

RISING UP

WONDERLAND TALKS TO THREE UNIQUELY TALENTED BRITISH ACTRESSES

ALL AT DIFFERENT YET CRITICAL STAGES IN THEIR INDIVIDUAL CAREERS.

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ROMOLA GARAI

Romola Garai has barely settled into her seat and she's already giddily chatting 15 to the dozen. This, you quickly learn, is the 27-year-old actress's default mode: engaging, articulate, honest and forthright (about most things) – a born motor-mouth. I tell her that when I scanned the 'Personal Quotes' section on her IMDB page, she had 36 listed, out-stripping most other actors on the site by a hefty margin – even an oft-interviewed superstar like Tom Cruise (only 24). She hasn't been on there padding out her own page, has she? "Noo!" she shrieks in mock horror. "It's because I never know when to shut up..."

At the Soho Hotel, where we convene for afternoon tea, Garai orders Earl Grey and scones – and expresses shock when I tell her I don't like them. "Who doesn't like a scone?" she scolds, laughing. "It doesn't taste of anything – you just put cream on it!" Just one of those things, I explain, perhaps from not growing up in the UK. "Ah. For you, it's like, 'What is this hard bread you eat?'" She chuckles, and when the waiter returns, asks for tap rather than bottled water. Not the type to waste her loot on bottled water, then? "Not when you can spend £9 on a scone!" she cackles.

Having just come from a meeting with a director, she's dressed in what a glossy party invite would call 'smart casual' – cream-coloured silk top, short, dark pleated skirt, her hair hanging loose and next-to-no make-up on. I congratulate Garai on

her tremendous, heart-on-sleeve performance in *Glorious 39*, Stephen Poliakoff's WW2 thriller in which she plays the eldest, adopted daughter of an aristocratic English clan who go haywire when she tries to unravel a strange mystery. "Thank you! It's always a scary thing, so that means a lot," she says. "Stephen really fought for me to be cast so I owe him a lot. I don't bring any financial weight with me." Not even after *Atonement*, with its starry cast and multiple awards?

"I feel like a lot of the time, people really support casting me and then it doesn't deliver." She laughs ruefully. "I s'pose it's a difficult thing to fight that fight for a director. And nine times out of ten, they don't. There's no moral criticism of that. People have to get the money how and when they can. Sometimes they can afford to cast a relative unknown, but most of the time they can't."

It surprises me to hear Garai lumping herself in the unknown category, but scanning her CV I realise that, where the average filmgoer is concerned, she's probably right. While she's worked steadily since landing a heartwrenching punch in her breakout film, *I Capture The Castle*, it's been mostly small supporting parts (*Vanity Fair*, *Scoop*) or low-profile Brit indies (*Inside I'm Dancing*, *Amazing Grace*). Her sole leading role between *Castle* and *Glorious* was Francois Ozon's melodramatic campfest *Angel*, which barely escaped the film festival circuit. Still, I've always found her a dynamic talent in the ranks of British actresses, and wonder why she thinks she hasn't broken through like a Knightley or a Blunt?

"I have a strong style," she reasons. "You either like what I do or you don't, and that's fine. You mentioned *Atonement* and I think that did

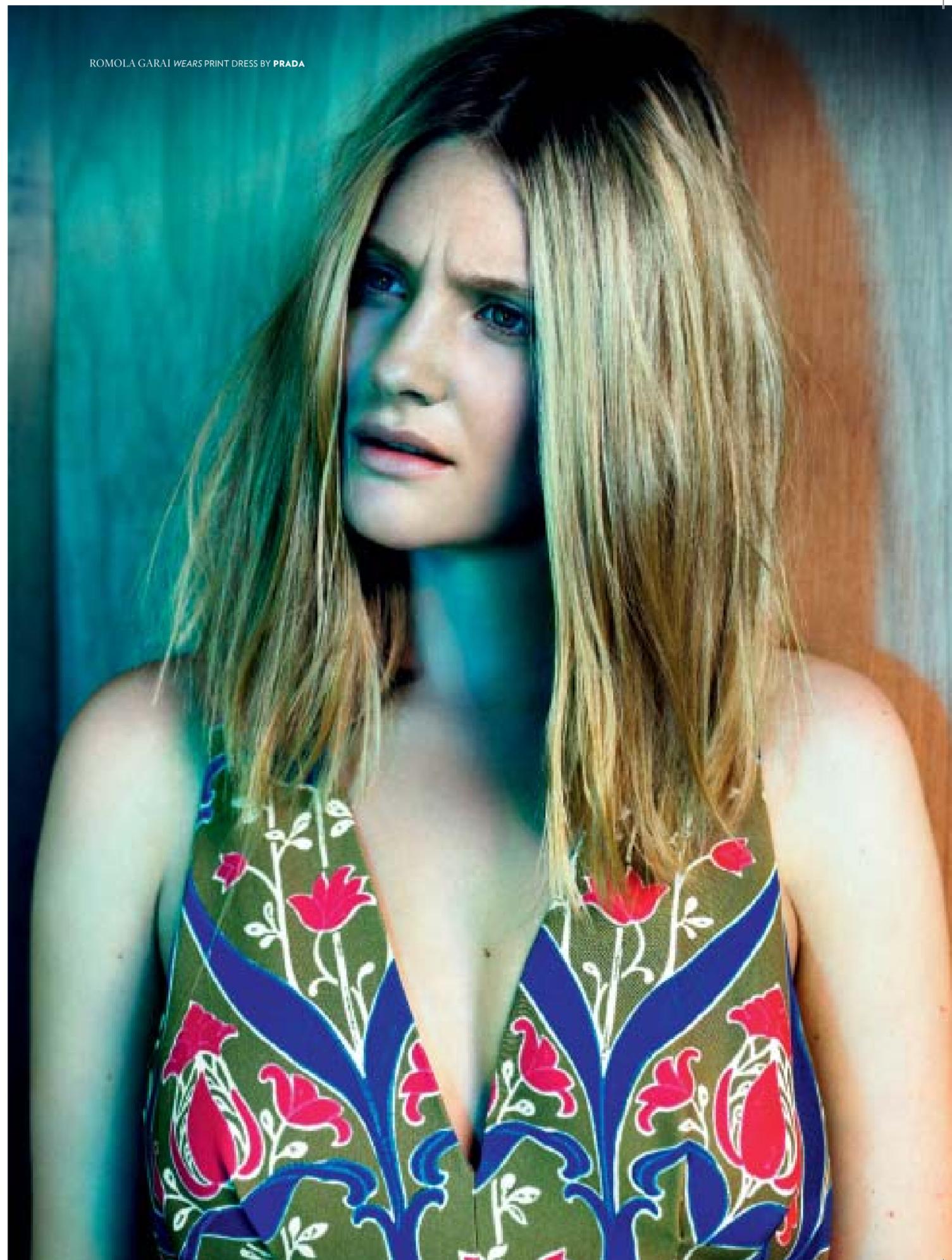
help my career, actually. I never heard anyone say, 'I loathed it'. Whereas with most of the other stuff I've done, people either liked it or they didn't."

Fortunate for Garai, then, that she continues to find impassioned supporters of her talents: Poliakoff with *Glorious 39*, Ozon with *Angel* and Wright with *Atonement*. In fact, Garai nearly landed the role of Elizabeth Bennett that went to Knightley in Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, so was delighted when he offered her 'middle' Briony in *Atonement*, enduring the horrors of World War 1 as a penitent nurse after Saoirse Ronan's 11-year-old version has wreaked family havoc (Garai also got to play a Jane Austen lead too, in the recent BBC version of *Emma*).

When it comes to enhancing her profile, however, Garai shows no compunction to move to LA, or ask her agent to find throwaway parts in big-budget projects just to get her name rolling off Hollywood lips (which, for the record, is pronounced Rom-ala Gar-ee). "I had an interesting experience with all of this because I did go to America and I did do a Hollywood film and it was a disaster," she laughs.

That career skid-mark was *Dirty Dancing 2: Havana Nights*, in which she plays an American princess hot-stepping it with Diego Luna. She's right – it's a disaster. But, as hideous as the experience turned out, it was her only attempt to crack the worldwide market. "I tend to be a one-shot kind of person," she admits. "And the funny thing is, I was desperate to do it! I wish I could say I was going, 'No way,' but I was like, 'I love *Dirty Dancing!*' This is my problem – for all my very serious work, I'm an absolute lover of cotton-candy kitsch. But I had such a terrible time and my confidence

ROMOLA GARAI WEARS PRINT DRESS BY PRADA





ROMOLA GARAI WEARS VINTAGE ONE PIECE BATHING SUIT FROM SHEILA COOK, CASHMERE CARDIGAN BY JOHN SMEDELY

took a real knock – because I was bad. So I’ve never been tempted to do that again. Although I’m sure as I get closer to 30, I might have to prepare myself for round two.”

Does she see 30 as her gauntlet, then? “You have to be realistic about the opportunities that you get diminishing over time,” she states. “It’s a perennial bugbear of actresses, that their sexual availability seems to diminish over time whereas men’s just carries on... but that’s a reflection of the world we live in. I don’t see the point in moaning about life.”

“ I HAVE A STRONG STYLE. You either like it or you don’t, AND THAT’S FINE ”

ROMOLA GARAI

Garai’s pragmatic streak – she’s ambitious but seems accepting of what life throws at her – probably comes from her family’s abrupt change in fortunes early in her life. Up until six, she lived a luxurious ex-pat lifestyle in Hong Kong and Singapore. “It was nice, you know? It was hot and we had a nice house and a pool. And then that changed and it’s never really come back.” In 1989, her father lost his high-powered banking job and moved the Garais back to Wiltshire. “We still had a nice life – I’m not complaining – but it was different.”

As Garai observes, a lot of actors moved around frequently as kids – it’s what gives them that ability to be behavioural sponges. Is that where her own performing bug came from? “It was more like a performing virus,” she corrects. “You

can’t help it, it shapes your character. Your identity becomes quite amorphous; you’re not necessarily good at knowing how you feel or who you are in any given situation because you’re trying to give other people what they want.” Still, at 16, she was self-possessed enough to make the decision to move to London and live with her older sister, finishing her A-levels at the City of London School for Girls, before landing an agent, a few telly jobs and a career.

“I know actresses who just fundamentally hate what they do and every day is a struggle for them,” muses Gari. “If they could think of something else to do, they would. Whereas I actually like my job. I read between takes. I always bring books with me. I make sure I don’t just sit around and contemplate my own navel, because that’s bad for your mental state.” “But,” she adds, “I’ve become more nervous as I’ve got older, because you have more to lose. And you realise that you have the capacity to both be good and bad. When you’re older, you know it can go either way.”

If *Glorious 39* gets some wind behind its sails, Garai’s hypnotic performance could garner awards chatter. Poliakoff’s first film in 10 years endured the usual tribulations of a low-budget shoot, like shooting a summer picnic scene in November. “It was so fucking, freezing cold!” she recalls, shivering at the memory. She got further chill-bumps from one of its key themes – the number of Brits who didn’t want to fight the Nazis. “My family were Hungarian Jewish who emigrated,” she says. “And for that generation, Britain was the great single white knight of Europe. That was the mythology that I have been brought up with so I never knew that so many people didn’t think the war was worth fighting. And it wasn’t even motivated by political idealism; it was just selfishness.”

As open and chatty as Garai is, there are definitely areas she keeps closed off from public viewing. For instance, her character in *Glorious 39* is adopted, but when I ask Garai about her own, real-life adopted siblings – an older brother and sister – she’s quite terse. Ditto about whether she’s seeing anyone (“I’d rather not say”), her family in general and her personal life beyond the fact that she likes cooking and just completed her Open University degree in English.

But you can’t begrudge her erecting a few barriers when she subsequently refers to herself as “Greedy Garai” while scoffing that scone,

while confessing to a penchant for older men. “If somebody’s 20 years older than me and emotionally troubled, I’m instantly attracted to them. It’s my trademark,” she snorts.

Besides that degree, Garai hasn’t worked since finishing *Emma and Glorious 39* and has nothing lined up. “I’ve had a few meetings so hopefully something will come up,” she says. “I’m always amazed by people who talk about their careers in a strategic way because I just do not have a strategy. I just get the jobs I get. I try to be selective in that I won’t audition for certain things but that’s a pathetic amount of control.” Like what? “I don’t wanna be walking around in a bikini in the back of somebody’s shot.” And does Garai get asked to go up for bikini roles much? “No...” she says, breaking out into a grin. “I’m saying I wouldn’t do it but nobody’s asked me yet!”

GLORIOUS 39 IS OUT NOVEMBER 20

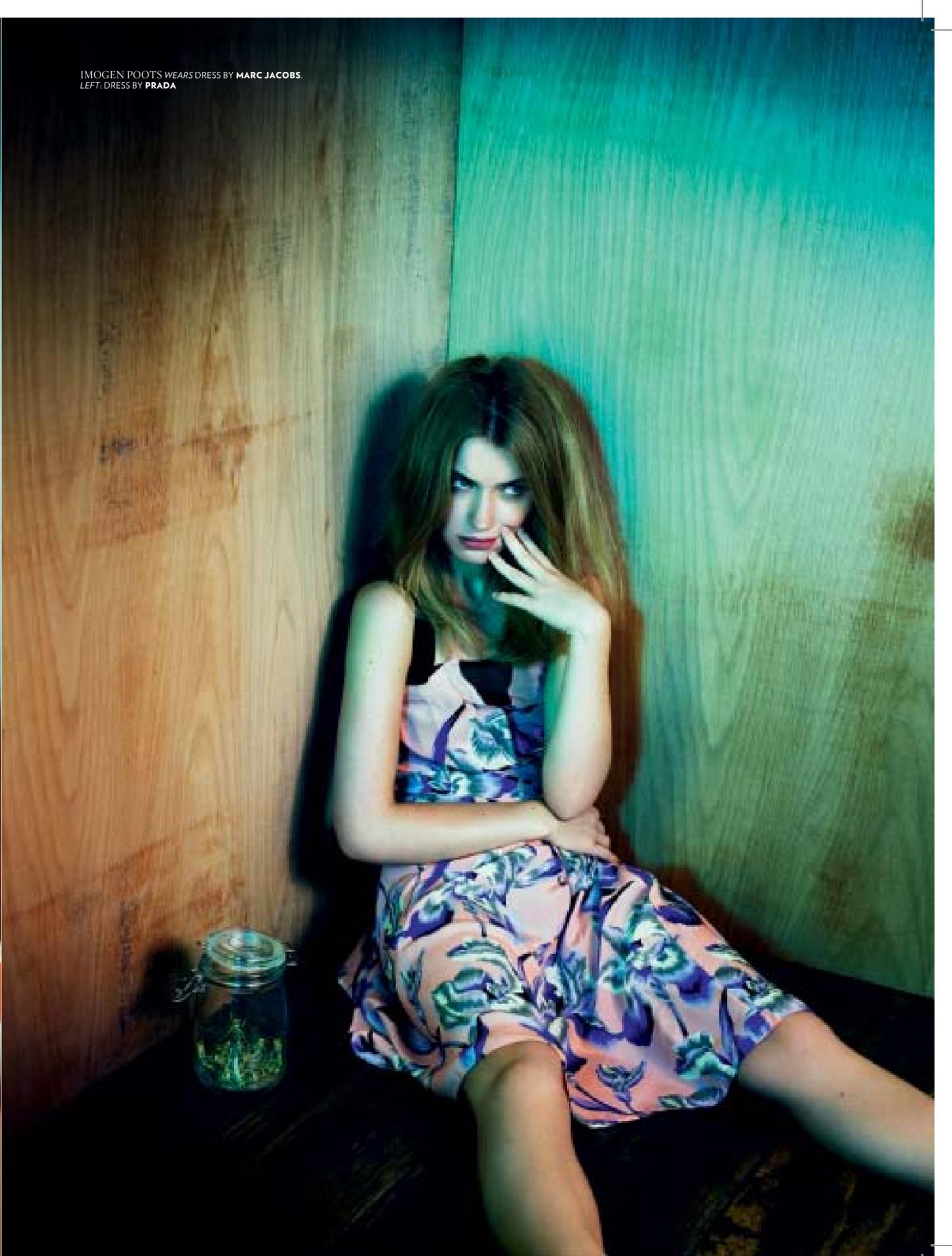
IMOGEN POOTS

According to Imogen Poots, her life is “insane” at the moment. Not because she’s dating some sculpted paparazzi magnet or she just won the EuroMillions, but because she’s about to fly the family coop. Having lived at home from birth in her parents’ riverside Chiswick house (“very nice,” she coos in a mock-snobby voice), she’s finally cutting loose and moving into a mate’s house in Acton. In fact, she was packing up CDs and books into boxes before dashing off to meet *WONDERLAND* in a Chiswick brasserie.

“I’m renting a loo and a bedroom in his house so it’s pretty fun times,” she says happily. “It’s weird because it’s just so much to sort out and forgetting to tell everyone your change of address and buying bed linen.” Poots tosses her hands up in excitement. “It’s strange. It’s good. It’s all groovy.” It’s not just domestically that Poots is having an eventful year. With five films coming out soon, the just-turned-20 actress is building on the compelling foundations she laid in her breakout role, as Robert Carlyle’s daughter in Brit-zombie thriller *28 Weeks Later*. “You never know when you’re going to be suddenly sitting on your bum with a book,” she



IMOGEN POOTS WEARS DRESS BY MARC JACOBS.
LEFT: DRESS BY PRADA



LYDIA WILSON WEARS TWO PIECE BY MARC JACOBS.
BUG FROM LONDON TAXIDERMV

laughs. "But it's good at the moment. Bits and bobs going around."

Poots is being modest. Those "bits and bobs" include playing Michael Douglas's prickly stepdaughter in *Solitary Man* and "complete fantasist" Poppy in the sinister 1930s boarding-school drama *Cracks* ("Dodgy title! Everyone's like, 'Done a story about cocaine?'"). She's also wrapped roles in supernatural thriller *Waking Madison*, Roman-in-Scotland adventure *Centurion* and Japanese director Hideo Nakata's cyberspace psycho-drama *Chatroom*, which she shot over the summer with fellow It-kid Aaron Johnson. *Solitary Man* and *Cracks* have already yielded Poots the most gushing reviews of her budding career, earning comparisons to Kate Winslet no less.

"Don't believe it," Poots blushes when I mention it. "It's very flattering." I read her the *Solitary Man* review in industry trade bible *Variety*: "Poots, who resembles both Kate Winslet and Scarlett Johansson, is a knockout in every sense." "Pretty damn good, isn't it?" she smiles, genuinely pleased. "At least it's not 'handsome' something. I don't look like a man, so that's all good!"

In her mid-teens, Poots used to take herself off to Hammersmith every Saturday to hang out in the improvisational youth theatre group *YoungBlood* (Carey Mulligan and Noel Clarke were members too), although not out of any burning desire to be an actress. "It was just somewhere you could go on Saturday and mix up the backgrounds because obviously Chiswick can be too middle-class at times and Hammersmith could really mix it up. It attracted lots of different kinds of kids. A lot of it was quite 'street' but it really gave you a way to feel confident inside because you were standing up in front of a group of 30 or 40 other kids and they could all be going 'Boo!'. You just don't know what's going to happen. It certainly boosted my self esteem."

Signed to a small agency, Poots landed her first film role at 15 when she was cast in *V For Vendetta*, shooting her scenes over one weekend in Berlin while in the middle of her GCSEs. That was followed 18 months later by the aforementioned zombie sequel, which wasn't as successful as its predecessor but allowed Poots (and her hypnotic eyes) to stand out amidst all the undead bloodletting.

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IMOGEN POOTS

spective on things changed," she reveals, "because you realise there's a life outside of school; there's an education outside of school. The director, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, has always been a very special person to me because he took a chance on some unknown ragamuffin."

Coming from an academic clan ("I'm definitely the idiot in my family"), the self-described "geek" decided to give acting a shot full time. But she's also hedged her bets; she has a place on hold at the Courtauld Institute of Art, where she intends to do a history of art degree "at some point". Turning 20 in June was "a tragedy" she insists, in a way that looks like she genuinely believes it. Indeed, rather than throwing a massive party and inviting all her friends, she vanished on holiday with her mum to Tunisia. "When you're young you think 20 is so old and then you hit it and you're still completely immature and ignorant."

Next spring, Poots hopes to be playing Cordelia in *Gordy* (brother of Philip Seymour Hoffman's dramatisation of the life of King Lear's sweetest daughter. But, she admits, it's hard to prize the best roles from her rivals. "You get your heart broken at least four times a month! But I've been very lucky in terms of having roles that are strong women; they're not objects, which can often be the case, especially in these high school films

where it's some 'chick'. Like, great, I don't have tits or a bum so that's a failure."

Still, Poots is being groomed for success, not failure, by CAA, the major Hollywood agency that's signed her; she now makes frequent sojourns to LA, often staying with her friend Juno Temple. "It's awesome that Juno lives out there now!" says Poots, who doesn't drive and isn't yet of legal drinking age in America. "I got chucked out of *The Troubadour* for being under 21. But I got back in again! I have fun out there but I don't want to live there. I'd live in Majorca at the drop of a hat but Los Angeles just seems too sterile."

With the actress still "striving to be intellectual", it's not surprising she hasn't connected to the city where a great boob job is more prized than big brainpower. When I ask her to reveal what she really loves about acting, her smart reply goes some way towards demonstrating that the head on her shoulders is going to keep Poots balanced wherever her journey takes her.

"I think there's a point where you can overanalyse acting because you're not saving anyone's life," she ponders. "People get too caught up in it and it can all get a bit bullshit. But what fascinates me is seeing the world through as many different eyes as possible. There's a beautiful line Oscar Wilde uses in *Dorian Gray* when he speaks about the actress Sybil. She lets people borrow things, she lends them tears for sorrow that's not their own. That's a beautiful idea. I've always thought of lending people feelings or emotions that they haven't actually experienced."

CRACKS IS OUT DECEMBER 4

LYDIA WILSON

Never heard of Lydia Wilson? You have now. Newly emerged from a three-year RADA cocoon, Wilson was a star pupil in her year, tipped for great things by her tutors. She only graduated in July and she's already starring in a major National Theatre production and making her film debut in Keira Knightley's next project, *Never Let Me Go*. Currently, she's midway through intensive

rehearsals for her National gig, Austrian playwright Ferdinand Bruckner's erotic but desolate 1920s play *Pains of Youth*. When we meet outside the stage door, Wilson says it was hard to tear herself away from her fellow actors, who have apparently bonded into an inseparable clique. "It was like I was being ripped from the unit," she laughs. "They were like, 'Where are you going?'"

Judging by how quickly she's erupted out of the drama-school gate, we reckon she's going the distance. As we settle into the NFT bar, Wilson chatters breathlessly about working with acclaimed theatre goddess Katie Mitchell on *Pains of Youth*, which follows six fucked-up, promiscuous Austrian medical students who set about destroying each other in post-World War One Vienna. "It's been a nice, smooth transition," she admits. "But at the same time, I'm pinching myself. I was brought up in London so coming here is like being in the high church of theatre."

Raised in Queen's Park by her advertising exec father and American mum (an ex-model turned philosophy teacher), Wilson grew up part of a tight-knit neighbourhood posse that numbered anywhere between five and 50. "This group's been through a lot and I feel very loyal towards it. But I've also felt a bit of tension in having this kind of ambition," she says. "It's been so slow-burning in a way. I had to study hard for my A-levels when everyone else was down at the pub. I used to sneak down in my pyjamas and then come back home to write an essay. I've kind of been incubating for a long time and I often feel disloyal to the Queen's Park scene. But they've never rejected me."

Now 25, Wilson decided she wanted to be an actress at the age of five. "I still wonder why – and it lay dormant for a long time because I was a quiet kid." Adolescence brought with it a plague of insecurity and turmoil. "That was a sad time," she sighs. "My school uniform [at Henrietta Barnett] was blue and I just remember feeling blue – for five years." This led to her off-the-rails period, when she traipsed across north London with her mates drinking, smoking, spraying graffiti and "provoking people". "We were so lairy. I looked like a boy and wasn't that loud but I had some gobby mates. When I look back on it now, I cringe."

The catalyst to leave the shit-stirring be-

“ THAT WAS THE BEST SUMMER. I'd just broken up with my first love and I lived with rock stars for a month! ”

LYDIA WILSON

hind was a change of scenery (new school) and that bubbling ambition of hers, which led to art school and Cambridge University before she ever dared to contemplate drama school. "I needed coaxing out," she says. "I needed permission to call myself an actor and to not sabotage myself every step of the way." Cambridge gave Wilson that confidence boost – she says it was like being locked away at a crazy drama festival for three years. But, as a streetwise Londoner, she was also dumbfounded by some of the shocking insularity she found there. "I didn't think I was going to find my people," she muses. "I thought I was so hard! I was going to be the first female MC in Cambridge. I brought my microphone, I had all these political lyrics and I used to rap with the kids in Queen's Park. I remember writing all this angsty poetry the first night I got there, about the cold wind and smoking – 'Breathing in this fresh ice wind, smoking in these black worms' – and how this was just the wrong

place for me. But actually it turned out to be the best, most nurturing place."

Once she fell in with the drama crowd, Wilson made pilgrimages to the Edinburgh festival, heading up one year in a production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, in which she styled herself after a young Lou Reed and shaved her head. "That was the best summer," the actress gushes. "I'd just broken up with my first love and I had this long blonde hair and it all came off and I lived with rock stars for a month! It felt good." Recently, Wilson hooked up her *Hedwig* co-star when he was in London with his rock band for an evening of tequila, whisky and reminiscing. Rough hangover, then? "Dude, I was surprised I was alive! But I think the adrenaline of being with old friends overrode it. Coming out of drama school and locking horns with people that you feel have safeguarded a bit of your identity while you've been in that hole is quite wonderful."

Indeed, although it's done her proud, Wilson divulges that surfacing from RADA has left her feeling "nebulous". For her, three years of intensive navel-gazing left her feeling like she has to put the pieces of her personality back together. "Even talking to you now, I feel like I'm frantically trying to create a person and fly flags for things that I'm sure at some point I used to believe in, like 'Queen's Park!', 'being a cool kid!', stuff like that. Because it all goes on hold when you're running around in leotard and leggings. But I have faith it will come back."

Pains of Youth will take Wilson up to January and then she can look ahead to watching herself on screen in the highly-anticipated adaptation of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel about human clones bred to be organ donors. "I have one line," she giggles of her scene as an ill-fated replica being looked after by Carey Mulligan on her deathbed. "Dude, I've got one eye and no stomach! It's funny because they say act with your gut or, on film, use your eyes, and I have neither! Carey sniffed out straight away that it was my first job – she was super-cool. I guess it's kind of funny to die as your first job, it's like a fucked-up kind of birth. But my mum's going to be so upset."

PAINS OF YOUTH RUNS AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE UNTIL JANUARY. **NEVER LET ME GO** OPENS IN 2010.

LYDIA WILSON WEARS VINTAGE BATHING SUIT FROM **THE GIRL CANT HELP IT**. CASHMERE CARDIGAN BY **JOHN SMEDELY**. BUG FROM **LONDON TAXIDERM**

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