

MAKING OF

NOT ANOTHER TEEN MOVIE

WORDS MATT MUELLER

Oscar-winning filmmaker Kevin Macdonald turns his hand to the Young Adult genre, but *How I Live Now* features shagging cousins, bleak violence and nuclear war. *Twilight 5* it ain't...

Fucking hate you, you know that? How can I be related to such an asshole?" Saoirse Ronan, wash your mouth out. What would your parents say? Oh wait, there's the Irish actress' father Paul, hovering within earshot, big grin decorating his face. Clearly he's not the object of her profanity-laden ire today - 'today' being a year ago, August 2012, in a lush green hollow beside a babbling brook in the picture-postcard Brecon Beacons.

Lying back in the tall green grass, and sporting bleached-blond hair, a selection of facial piercings and kohl-black eyeliner, Ronan is dressed for insolence. Thankfully her surly demeanour is for Kevin

Macdonald's camera: in *How I Live Now* she plays Daisy, an American teen exiled by her father to live with her aunt and cousins in the English countryside for the summer. Only for World War 3 to break out...

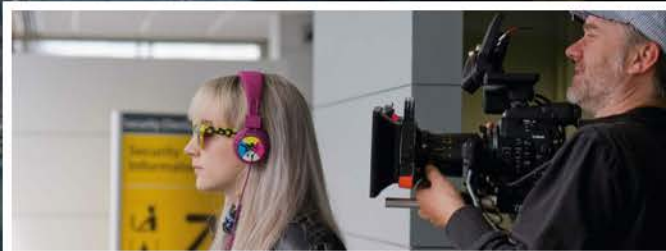
In between set-ups, Ronan, eight months off her 19th birthday, flits about the miniature Welsh valley, larking around with the rest of the posse of young actors: George MacKay (20), Tom Holland (16) and Harley Bird (10) as Daisy's cousins Edmond, Isaac and Piper, and Danny McEvoy (13) as their (abused) best friend Joe. There's no need for the pretence of maturity on *How I Live Now*'s set: Ronan and crew are like giddy school kids let loose in the fields. "My throat is sore,"

she confesses, "from all the singing and laughing I've been doing."

Clearly sharing a close bond, the quintet seems to exist in its own bubble, away from the rest of the crew. "We've been doing all kinds of stupid stuff," says MacKay, as Holland rolls up beside him with Ronan and the two lads serve up a display of one of their favourite on-set games: gobbing grapes back and forth into each other's mouths. "We're all very comfortable with each other," MacKay adds later, somewhat unnecessarily.

It was MacKay - swiftly rising through the ranks of youthful British actors - who was the target of Ronan's F-word tirade, her response to Edmond's ribbing while >>

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: ROSIE FLETCHER



On the run: (clockwise from main) filming *How I Live Now* in Wales; Daisy (Saoirse Ronan) hits the road; Ronan in the frame; director Kevin Macdonald with cast and crew.

World on her shoulders: Daisy (Saoirse Ronan) must fight to protect her young cousins.

'I'VE NEVER PLAYED SOMEONE WHO'S A BITCH, BASICALLY'
SAOIRSE RONAN

the three younger ones sprint nearby. Daisy has arrived from NYC burdened by angst and self-loathing, her petulance all-consuming. But hints of romance are already percolating with her awkward, sensitive cousin, even as there are ominous rumblings: a war that will envelope England, see favourite characters murdered and dumped into mass graves, and hardly an adult in sight as the cousin's peace-negotiator mother (Anna Chancellor) is stranded abroad.

Even in the *Hunger Games* era, *How I Live Now* is one of the gutsiest and most complex teen-protagonist tales you'll see. "It starts as a *Twilight*-type teen movie and then it becomes *Children Of Men*," offers Macdonald. "It's for teens but also for adults. Adults who remember what it was like to be a teenager..."

Five years before Katniss Everdeen appeared in print, slaying fellow adolescents to stay alive in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Meg Rosoff unveiled Elizabeth, aka Daisy, in *How I Live Now*, a heroine who self-harms, has an eating disorder, loses her virginity to her cousin, and sees the worst of human nature in an ugly war. Rosoff's bleak tale won awards and readers, conquering not only the so-called young-adult market but acquiring a grown-up fanbase as well. Its publisher even printed a separate cover with added adult appeal.

Macdonald was instantly hooked, asking the producers to wait for him while he finished other projects. Embracing *How I Live Now* as a teen love story, albeit one with seriously harsh undertones,

Macdonald was determined to keep all the taboo-busting of Rosoff's novel, including a mercenary enemy who are never really defined but rape and kill with abandon, and the two leads being bonking cousins which, while not illegal in the UK, is definitely frowned upon.

"I think it's almost more romantic that they are cousins," says Ronan. "You do hear from a lot of relatives who have got together that there's a connection there that's so strong, and that's what you see between Daisy and Eddie."

Some elements from the book have been altered or streamlined. Daisy's self-harming and eating disorder, for instance, are implied rather than overt. "We shot scenes where I stick pins in my face, although she's more OCD than anything else now," says Ronan. "But the symptoms are still there, so people who love the book won't feel like anything's missing."

Less emphasis, too, has been placed on a psychic connection between Daisy and Edmond,



Happier times: the family enjoys the calm before the storm.

which is now hallucinatory dreams that make Daisy aware of his fate during the darkest stretches of narrative, after the cousins are separated and Daisy and Piper must navigate their way back to the family manor, Brackendale. Macdonald has even upped the harshness: at one point, Daisy kills to save her youngest cousin, though bitter fury rather than absolute necessity fuels her actions. While her piercings are fake and her bleached tresses a wig, being Daisy has been an emotive experience for Ronan.

"It's been such a great release for me," she says, "because I've never played someone who's a bitch, basically. She's so different to me in every way. I've loved it." Daisy ends up becoming more resourceful than she ever could have imagined, delivering an empowering message about finding your true self and not hiding behind a mask.

"It's an edgy film," says Macdonald. "It's about taboos, and cousins, and love and sex and things that you would never have in an American mainstream movie's vision of being a teenager. I don't remember being a teenager like that. I remember being fascinated by taboos, and wanting to break them: getting drunk, snogging people you shouldn't be snogging, the messiness of first sexual adventures."

How *I Live Now*'s eight-week shoot took place almost entirely in Wales, and was beset by soggy weather. During *Total Film*'s visit, downpours were unleashed but mostly the sun shone down from a vivid blue sky. With sheep bleating in the distance, butterflies floating across the field, and the stream looking desperately inviting ("It's absolutely freezing," Holland assured us), it had the appearance of a bucolic idyll, all part of Macdonald's plan for the peaceful calm before the terrible storm.

Today's scene is about to shift radically from happy frolicking to abrupt alarm as first Edmond, then the others, hear the sonic boom of what turns out to be a nuclear blast in far-off London (the sound, to be added in post-production, is helpfully signified by Macdonald shouting "Boom!"). Wind machines are cranked up to create the turbulent impression of an atom bomb's after-effects, several hundred miles away from ground zero. The end of innocence is nigh.

"Fuuuuck, that was scary!" cries Ronan after one especially violent gust. The star of *Hanna* and *The Lovely Bones* giggles with glee before adding, "We're all going to die! I love war!" Even while embracing her childish side on the set, this gifted actress knows that adulthood beckons. *How I Live Now*, which is about the healing of damaged folk, even if nothing ends tied up in a lovely bow, may well mark the transition phase in her career.

"I know teenage girls who got so excited when they heard I was making this movie," she says. "Daisy is the kind of character I would relate to because she's messed up and she's not glorified. So many people out there put up a front and try to be cool. But it's actually a lot cooler if you just become yourself." **TF**

How I Live Now opens on 4 October.