

Everywhere Girl

A self-confessed bookworm-turned-butterfly, Anne-Marie Duff is known for punching above her weight. As a put-upon daughter in *Shameless*, Joan of Arc, John Lennon's mum in the upcoming *Nowhere Boy* and a drudge in the new *Is Anybody There?*, she also has a range that knows no bounds. **By Matt Mueller**

Although we're meeting in her favourite Crouch End café, only a 10-minute walk from her north London flat, Anne-Marie Duff strolls through the entrance and immediately apologises for being late, offering an excuse that's a cut above 'My meter was being read' or 'The dog ate my house keys'. Duff has come direct from Ealing Studios, where she's deep in rehearsals for artist Sam Taylor-Wood's directorial debut, *Nowhere Boy*, about the turbulent teenage years of John Lennon before his rise to sonic superstardom.

It's been a tiring day at the office, but Duff cheerfully shrugs off any fatigue she's feeling. Dressed casually in blue vest, white open-necked shirt and jeans, with her ash-blonde hair loosely tied back, the 38-year-old actress is clearly no slave to fashion. But from her film debut in *The Magdalene Sisters* to her starring role in the National Theatre's acclaimed 2007 production of *Saint Joan*, Duff has always valued her craft above the glamour-fringed trappings of the profession.

As the waitress takes our order ("Just some breakfast tea. Thanks, love"), Duff gushes about *Nowhere Boy*, in which she'll play Lennon's reckless mother, Julia, opposite newcomer Aaron Johnson as the young Beatle-to-be and Kristin Scott Thomas as the aunt who was eventually granted custody. "It's a tragedy by our standards," Duff says. "Julia had stuff going on, but not enough to warrant what happened." Duff grumbles that she can't feel the tips of her fingers from the hours spent in banjo lessons for the film, but she can't wait to get stuck in, declaring, "Everyone around us is so austere, but Aaron and I get to be absolute rebels."

Nowhere Boy is the latest in a spurt of film work for the Hayes-born actress, whose most notable roles to date have come in television: as Fiona Gallagher in *Shameless* and Elizabeth I in *The Virgin Queen*, as well as on stage. Two years on, Duff's dynamic performance as Joan of Arc in *Saint Joan* still percolates in the minds of those who were lucky enough to see it. Since then, she's squeezed in six films, including *Notes on a Scandal* and the upcoming *The Last Station*, in which she plays Leo Tolstoy's daughter opposite Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren.

"You can't have a plan," muses Duff. "I do whatever I'm asked that I think is interesting, in any medium. There's no real logic to any of it. I got asked to play Elizabeth I because of Fiona in *Shameless*. It was like, who made that leap? Don't get me wrong – I'm terribly grateful. You just have to grab it when it comes."

Duff was born to working-class Irish parents, grew up on a council estate near Southall and failed on her first attempt to get into drama school. Eventually, she gained a place at London's Drama Centre, where her contemporaries included John Simm and Paul Bettany. Acting was initially a hobby encouraged by Duff's parents to help her overcome her adolescent timidity ("I was such a bookworm"), but it quickly became her life's passion. However, she grafted for years in repertory theatre, playing scads of ingénues who 'cried then died', before appearances in *War and Peace* and *King Lear* at the National finally put her on the map.

"I had an old-fashioned trajectory, and I'm glad. I needed to develop coping mechanisms," admits Duff, whose directors have been impressed – and a bit alarmed

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Chris Floyd/Contour by Getty Images





Clockwise from top left In *Is Anybody There?* Duff plays the mother of Edward (Bill Wilner, left), and the owner of an old people's home; Duff in 2007 as Joan of Arc in *Saint Joan* at London's Olivier Theatre; with husband James McAvoy – with whom she starred in *Shameless* – at the 2008 Variety Club Showbiz Awards at London's Grosvenor Hotel

– at how intensely she hurls herself into a role. “I’m not very good at taking care of myself. I get a lot of stick for this at home, but when I was doing *Saint Joan*, I was the happiest I’ve ever been creatively. But I was underweight, and I had scars from those bloody swords – look at my hands! I look like a scrapper, I’ve got so many scars!” Duff shows me little white lines on her hands. “But I think it’s more interesting when people take big risks with things.”

After nearly 20 years in her profession, Duff is better now at handling gaps between jobs. Last year, she even took a six-month sabbatical, hanging out with friends and family and embarking on road trips around Britain. “I drove up the west coast of Scotland in my little car. What was I thinking? But it was brilliant. Then down to Cornwall, here, there and everywhere. I’m an absolute work junkie, so it took me a long time to calm down.”

Her latest film, *Is Anybody There?*, is an amiable British chamber piece set in the 1980s about a boy growing up in an old people’s home run by his parents. Duff portrays the lad’s put-upon mother, who performs all the drudge work while her husband (David Morrissey) endures a midlife crisis, although she’s pleased she escaped the worst of the ‘80s looks. “David had so many terrible costumes,” chuckles Duff. “He embraced it! I laughed all day every day.” The film also features a convoy of British acting legends, including Leslie Phillips, Sylvia Syms and Michael Caine, which meant that the anecdotes were flowing on set. “You’d walk into a room and you’d hear somebody finishing a story: ‘And then, Kenneth Williams said to me...’ And Michael was lovely, very cool. I really did have a thing for him in *The Ipcress File*, so I was so excited to meet him. How often do you get to meet legends?”

While Duff still gets star-struck by her fellow actors, glamping up to run the red-carpet gauntlet is an occasional necessity of the actor’s life; and though she says she “avoids workie things like the plague”, some opportunities are too good to miss. When her husband, actor James McAvoy, was invited to last year’s Academy Awards as the

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star of 2007’s *Atonement*, Duff joined him out in L.A. for the annual awards-season jamboree for a couple of weeks and enjoyed every second of it.

“It was hilariously good fun to go to the Oscars,” she laughs. “I felt like I’d taken some strange drug. I couldn’t turn my head without there being somebody *more* famous: ‘Oh my God, Harrison Ford! Steven Spielberg!’ I got very giggly, because it just felt absurd. And none of them knew who I was, so I was just having a good old time! It was great to put the goggles on for a day.”

In her downtime, Duff loves to hike, hill-walk and camp with McAvoy. The couple (who met on the set of *Shameless* and married in 2006) maintains a strict rule about not discussing their relationship. They’ve lived in Crouch End, which Duff loves for its “old villagey atmosphere”, for the past three years. But although the neighbourhood has an abundance of actors and musicians (and thus attendant paparazzi), Duff says they don’t get much hassle: “I’m much too boring and scruffy to be papped. That’s the secret: bore them rigid.” ■

***Is Anybody There?* opens 1st May in the UK; *The Last Station* will be released in spring 2009.**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Premiere, Grazia, The Guardian and Wonderland