



ahead of the...

Forget Alba.
Forget Simpson.
The *Jessica* to watch
is *Biel*: smart and
sassy in *Easy Virtue*
and about to play
a nympho, then a
stripper. Good job
she's dropped that
no-nudity clause...

JESSICA BIEL CAN TAKE IT ON THE chin. She's just finished telling *Total Film* how her rude and unpredictable *Easy Virtue* director Stephan Elliott would call her a cunt mid-take — as in, “Lift your work, cunt!” — when the brassy Australian sidles up to the Toronto hotel lounge sofa we're settled in and proceeds to take the mickey out of his leading actress. “She still doesn't know what crumpet is,” he brays loudly. “I told her that she's good crumpet and she hasn't quite worked it out yet.”

Unfazed by the director's bimbo-baiting, Biel counters casually, “He's a maniac, he has no filter at all. I had no idea what kind of film we were making...” >>



Despite their showy bickering, it's clear the two have a strange mutual admiration thing going on. And as for the notion of crumpet... "I kinda get the tea and crumpets thing. I liked the horse riding but I'm not interested in the fox hunting at all," muses Biel oddly, who was too busy being stunned by Elliot's peculiar outbursts to get to grips with modern Britain (he claims she mistook a small ferris wheel in Hyde Park for the London Eye).

But never mind — it matters not a jot in *Easy Virtue*. In fact, the whole point is how oblivious Biel's brassy American racer Larita Huntington is to upstairs-downstairs mores when she lands in an English aristocrat viper-pit after marrying one of their chosen

sons (Ben Barnes). Ripped from the pages of an early Noel Coward play, it's a classic culture-clash tale, with Biel descending on the snooty clan's country pile like an invading Martian (complete with phallic silver car and platinum-helmet hairdo). Which kind of echoed Biel's own tardy arrival to the *Virtue* set, when she came face to face with her fearsome onscreen nemesis, Kristin Scott Thomas.

"I was really terrified by her," whispers Biel. "She's an intimidating woman. She lets you know that this is her show and you have to go, 'Oh yeah? We'll see.'" In fact, Biel not only holds her own in *Easy Virtue*, she's a sparkling revelation, squeezing every ounce of sex-bomb charm and steely street-smarts

out of Larita. "She's the woman that I've always dreamed of being. I'd love to have that ballsy quality myself. She's not going to take any shit from anybody. I'm a little bit passive unfortunately. I'm just kinda nice, which is boring..."

Easy Virtue builds on the 26-year-old actress' previous head-turning appearance as Sophie in period drama *The Illusionist*, the first film that singled her out as a starlet determined not to be hemmed in by genetic circumstances — that is to say, the fact that she happens to possess a body and face built for lads' mags. Fortunately for Biel, she's not skimpy in the talent stakes. And as far as being lads' mag crumpet, it's been there, done that for Biel: she shattered the goody-



Unfortunately, *Chainsaw* '03 propelled her into the ranks of the three Jessicas – the other two being Alba and Simpson – much to her own frustration. “It’s so Hollywood to just throw you all together and make some kitschy thing out of it,” sighs Biel. “I feel like everyone’s pretty much over that and creatively we’re all doing very different things now.” As for Marcus Nispel’s flesh-and-gore reboot, the actress remembers it being “extremely emotionally and physically exhausting. I look back at it now and I honestly don’t know how I did it. I don’t think I could do it again.”

Ring in *Total Film* a few weeks later from Rome, where she and boyfriend Justin Timberlake have jetted for a friend’s wedding (with, predictably, their every appearance accompanied by a throng of paps), Biel insists that while she’s zipped through the genres, from action queen (*Blade: Trinity*) to badly-burned Iraq vet (*Home Of The Brave*), there’s no masterplan.

“The masterplan is to just keep doing interesting things, to keep me interested,” she vouches. “It’s not about how people see my career or how I want the world to react to me. It’s just to keep being challenged, just trying everything and exploring different parts of myself. There’s not much more rhyme or reason to it than that.”

But it’s a tough world out there for ingénues and she knows it. Some in Hollywood would love to confine her to roles requiring tight-fitting t-shirts – and Biel was happy to play along during her profile-building phase. Now she’s “cool” with waiting for better material to come her way. “There

are very few good roles and there’s a large group of very talented women,” says the Minnesota native, who holds up the “no-borders” careers of Blanchett, Moore and Streep as ones she wants to emulate. “It’s difficult to obtain one of those really great roles. It is a lot about image and how you’re perceived. That is a big part of it. The roles are there, they’re just highly coveted.”

Biel does herself a disservice, however, claiming she’s not ballsy. She fought tooth and nail to get cast in *The Illusionist* and changed the industry perception of her in the process. The sceptical filmmakers had rejected her outright but Biel badgered for an audition and arrived fully decked out in her character’s period look. “I was sick and

tired of hearing, ‘You just don’t look period.’ I just got to the point where I was not going to lose that role because I didn’t look right.” Unsurprisingly, she calls *The Illusionist*’s duchess “my favourite performance”.

She’s about to be usurped by Biel’s next role in *Nailed*, though – assuming the film ever comes out. Shot over the summer, David O Russell’s latest has been bogged down in a stop-start quagmire as its backers kept running out of cash. Biel says it would be “tragic” if they can’t finish – “We only have three scenes left to shoot” – but even she’s not sure. If *Nailed* does cross the finish line, we’ll get to see Biel playing a blissfully air-headed, roller-skating waitress who gets a nail in her head and ends up prone to fits of

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shocking rage and “crazy, aggressive sexual behaviour”. She becomes a nymphomaniac, then? “Well, she’ll start to get uncontrollably excited about, like, a lamppost and then she races to... you know...”

Biel says *Nailed* is “poignant, sarcastic and hilarious” and that the famously intense O Russell has got “incredible performances out of everybody, especially me”. Another role, then, that could send her stock rising. She’s also got *Powder Blue* coming up, in which she plays a stripper with a terminally ill son; the actress’ fanbase will be delighted to hear that the *Crash*-style ensemble drama brings her career-long no-nudity policy to a spectacular end. Unlike the regretted *Gear* shoot, however, no one forced her into it

“You change and you grow. One moment it’s right and another moment it’s not right to maintain that policy,” she explains. “I’m going to take it project by project now. What makes sense for the character and what makes sense for me...” **TF**



Easy Virtue opens on 7 November and is reviewed on page 56.

two-shoes barrier of her television-series launchpad *7th Heaven* (in which she played the daughter of a preacher) by posing for America’s *Gear* magazine – an infamous naked-tease cover shoot she claims her then-handlers manipulated her into.

When she made the leap to movies, she slipped straight into cleavage-flashing roles as a coke-snorting tramp in *The Rules Of Attraction* and terrorised totty in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* – the 2003 remake of the classic horror. “You do something and then you get pigeonholed. So it was just a natural reaction to want to do something like *Rules Of Attraction* or *Texas Chainsaw* or whatever it is to shake up my image and to keep myself from getting bored!”

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