



Nicole Oliver

Nicole Oliver might be better known to some as a live-action actor than a voice-actor. One of her first jobs out of college was on a TV series, *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*, in which she played the police-officer girlfriend of Peter, Caine's son. "In the first season, he had a girlfriend who was a rock-'n'-roll singer," she says, "and originally I auditioned for that part, but they gave it to a girl from the States. But they liked me and remembered me, and my character was introduced." At that time, Oliver was very new to on-camera acting. "My first gig on television was a shower scene," she laughs. "I didn't even know what a close-up was. I knew nothing. But that's the show I did right out of school." Ironically enough, it's still the role for which she is probably the most recognized, all around the world. "My cousin was trekking through the mountains in Chile," Oliver remembers, "and she's in this little village where they have two TVs, and she sees my face in this episode of *Kung Fu* dubbed in Spanish."

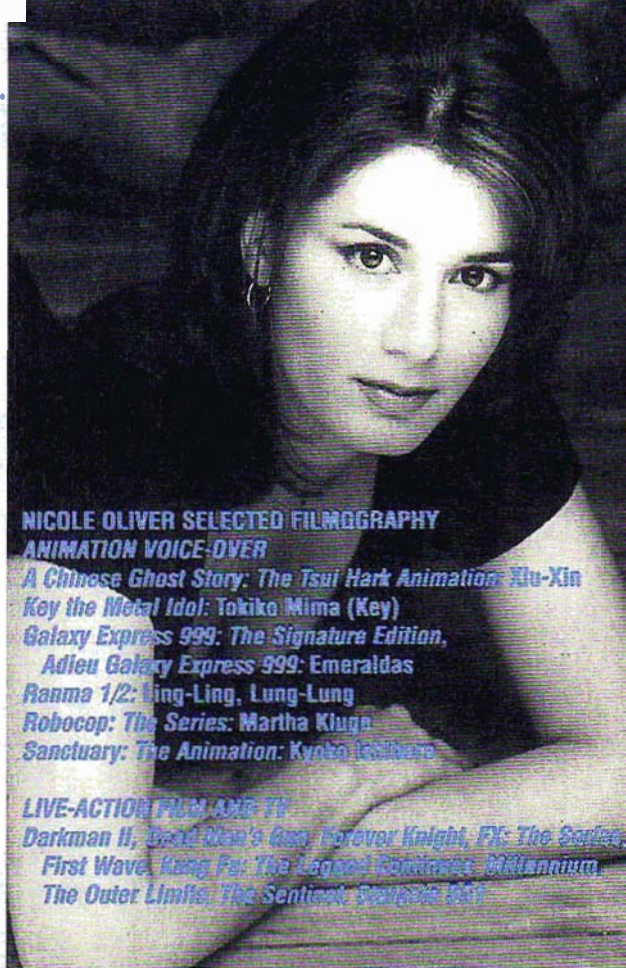
Oliver got her start in voice-acting through commercials, which led into animation, and finally, anime. Her anime roles have been as diverse as *Key the Metal Idol's* robotic idol Key to the space pirate Emeraldas in *Galaxy Express 999*, and it's this diversity of roles that Oliver says she enjoys the most about voice-acting. "I guess it's really starting to open up for me as I'm getting more comfortable with exploring all the different voices I have," she says. "At first I did Queen Emeraldas with that kind of regal thing, with bad-girl, raspy kinds of qualities...I did a couple of those sorts of characters. But I'm finding now that it's pretty much all over the map. I just played a Kathie Lee Gifford-like talk-show host from hell in this new cartoon show called *The Adventures of Milo*. I've done little girls now, and older women, and I'm really getting a great opportunity to explore all of it. It's really wonderful."

When you're going to go into a role, do you do anything interesting to prepare, to research the part?

It depends on the project. For voice-acting specifically, I'm quite a mimic—I have quite an ear for accents and all that. There's this series called *Robocop*, which is airing in the States now, and I played a couple of evil characters recurring in it. One of them is a Russian cross between the Borg Queen and Rosa Klebb from *From Russia with Love*. Her character's name is Martha Kluge, and she has a Russian accent. In that case, I was really boning up to get the accent down so I could concentrate on character. I like to try and read the script beforehand for voice-acting, much like I would for an on-camera part. You get the script, read it, figure your relationships to the other characters—what your character wants—get some ideas in your brain on how you might like to approach it. But the bottom line is, whether it's voice-acting or in front of the camera, as soon as you walk onto the set or into the recording studio, you gotta let it all go, because you never know what's going to happen. [LAUGHS] And be willing to rock 'n' roll, as they say. But yeah, I do a fair amount of preparation—I mean, if the director says do something, I do it. But it's also quite nice to be able to say, Well, what if it were *this*, because I think *this* is how this character feels.

Let's talk about two of the more recent characters you've played. You just finished Xiu-Xin in *A Chinese Ghost Story* and you were also Key. Your natural voice sounds very different from Key.

[LAUGHS] I know.



NICOLE OLIVER SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY ANIMATION VOICE-OVER

A Chinese Ghost Story: The Tsui Hark Animation: Xiu-Xin
Key the Metal Idol: Tokiko Mima (Key)
Galaxy Express 999: The Signature Edition,
Adieu Galaxy Express 999: Emeraldas
Ranma 1/2: Ling-Ling, Lung-Lung
Robocop: The Series: Martha Kluge
Sanctuary: The Animation: Kyoko Isidoro

LIVE-ACTION FILM AND TV

Darkman II, Brad Pitt's Gun, Forever Knight, FX: The Series,
First Wave, Kung Fu: The Legend Continues, Millennium,
The Outer Limits, The Sentinel, Seinfeld 1997

What was your impression of Key when you started that series? How did you find that voice?

Oh, it was frustrating because my voice is very animated, and it's like walking a fine line between—you don't to be robotic, but you can't be human. And she was a younger girl—and so that was a real challenge to try and find her all the time and to try and find some humor in it without it being too one-note, because that's what the character was. She was a young girl who thought she wanted to be human, and thought that she was robotic, but was made that way to protect her. That was definitely a challenge.

Did you base her voice on anyone in particular?

My little cousin, actually—my little cousin Amanda. There are some voice-actors who have a million voices in their heads, and I think that they're incredibly blessed and lucky. I have a few, but like I said, I'm a mimic, so I often start with voices either from listening to some of my favorite Hollywood stars or people around me that have interesting qualities, and then I take it from there and make it my own. But that's where Key's voice came from, and the singing was just an amazing experience—getting to sing in character.

So you did some of the singing yourself?

Yeah, I did her singing. The English songs she sang were in my voice.

So did you do a lot of vocal training for that as well?

I did years ago. I started out in musical theater, and I had to take it all through school. I mean, I sang in a band, but it was rock 'n' roll. [LAUGHS] But it's been a while. My focus has been on acting on-camera, and the singing stuff has gotten sidelined.

How how about Xiu-Xin. What was that like?

I liked her—she was closer to me vocally, definitely. She's really

playful and mischievous and romantic, which was fun, and she got to fight, which I quite like, although it's a little hard on your voice when you try and do those fight scenes all the time. I quite enjoyed it. It's a great release—you get to stand in the booth and flail around. It's great aggression therapy.

Get all your angst out. Who needs Tae Bo?

[LAUGHS] Who needs Tae Bo when you can do a little bit of anime! I really enjoyed doing that a lot. It was great fun. I really liked the relationship between Xiu-Xin and her sister. Unfortunately, we don't record with other actors at the same time. I also do a lot of what they call the prelay animation—like what they do for Saturday-morning cartoon shows, where they animate the images off your voice—and when you record those, you're in a room with all the other actors, so you get to play off each other. So one of the challenges in anime is having to play off a TV screen. And sometimes not even the other English voices are there so you kind of have to act out all the others.

With both Xiu-Xin and Key, did you find your impressions of them changing as the production went on? Or do you find that normally happens with the projects—you start with some sort of initial idea of what the characters are like and over time it will change? I think—yeah, generally. I try to go with broad strokes of the character if that makes sense—red, yellow, green, blue...you're shading the character. I really experienced that with Key, because I did her over quite a long time. So I was very comfortable with her, but I also got to find more of her sense of humor. For me, that was a discovery I made with the character—she has quite a dry wit. In the recording sessions, [Viz Video producer] Toshi would go, "Okay this is not a sitcom, Nicki, let's get back to the story." [LAUGHS] Even with *A Chinese Ghost Story*—I liked Xiu-Xin more as it went on. She was very manipulative at first, and the more you are with a character the more you get to find out about all the different little corners they have. It's like with anybody you meet in real life, the longer you hang around with them, the more you really get to know them. I guess I really experienced that with Key because I was with her the longest.

Do you enjoy watching the animation you're in? Or do you ever watch it at all?

I do, actually. I often ask for copies of it, and I just think animation is such an amazing art form. I'm really quite blown away with the animators and the people who draw the backgrounds and all that. I just think it's an incredible talent. It's an idea in their heads, and they just bring it to life. And I know that the voices are often the last part in, even after the sketches have been done or even before the prelays. Although they are animating off your voice, they have a definite concept and design of what the character looks like. I love watching it. This whole idea of voice-acting has given me an excuse to watch Saturday-morning cartoons for the rest of my life. It gives me a great excuse to be a kid for a long long time to come.

Were you an animation watcher before you became a voice-actor?

Oh, yes. I'm a huge *Bugs Bunny* fan. Huge. Oh, and the Walt Disney films—*Bambi*, *Snow White*—my dad

would take me to them. Growing up with Saturday-morning cartoons, it was *Looney Tunes*, *Tom & Jerry*, and stuff. Cartoons are so much different now. *Mr. Magoo*, *Yogi Bear*, *The Flintstones*, all the great ones. *The Flintstones* at lunchtime was a ritual. I would rush home to watch *The Flintstones*. Now, my younger brothers are total *Simpsons* freaks. Half the universe is. And I do watch *The Simpsons* and laugh with *Futurama*. And my mom used to say when *The Flintstones* were on that it was for adults and that it's really funny if you watch it as an adult—kids don't get all the stuff that's in there. I'm a big cartoon watcher.

What would you say is the strangest role you've ever had to played as a voice-actor?

Well, I can't remember the name of it, but some of the more adult-oriented anime...that's been a little bizarre for me to do. It was one of those situations where you've worked for the company before, and it was, "Hey, we'd love you to come in," and I'm like, "Sure!" because it's fun. So I go walking in there, and they go, "Well, it's a little adult," and I'm looking at the script and...aha—women in the hot tub! [LAUGHS] That's why it's been a little strange, when you're simulating those kinds of acts. It's just you and a microphone, and you look out and the whole control room is falling over with laughter. That's when it gets a little weird. That's been the most bizarre. Everything else has been pretty much okay. I did play these psycho twins in *Ranma 1/2*, they were a little freaky. Their names were Ling-Ling and Lung-Lung, and they were like these little hyperactive girls from hell. And that little guy running around looking up everyone's dress.

Other than *Kung Fu* and the upcoming movie, is there any other live-action work you've done that our readers may have seen?

Well, let me see, I have guest-starred on a show called *Total Recall* which is a new show on Showtime. I've done *First Wave*, I did *Dead Man's Gun*, which is on Showtime, and I had a recurring role on a series called *FX: The Series*. I played the New York cop's wife on that. I've done *Millennium*, and *Stargate SG1* for Showtime, and I've done the *Oster Limits*. I'm really lucky that I'm at a place in my on-camera career where I just do guest-star parts or lead roles. It's a really lovely place to be.

So what's next for you? What's your next big project? I'm starting on a cartoon series next week with the prelay. The working title is "Nascar Super Chargers." I've started promoting my film, and I'm waiting to hear on a couple of projects. But I'm busier than not, that's for sure.

Do you have any closing message or words of advice for aspiring voice-actors who one day would like to play for a living?

Just do it. The only thing that will stop you from doing it is yourself. If you've got the drive and the desire and you want to try, it's as simple as putting one foot in front of the other, be it going to a theater school or checking out somebody you know who does it already and asking them to give you a hand. I really think it's just as simple as giving it a go, because the worst thing you can say is, "What would have happened if...?" ★

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