

## NATALIE PORTMAN

### Israeli-born actor

*An actor on stage and on film, Portman is best known for her role as Padmé Amidala in the Star Wars prequel trilogy (1999, 2002, 2005).*

**BORN:** June 9, 1981; Jerusalem, Israel

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Natalie Hershlag (birth name)

**AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Entertainment

#### EARLY LIFE

Natalie Portman (PORT-mihn) was born June 9, 1981. Her father, medical student Avner Hershlag, and mother, Shelley Stevens, met at the Jewish student center at Ohio State University during the 1970's. Shelley's ancestors had immigrated to the United States from Austria and Russia, and Avner's parents had immigrated to Israel from Poland after World War II. Avner's grandparents and several more of his relatives died during the Holocaust.

Avner and Shelley corresponded after he returned to Israel and were married when she visited him a few years later. Portman was born in Jerusalem in 1981, making her an Israeli citizen, and she was also an American citizen through her mother. In 1984, the Hershlags moved to

the United States, where Avner became a resident surgeon in obstetrics and gynecology at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Portman attended the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland, while they lived in the area. The family relocated to Connecticut in 1988 when Avner received a fellowship to do research on fertility and reproduction at Yale University. In 1990, the Hershlags settled permanently in Long Island, New York, when Avner accepted positions at North Shore University Hospital on Long Island and New York University School of Medicine.

Portman attended a Jewish elementary school, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Glen Cove, New York, after the move and took ballet lessons until she was thirteen. She graduated from the Syosset High School, a secular public school, in 1999. During the summers, Portman attended the Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts in Huntington, New York, and the Stage-door Manor Performing Arts Camp in the Catskills. In June, 2003, Portman graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Already bilingual in Hebrew and English, Portman has studied French, Japanese, German, and Arabic. In high school, she took all the science courses the school offered and was a semifinalist in the Intel Science Talent Search. In 2002, she cowrote a paper on memory in infants for a joint project between Harvard's medical school and its Laboratory for Infant Study.

#### LIFE'S WORK

Although Portman was a full-time student until 2003, she began acting professionally when she was only eleven. In 1992, she was chosen to understudy Britney Spears, who was playing the leading role in the Off-Broadway musical *Ruthless!* Portman's film career began when she was cast in the role of a child who befriends a middle-aged assassin, played by Jean Reno, in Luc Besson's 1994 film *The Professional*. Soon after getting the part, she adopted her maternal grandmother's maiden name, Portman, as her professional name. In 1994, she appeared in the short television film *Developing*.

Portman played minor roles in the films



Natalie Portman. (AFP/Getty Images)

*Heat* (1995), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and *Mars Attacks!* (1996) and a major role in *Beautiful Girls* (1996). She turned down the role of the title character in the 1997 remake of *Lolita*, because it was too similar to the characters she had played in *The Professional* and *Beautiful Girls*. From 1997 to 1998, Portman played the title character in a new adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* on Broadway. She turned down a costarring role opposite Susan Sarandon in the film *Anywhere but Here* (1999) after learning it would involve a sex scene. However, she accepted the part after Sarandon insisted that the script be rewritten deleting the scene.

In 1995, George Lucas cast Portman as Padmé Amidala in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy: *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). She played a unwed teenage mother who gives birth in a Wal-Mart in *Where the Heart Is* (2000). This was the first film in which she was the primary star. Portman appeared in New York City's Public Theater production of Anton Chekhov's *Chayka* (1896; *The Seagull*, 1909) in July, 2001. The cast included Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Portman made a cameo appearance in the film *Zoolander* (2001) and appeared briefly as a widow in the film *Cold Mountain* (2003).

Portman appeared in the independent films *Garden State* and *Closer* in 2004. The latter film featured her critically acclaimed role as Alice, an exotic dancer who becomes the mistress of a novelist (Jude Law). In the science fiction thriller *V for Vendetta* (2005), Portman played a young woman who is saved from the secret police by the main character, known only by the initial V. Portman worked with a voice coach to speak with an English accent and allowed her head to be shaved. Another film, *Free Zone*, also came out in 2005.

Director Miloš Forman cast her in *Goya's Ghosts* (2006); although he had not seen any of her film work, he thought she looked like a Francisco Goya painting. In 2007, Portman starred in the fantasy film *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium* and the road film *My Blueberry Nights*. Portman appeared in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, a historical drama in which she plays Anne Boleyn, the second wife of England's King Henry VIII, in 2008. In 2009, she starred opposite Tobey Maguire and Jake Gyllenhaal in the contemporary drama *Brothers*. In 2010, she appeared in *Black Swan*, in which she played a bal-

## QUEEN PADMÉ AMIDALA OF STAR WARS

After seeing Natalie Portman in *The Professional* (1994), director George Lucas decided to cast her as Padmé Amidala for the three new *Star Wars* films he was planning. He judged that she could grow with the role from a teenager to become the wife of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and mother of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa. Portman was one of the few members of her generation who had never seen the original *Star Wars* (1977), either on television or in rerelease in the theaters, so she did not know what to expect. She was sixteen during the filming of *The Phantom Menace* (1999), nineteen during *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and twenty-two when Lucas filmed *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Portman worked with a dialect coach to learn how to speak without a regional accent, and she studied the films of Lauren Bacall, Katharine Hepburn, and Audrey Hepburn to learn how to walk and talk with authority while remaining feminine. For the *Star Wars* films, the dialogue was rather simple, but the action was demanding physically, and Portman sprained her ankle during the filming of *The Phantom Menace*. Reviews were mixed, but the films were among the highest grossing of all time and have made Portman an extremely wealthy woman.

lerina and for which she won a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for Best Actress.

### SIGNIFICANCE

Portman starred in three of the six *Star Wars* films. By 2008, the series had grossed more than \$5.5 billion, making it the third most commercially successful film franchise in history, behind the *James Bond* and *Harry Potter* films. In addition to Portman being the model for an action figure, Portman's image has appeared on posters, cans of Diet Pepsi, boxes of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and other merchandise items. Because she is a vegetarian, the Kentucky Fried Chicken image was embarrassing for Portman, but her contract gave her no say over how her image could be used. Portman received a Golden Globe nomination for best supporting actress for her role in *Anywhere but Here*. Her performance in *Closer* earned her a supporting actress Golden Globe and a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

— Thomas R. Feller

### FURTHER READING

Dickerson, James L. *Natalie Portman: Queen of Hearts*.

Toronto: ECW Press, 2002. Biography of Portman written for young adults.

Hemphill, Meg. "Natalie Portman." *In Style* (November,