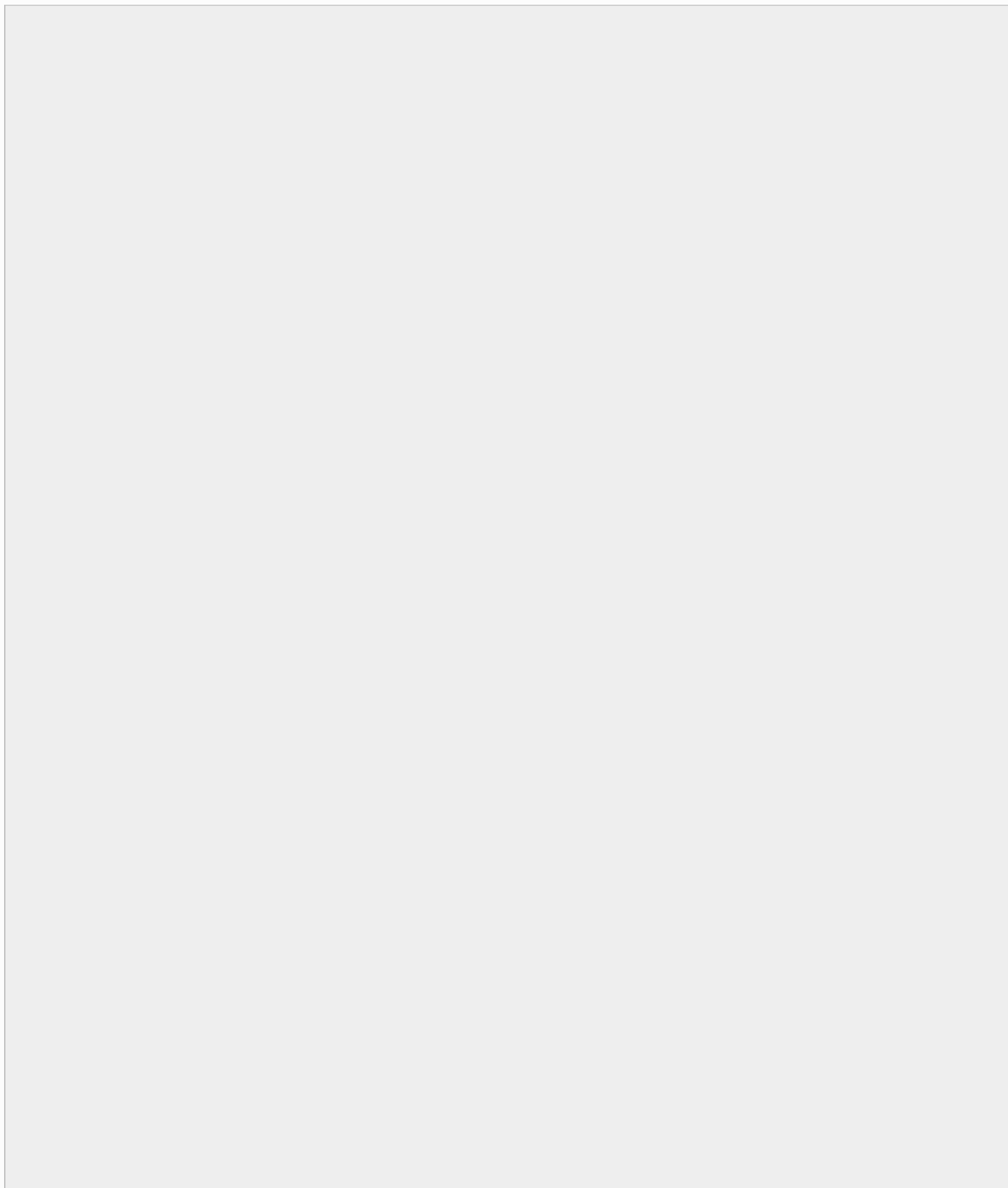
“Everything else, the interviews, the press, whatever it's all very perplexing. Sometimes you kind of feel like a salesman! I'm not trying to sell anything. I'm just trying to, you know, do what's creatively fulfilling to me and what's exciting to me and tell stories!”

“I think that something like social media, where now is part of the job and it's a part of your business, people have more liberty to speak on you as if you're not human. It's actually getting harder and harder for me to engage with people on social media or be active in that way. You feel kind of tossed to the dogs in a sense. People, because they can hide behind a screen, they can say whatever, do whatever.”

“And again, I try not to read as much as possible. I don't want to start a fight or some battle trying to prove myself on social media. I'm just setting myself up to lose. I'd much rather just spend time with the people that I know and love and ignore that sort of thing.”

A prodigy with great parents ... and a mission

When Ortega expressed interest in acting, Ortega's mom, Natalie, got her started with a book of monologues. She posted a video of Ortega performing one of them on Facebook when she was nine. This led to a role on a Rob Schneider's sitcom.





Jenna Ortega arrives at the 27th Annual "A Time for Heroes" Family Festival on Sunday, Oct. 23, 2016, in Culver City, Calif. (Photo by Willy Sanjuan/Invision/AP)

Precocious Ortega asked a ton of questions about every set job, took notes, and learned.

“I wanted to be as professional as possible. I would carry around this notebook and anything that I overheard people talking about, I’d go and ask questions.”

Ortega’s parents were encouraging but wary.


“I’ve always been able to leave because they initially didn’t even want me in the industry — not to not be supportive but just because it is so cutthroat. And what are the chances like this is kind of insane that I’m even right here! None of us were expecting any of that. My parents set priorities. I had to have perfect grades. And if I was given a platform I had to use that platform for good. And if I ever started to use it in any sense that didn’t give back to my community or wasn’t engaged in the things that I was always interested in as a kid, I shouldn’t be here.”

Hollywood makes her anxious

“I feel like everything about this industry has always been intimidating. I wanted to perform so well, I put such immense pressure on myself. I’ve always been a naturally very anxious person. I’ve always been on the edge of my seat asking, oh what does that mean?”

Season 2, confirmed

What are Ortega’s hopes for Wednesday Season 2? More blood, less romance.



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“I thought that the show was going to be leaning a bit more into the horror aspect. I don't want to scare away young viewers. At same time it could be interesting to many kids out there ... [JOKING] the sons and daughters of nurses? That might be interesting to them.”

But leave the kisses out?

“Last season they kind of tried to put Wednesday in a bit of a love triangle which that was like a weird thing to justify, and I don't think that's natural, so I feel like I'd rather just focus on her in her experience as a teenager. I don't want things to become romantic because that's always in my opinion the most boring part of the show.”

The return of that cello!

One of the iconic scenes of Wednesday takes place with Ortega playing “Paint It Black” in the dark on her dorm balcony. It's haunting, and amazing sound, image, and intensity.

Ortega learned the cello to play, and her instructor introduced her to the late cellist and legend, Jacqueline du Pre. It's very Wednesday of her to revere the legendary English Cellist Jacqueline du Pre, whose career was cut short at age 28 by multiple sclerosis. She is still considered one of the greatest cellists ever. Ortega has chosen a great spirit to emulate.

“I'm really upset because I really wanted to do piece of Jacqueline Du Pre. She was really interesting, a very young powerhouse woman cellist and the only one really of her time ... her style was very gothic and very strong, but nobody played like her and she would have been an inspiration for Wednesday. I

wanted to play that piece so if there's any sort of time for like a Jaqueline du Pre moment, I'd love to do that.”

Viewers love Wednesday's fierce midnight balcony cello playing. With Season two already greenlit and underway it's a safe bet Jenna Ortega's persistence and Tim Burton's ear for music will find a way.

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