

Being BLUNT

With almost regal poise, Emily Blunt has made the giant leap from playing a mouthy assistant in *The Devil Wears Prada* to the title role in *The Young Victoria*. But, as she herself admits, this time she may have been a little bit presumptuous. By Matt Mueller

At Shepperton Studios, Queen Victoria's lavish coronation is taking place on a threadbare set. Apart from a hefty throne, red carpet and scores of extras decked out in mid-19th-century aristocratic finery, the sound stage is filled mainly with the film's crew, heavy wires and bright lights. In the midst of this cluttered enclosure sits Emily Blunt, ramrod straight in the throne, draped in a gold-embroidered gown and ermine-lined cloak and clutching the coronation sceptre as dignitaries come forth to pay homage.

Most of *The Young Victoria*'s coronation sequence has already been filmed in Lincoln Cathedral – which stood in for Westminster Abbey – so today is largely about getting close-ups of Blunt and attendant royals. Between takes, the 24-year-old actress spots someone with a bag of sweets and asks if she can have one, dubbing it “the royal sweet” as she pops it into her mouth. Off to the side, a special-effects green screen is draped on the wall behind the royal box where, among others, Victoria's overbearing mother, the Duchess of Kent (Miranda Richardson), and future husband Prince Albert (Rupert Friend) watch this frail, delicate teenager become queen of an empire.

Looking not the least bit frail herself, Blunt strolls over to regale us with tales of agony at being heavily accessorised for the occasion. “I’m quite overheated with all these layers,” she says with a self-mocking smile. “Wearing the big cloak is like carrying a bear on my shoulders. The crown has left a dent in my head, which they cover with make-up so I won’t look frightening to you. And if one more person steps on my train, I might start swinging some punches!”

Victoria is her first leading role, one she snared only after fierce competition. And she didn’t do it by being demure: “I was quite pushy in wanting this part,” admits Blunt, whose dynamic turns in films like *My Summer of Love*, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Charlie Wilson’s War* have propelled her rapidly to the front ranks of young British actresses. “I basically said to the producers, ‘I am well aware that people are going to be bartering for this, but I want you to give me a chance, because I can do it.’ I walked out thinking, ‘God, that was so presumptuous of me.’ But it seemed to work. Maybe there was something royal in *demanding* the role that won them over.”

British producer Graham King and his occasional partner, director Martin Scorsese, who had collaborated on the 2006 Oscar winner *The Departed*, leapt at the chance to make a biopic that not only chronicled Victoria's journey from her oppressive childhood through the mistake-ridden years of her early reign, but also revised the image of her as a frumpy, sour-faced widow forever dressed in black.

“Contrary to popular belief,” Blunt asserts, “Victoria was a feisty, emotional, vibrant person when she was younger. She loved dancing, music, riding and romance. It’s exciting that we’re going to refresh people’s opinion of her. I definitely felt the pressure to do her justice.”

Also feeling the pressure was Jean-Marc Vallée, a French-Canadian director who was King and Scorsese’s unusual choice to direct the script, which was written by fellow Oscar-winner Julian Fellowes (*Gosford Park*). “I’m not into period films at all, and I didn’t know anything about Queen Victoria,” says Vallée. “But when I read Julian’s script, it was a beautiful story. I thought Victoria had a mystical quality that I was interested to explore.”



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Her life was special; to be that young and female and to be thrust into this man’s world... I actually saw her as a rebel. And it’s a character-driven story,” he continues. “The plot is not the show; it’s the drama of watching these people live; that’s what I loved about it.”

The film’s Oscar quotient was further boosted by Sandy Powell, who designed the film’s elaborate costumes, including a procession of increasingly extravagant gowns for Victoria. The producers also surrounded Blunt with a stellar line-up of supporting actors, including Jim Broadbent as Victoria’s uncle, King William IV; Miranda Richardson as her suffocating mother; and Paul Bettany as confidante and Whig prime minister Lord Melbourne.

At its core, though, the film is about the diminutive Queen’s love affair with Prince Albert, played by Rupert Friend. “It is the greatest love story of monarch history,” says Blunt. “Albert was her greatest achievement by far, because she needed him to rein in all of that fire and emotion so that she could reign in a more moderate and fair way. He was dignified and selfless in wanting her to be the best version of herself she could possibly be. He’s my definition of a real man, and Rupert’s portrayal is going to melt hearts.”

However, Friend self-deprecatingly claims he was cast only because the producers were getting desperate after a long and exhaustive search. But Blunt is right: Friend’s performance, as well as his convincing German accent, could propel him beyond his tabloid identity as ‘Keira Knightley’s boyfriend’.

“I completely fell in love with Albert,” Friend says. “He was such an inspiringly loyal and dedicated man, not only to this woman, not only to his studies and to improving himself, but also to improving the lives of everyone else. He was altruistic, and he was so passionate about Victoria. He’s known as ‘the King without a crown’ because – although he did a lot of work with her, running England – he was giving up the right ever to be king. And for a man, that’s quite a sacrifice.”

Unlike her regal counterpart, Blunt wasn’t groomed for anything apart from being a well-brought-up barrister’s daughter from Roehampton. She studied singing and cello, and was educated at Hurtwood House sixth-form college in Surrey. But, lest we think she’s lived an untroubled existence, she was also struck by a severe stutter when she was nine that got progressively

worse into her early teens. A drama teacher suggested she try to adopt different accents on stage, which eventually helped her tame the affliction. “It still comes back if I’m nervous or tired,” she says.

When Blunt landed an agent in her late teens, she was off and running: she won an Evening Standard Award for best newcomer in her first professional job (opposite Dame Judi Dench, the other Victoria, in Sir Peter Hall’s production of *The Royal Family*) and a Golden Globe for her role in the TV drama *Gideon’s Daughter*, before landing on Hollywood hot lists when she was cast as Meryl Streep’s neurotic English assistant in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

“I based that character on a couple of people I know – who shall remain nameless,” says Blunt. Asked if she found any similarities between herself and the young Victoria, Blunt smiles and says, “Well, I’ve heard she wasn’t much of a looker. But I think we are fairly similar. We both have these rather hooded eyes and we both like to eat. I eat like a truck driver, but I think I have a better metabolism than she did. Actually the prime minister said to her at one point, ‘Ma’am, you must try to eat only when you’re hungry.’ And she said, ‘Well, I’m *always* hungry.’”

Like nearly all films that dabble in history, it doesn’t adhere to the facts with unbending accuracy. For one thing, Blunt is eight inches taller than Victoria, requiring the casting of taller actors like Bettany and Friend to instill the illusion of shortness; Albert didn’t attend Victoria’s coronation; and he never dived in front of his wife to protect her from an assassin’s bullet, a scene Fellows added to the film’s climax to highlight the couple’s passionate devotion. “We just allowed ourselves to go there and try to make magic,” says Vallée. “It might bother some experts, but it will never bother the audience; it never betrays her story.”

Blunt agrees. “We were very accurate with the etiquette. But what I wanted to show was the moments when she’s alone, when no one else was around. I did want to see her slouch back in her chair and lessen the stiff-backed approach to her world. I’m sure someone will pick me up on that, but if they do question me, I’ll just say, ‘Prove it to me.’ No one can prove what she did in private. So I felt like I had a free rein.” ■

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

Clockwise from bottom left Rupert Friend as Prince Albert; Victoria at a banquet thrown by her uncle, King William IV; coronation day; Mark Strong as Victoria’s stepfather, Conroy, and Miranda Richardson as her mother, The Duchess of Kent; Victoria and Albert