

at ease

Local girl stars in second film

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IT'S 8:30 A.M. AND GENNIE James has already been awake for three hours. Unlike other eight-year-olds on summer vacation, Gennie isn't watching morning cartoons.

Instead, an overworked production assistant shuttles Gennie away from her trailer and to a 1952 Plymouth station wagon — where she will spend the next hour shooting a half-minute scene.

A make-up specialist dashes to Gennie's side to re-position her hair. A technical assistant rushes over and squirts Gennie with bug spray to fend off insects. The director of the movie squats down next to Gennie and carefully coaches her on her next scene.

She happily takes all this frenzied activity in stride. After all, this is her second movie and she has starred in a Hallmark television special.

Gennie, freckle-faced and alert, speaks like a seasoned professional about her experiences from this movie and from her first movie role, as Possum Spalding in "Places in the Heart."

Gennie's newest venture is the role of Aylene Porter in the Martin Jurow production "Papa Was a Preacher."

The film is based on a book of the same name written by Aylene Porter and describes a year in the life of the Porter family. It is the true story of Aylene, her sister and six brothers in a Texas parsonage who move with their parents from Dallas to a church in a rural Texas town in 1952.

Jurow is a Harvard Law School graduate who has also produced "Terms of Endearment," "Breakfast at Tiffany's," "Waltz Across Texas" and "The Great Race."

Robert Pine, best remembered from his television role as the sergeant in "Chips," plays the part of "Papa" and Georgia Engel, known for her portrayal of Georgette on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," plays "Papa's" wife, Pearl.

Gennie has become so comfortable with her co-workers she claims filming the movie is like "having a great big party just for kids."

"I enjoy doing pictures," she says as she folds her hands and crosses her legs. "It's different every time I do a movie. People get really close — like a real family."

"My favorite part about this movie is all these nice people and the way they relate to each other. When you meet people who are going to be your brothers and sisters in a movie, six boys and one other girl, you start



(Above) Eight-year-old Gennie James from Navasota stars in the feature film "Papa Was A Preacher." (Below) Director Steve Feke instructs the set crew.



feeling like a real family.

"Everyone is so sweet, and they all make time to talk to you — even when they're really busy. I really missed them when I was away." She was confined to her home in Navasota for two weeks with hepatitis.

She runs over to the three oldest boys in the movie who are throwing a softball around and practicing their next scene.

Brandon Sokolsky, who plays Aylene's brother "Raybon," leans over and kisses Gennie on the cheek. Gennie smiles and motions to 6-year-old co-star, Joshua Butts, to come investigate the creek behind the church.

Although Gennie says she has grown extremely close to her new movie family in Dallas, she still places a high priority on being a good big sister to her younger brother in Navasota.

"Johnny just turned four and he doesn't know that I am away in Dallas on this business and not just away visiting someone," she says nonchalantly. "When I'm home, I make sure that my best friend, Nikki; and I include Johnny in whatever we do. I mean, he's just a kid and I can feel what he's feeling when we let him play with us."

Gennie also values spending time with her mom and dad in Navasota. Her mother, Sally, is using her vacation time away from her job, to accompany Gennie during the filming of the movie.

"I've spent a lot of time with my mom during this movie," she says, "but now I'm looking forward to spending time with my dad when we go on a tour of 10 cities across the country for my Hallmark TV special."

Gennie says it is because of her dad that she is in the movie business.

"He's the one that got me into this," she says with a giggle. "I know he's proud of me. We've been really good buddies — partners for eight years."

"My dad is now an Aggie — and he's proud of it," Gennie says as she tells what Texas A&M courses her father is taking as part of a continuing education program.

"I'm glad he's proud," she continues. "I'm glad when he goes somewhere, or when he's been studying, and he has new things to tell us."

She says the Hallmark special, called "Hug-A-Bunch," will air on television after October but, with a finger over her mouth, she says she cannot reveal anything else about the special because "it's a secret."

Gennie and red-headed Joshua are now sharing a bowl of grapes.

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