

But if the shoe fits...

A Hollywood movie career is burgeoning for her big sister and now it seems Laura Riseborough's star is ascendent. **Tamzin Lewis** meets her.

I suspect Laura Riseborough acquired straight As in the 'how to be graceful' class at drama college. She looks like such a polished princess that I'm not surprised she bagged the part of the elegant Ella in *The Glass Slipper*.

But she genuinely didn't expect to be wearing the tiara in the Cinderella story and despite her sister Andrea's success as a screen actor, Laura was preparing herself for a 'Best Supporting' career.

"I'm 5ft 11 and very pale. To look at I am not the typical leading lady," she says. "I've always played supporting characters so I wasn't expecting the lead. In the audition when I talked to the Northern Stage director Erica Whyman about *The Glass Slipper*, it sounded amazing and I thought how much I would love to do this show.

"But I assumed I was auditioning for another role – not Ella. And when I left the room I thought 'I have totally not got that job'. So it was a big surprise two days later when I got the phone call offering me the part of Ella."

Ella is the rags to riches character in a sumptuous musical production of *The Glass Slipper* with lashings of northern spirit and Geordie humour from the pen of playwright Stephen Sharkey. All the fairytale elements are there, but the setting is 18th Century Newcastle and Ella is a feisty, independent and hard-working sort who reminds Laura of Jane Austen's women.

"Ella is such an interesting character, a practical and down-to-earth North East girl," she says. "She is not a bubble-pink princess. Ella has a career as a singing teacher and has plans and dreams to travel that don't involve getting married. So when she meets the prince, she is not a damsel in distress who needs to be rescued.

"*The Glass Slipper* isn't just a girl-meets-boy story and it feels very Geordie. It's not patronising but it is still fun and Christmassy."

Laura, 25, has returned to the North East after four years studying drama in London at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and East 15 Acting School. "Drama school was good for me", she says. "I was given a lot of room to play and experiment and find out what works for me."

Since graduating in July she has appeared in the musical *Oh! What a Lovely War* and the gritty *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane at London's Arcola Theatre, before beginning rehearsals for *The Glass Slipper*.

Laura grew up in Whitley Bay with her sister



Sister Andrea, as waitress Rose, with Sam Riley, as gangster Pinkie, in *Brighton Rock*

Andrea and both girls attended Church High School in Newcastle. Teachers picked up on Laura's dyslexia when she was 11 and she has since learnt to 'manage' the condition.

"All you can do is develop strategies to deal with dyslexia," she says. "It can be stressful if you are going to an audition and have to sight-read something you have never seen before. But then sometimes the nerves take over and you get through it."

Early in childhood she and her sister were encouraged into a love of theatre by her mum and an appreciation of film by her dad. Laura says: "We naturally gravitated towards theatre, singing and dance. Andrea was a very talented dancer and she has a lovely voice. As she was doing drama, I wanted to do it as well.

"We both found a natural enthusiasm for it and our parents were supportive but not pushy. If I had said that I wanted to make forts out of cardboard boxes for my job they would have tried to help me!"

She adds: "We did singing lessons, dancing and drama when we were little and I was a youth member of The People's Theatre from the age of 12. When I left school I started doing proper adult theatre at the People's. That was great and I learnt so much there; it is a wonderful place."

Like most little girls, they lapped up Disney movies but were also taken to Royal Shakespeare Company productions in Newcastle. "My mum is very passionate about Shakespeare and seeing the plays performed

meant that I was never scared of approaching Shakespeare as an actor," Laura says.

"The theatre didn't feel removed or inaccessible. It's sad if people feel scared or intimidated of the theatre and I'm grateful to my mum for taking us as children."

Older sister Andrea is probably equally grateful as her career hits the big time with new release *W.E.* directed by Madonna in which she plays Wallis Simpson.

Andrea's previous credits include *Brighton Rock*, *Made in Dagenham* and *Never let Me Go*, following her BBC role as a young Margaret Thatcher. World War II drama *Resistance*, in which she stars alongside Michael Sheen, was recently released.

Laura says: "Andrea has got good taste in picking films and is genuinely the hardest-working person I know. She is doing well and I'm proud of her."

So what was their relationship like as siblings growing up in Tyneside? "There are four and a half years between us," Laura replies. "I did look up to her and also probably really annoyed her. I was either a brat or following her about trying to get involved with whatever she was doing. I must have been a nightmare!"

And now? "She might not be in the country but Andrea is very supportive, which makes things easier for me. She is lovely."

You see what I mean? What decorum.

* *The Glass Slipper* is at Northern Stage until January 7. The box office is 0191 230 5151 or visit www.northernstage.co.uk



Laura Riseborough as Ella Humbleton and Will Featherstone as Prince Hubert in Northern Stage's *The Glass Slipper*.