



DUFF STUFF

WORDS MATT MUELLER

PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN LINDQUIST

FASHION EDITOR LAUREN BLANE

JACKET BY MARGARET
HOWELL

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"OOOH, I'm going to read your questions!" Anne-Marie Duff threatens playfully when my digital recorder expires midway through our meeting and I am diverted by an attempt to retrieve techie reinforcements from my bag. In the event, Duff snubs the sheaf of paper and instead pours herself another cup of English Breakfast tea. One of her neighbours strolls by the Crouch End café window; Duff smiles and waves.

ANNE-MARIE DUFF is 38, prodigiously talented, droll, smart, by turns shy and self-assured, engaging, eager to please, quick to laugh, and – on her two-and-a-half-year marriage to Hollywood A-lister James McAvoy – a closed book. She's herself, basically. And, as obvious as that sounds, it comes as a shock to meet an actress who, rather than presenting an unchippable façade of gorgeous grooming and evasive soundbites, just allows herself to *be*.

Take Duff's appearance: she's dressed simply in a cornflower blue vest and white button-down blouse, floating-heart pendant around her neck, blonde hair casually parted down the middle with her darker roots – and a few strands of grey – on show. The effect is endearing dishevelment. She looks like she's just returned from a gruelling day at the office, which in a way she has, having arrived directly at the café from Ealing Studios.

You wouldn't be the least bit surprised if Duff informed you that she'd just spent the last eight hours on her knees scrubbing soundstage floors but, in reality, she's come from rehearsals for artist Sam Taylor-Wood's film *Nowhere Boy*, in which she'll play John Lennon's rebel mum Julia. "Young Aaron [Johnson], who's playing John, had his quiff cut today," discloses Duff, who's learning to play the banjo for the film and is suffering from tip-of-finger numbness as a result. "It's a proper 60s quiff. It's so cute – it suits him well. We're finally starting to visualise things after having months of research and staring at books and photographs. He's playing about 17 and I'm playing my age, which is nice. I don't think I've played my age ever..."

Quick CV scan – she's right. Duff had already passed thirty when she portrayed an adolescent rape victim banished to one of Ireland's notoriously sadistic "laundries" for fallen women in *The Magdalene Sisters*. She was 33 playing twenty as Fiona Gallagher in *Shameless*; 34 playing 25-70 as Elizabeth I in *The Virgin Queen*; and 36 playing 19 as Joan of Arc in the National Theatre's 2007 production of *Saint Joan* – one of those rare and rapturous performances that is branded forever into the brains of those lucky enough to have witnessed it.

Joan anointed Duff as one of the most compelling stage presences of her generation. She was then able to take her pick from the abundance of plum theatre roles that fell into her lap. Right? "You'd have thought that... but no, I didn't get more theatre," she smiles. "What's that saying? 'How do you make God laugh? Start making plans.' I do whatever I'm asked that I think is interesting, in any medium, but there's no real logic. I don't know why it happens the way it does. I try not to analyse it."

Hang on... Duff wasn't deluged with offers in the wake of her triumphant performance as *Saint Joan*? Even she still looks stunned. "No. No more theatre," she confirms. "So you just don't know. If you have an experience like *Joan* once every twenty years, you're laughing. But it's very odd, it's very random, the whole thing, and you just have to grab it when it comes."

I'M REELING off Duff's vital statistics to her – born in Chiswick in 1970 to Irish parents; grew up on a council estate near Southall ("Yeah, that's about right," she chirps) – when a young girl and her older sister sidle up to the table: "Excuse me, are you from *The Virgin Queen*?" Duff laughs warmly and leans towards them to chat. "Did you like it?" "Yeah," they answer shyly. "Ah, nice one! I looked a bit weird in it, mind you. That shaved hairline was a bit grim – I can't lie!"



TROUSERS BY ARMAND
BASI ONE, VEST BY
AMERICAN APPAREL

RIGHT
KNITTED TOP BY
MARGARET HOWELL,
TROUSERS AND SHOES BY
ARMAND BASI ONE



BLACK DRESS BY
ARMAND BASI ONE

HAIR
CHI AT JED ROOT FOR
TOMMY GUNS USING
L'OREAL

MAKE-UP
HIROMI UEDA AT JULIAN
WATSON AGENCY

PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANTS
DOMINIC HAWGOOD,
GUSTAV ALMESTAL

FASHION ASSISTANT
LARA KARAGULLE

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“Aww, so cute,” coos Duff as the girls walk off. Yes, and they’ve rendered my next question superfluous: get recognised much? Duff snickers: “Yeah, see ya later ladies,” miming the act of slipping them a wad of cash. “Sweet. That’s what you like.”

WHEN DUFF WAS “very wee”, Roald Dahl visited her school and she decided she wanted to be a writer. But, concerned at their youngest child’s introverted, bookworm nature, her parents coaxed her into joining a local youth theatre group at 11. “I just had that thing where I didn’t feel comfortable at school, I always felt slightly odd,” she remembers. “You don’t feel like other kids – you don’t really care about getting a job that pays well and listening to Whitney Houston. So it became a haven, this whole other world. I found this whole language that I found I could speak. And I loved it.”

After failing on her first attempt to get into drama school and spending a year being “London’s worst waitress”, Duff attended the “very tough, very strict” Drama Centre with contemporaries like Paul Bettany and John Simm. She emerged after three years with “eyes opened and mind expanded” but still dubious about her own talents. “I certainly wasn’t the star of the year, I didn’t have any of that,” she muses. “I didn’t leave thinking, ‘Hang on world, here I come.’” Instead, she did it the old-fashioned way, toiling in repertory theatre, playing scads of ingenues (“all I used to do was cry and then die”) and slowly trading up to high-profile productions at the National (*War and Peace*, *King Lear*), before telly and film beckoned.

“I couldn’t do what [*Nowhere Boy* co-star] Aaron’s doing,” Duff insists. “If I’d had half his level of success at that age, I’d be fucked. I wasn’t strong enough. I didn’t have the strength of mind. Some people just don’t. I think things happen to you when they’re meant to... I needed to learn to keep things in perspective, to be polite, to be a negotiator. I hadn’t learnt to think yet – I was all about the feelings for a long time.”

DUFF DOESN’T FEEL like she’s ever had a “tipping point”, although Elizabeth I and Fiona in the first (and best) two series of *Shameless* put an intense media gaze on her. She initially turned down *Shameless* because of Fiona’s age and Manchester origins (outside her comfort zone), before realising she couldn’t and shouldn’t pass it up. “Those compass-point characters in TV are hard to come by,” she vouches. “But I haven’t done one since then for no reason other than perhaps I haven’t got one that turned me on.”

Instead of TV and theatre, she’s been gulping down film roles like sweeties in the last couple of years: *Notes on a Scandal*, *Garage*, *The Waiting Room*, *Nowhere Boy*, and this month’s *Is Anybody There?*, a chamber drama in which Duff and David Morrissey open an old people’s home, to the horror of their young son. It’s set in the 1980s, which, to the actress’s own horror, makes it a period piece.

“It’s so odd to think that,” she ponders. “I have these moments where I’ll be in the car listening to The Cure or something and I’ll go, ‘Oh my god! When I was first listening to this, it was twenty years since *Sgt. Pepper*. Now I’m listening to this twenty years later!’ It’s weird seeing the 80s as a piece of history. I don’t know about you but I still think I’m 22! I’m still new!”

Despite the raft of recent film roles, Duff insists she’s actually getting more selective as time passes. “When you’re starting out, you should just do anything. Nobody knows you, it doesn’t matter, you can live and learn,” she says. “But then you have to become more careful. You become more fussy. It’s like love; you’ll f– anybody when you’re starting out and then you’ll suddenly go, ‘I’m tired of this...’ You get more selective.”

LAST YEAR WAS an eventful one for Anne-Marie Duff. She attended the Academy Awards on the arm of Mr Duff, James McAvoy. She embarked

on a six-month sabbatical to spend time with “the people I love and never get to see”, driving all over Britain in her tiny car. And she jetted to Germany to play Leo Tolstoy’s daughter in *The Last Station*, opposite Helen Mirren and McAvoy. When I ask if the couple have any scenes together, Duff nods perfunctorily, then clears her throat – it’s the first moment of tension, and a wordless signal to move on. But it would be remiss to not fire off at least one potshot at the elephant in the room, so I ask why the twosome, who met on *Shameless* and married in 2006, maintain an unwavering policy of never discussing each other in print.

Hilariously, at that precise moment, a helmeted man whizzes by on a Vespa and Duff beams, waving as he passes. Yes, it’s McAvoy, pootling into the West End, where he’s starring in a revival of *Three Days of Rain* at the Apollo. Duff looks almost relieved: “You can’t put that in!” she hoots. (Sorry Anne-Marie...)

“Look, it wasn’t a conscious decision; nobody sat down and had a definitive conversation,” she sighs. “I just got really bored about people vomiting information about themselves everywhere and I’ve always been pretty old-fashioned and thought that it’s not terribly interesting to anybody else. But also it diminishes what you have and I’m very protective of it and it’s as simple as that. There’s no theory behind it other than keeping it mine.

“Somebody said to me the other day, ‘Yes, but what about the opportunity for empathy?’” she carries on. “And I thought, ‘But that’s not what the current nature of print seems to be about. It’s a culture of ridicule rather than understanding.’ I mean when you’ve got a situation where, on Facebook, you can join a club that says, ‘We Can’t Wait For Jade Goody To Die’... It frightens me and so I protect myself. Everyone has coping mechanisms with all the crap and that happens to be ours.”

But, all wariness aside, the fact that you’ve made a film together – and appear in scenes together – is not exactly going to ward off personal-life probing, I counter. “He’s a brilliant, brilliant actor and I love working with him,” she blurts. “But you can say that and then the whole interview becomes about being Mrs McAvoy. Which I’m very proud to be, but that’s not what I do for a living.” She stops herself, looking vaguely twitchy. Time to lighten the mood. So how does Duff unwind at the end of a long day, or rid herself of excess nervous energy?

Well, definitely *not* by waltzing down red carpets or turning up at any event with belligerent men with flashbulbs outside – “I avoid workie things like the plague” – although even she admits that the Oscars was an experience not to be missed: “It was hilariously good fun. Mother of God – that whole evening. I felt like I’d taken some strange drug. Every single angle... I couldn’t turn my head anywhere without there being somebody *more* famous... ‘Oh my god, it’s Harrison Ford!’ ‘Steven Spielberg ohmigod!’ I started to get very, very giggly because it just felt absurd. [*Laughs*] And them all taking themselves really seriously! None of them knew who I was so I was just having a good old time! I can remember thinking, ‘If I only do this once in my life, I’ve done it.’ It was good to just put the goggles on for a day, see what it’s like.”

In fact, Duff is happiest on an outdoor jaunt – hiking, camping, hill-climbing, “tramping – that’s what the Australians call it. I’m a bit of a trumper!” Or, she claims, when she’s in the kitchen with an apron, a sack of flour and a rolling pin or cake tin, popping things into the oven... “I’m one of those strange women who, if they feel a bit uptight, bakes a cake.” Duff creases up with laughter, instantly warming to her floured-and-aproned self-portrait. “I bake cakes all the time! I realised it about myself when I suddenly thought, ‘Surely nobody can eat this many cookies, nobody can eat another lemon drizzle cake.’ I’m like some crazy woman... I *will* become that actress who comes to rehearsal in a kaftan with a plate of flapjacks. I won’t be scary like Dame Diana Rigg, I’ll be smelling a bit too much of perfume and offering everyone a flapjack. Oh god, the scary inevitability of it all...”

IS ANYBODY THERE? IS RELEASED ON APRIL 17