



RISING STAR

Her convincing portrayals of strong and complex women – both fictional and real – have made Andrea Riseborough hot film property on both sides of the pond

BY MATT MUELLER

If Andrea Riseborough isn't careful, she could end up as Britain's own Meryl Streep. That's not a facile comparison, nor is it made simply because Riseborough also portrayed Margaret Thatcher on screen (although she did get there first, in the 2008 TV biopic *The Long Walk to Finchley*). Rather, this petite actress is displaying the same skilful flair for magnetic, immersive characterisation that Streep possessed at a similar stage of her career.

That sort of comparison is a weighty mantle to take on, but it's apparent when you encounter Riseborough just how robust she is. She knows her own mind and isn't afraid to speak it. Her sharp eye for detail has allowed her to conceal herself in an array of characters: a fiery aristocrat in Channel 4's English Civil War bodice-ripper *The Devil's Whore*; a melancholy medical clone in *Never Let Me Go*; a bolshy, beehived machinist in *Made in Dagenham*; a browbeaten wallflower in *Brighton Rock*; and the flamboyant and impeccable Wallis Simpson in *W.E.*

Her new film, *Shadow Dancer*, isn't likely to silence the comparisons with Streep, even if she mildly recoils at the term that's being used to describe her. "Chameleonic," she repeats with muted enthusiasm. "It's been said about me."

In James Marsh's taut cat-and-mouse thriller, Riseborough

shows off a flawless Northern Irish accent. She plays Colette, a single mother, and the only daughter in a clan of die-hard Irish nationalists, who finds herself being blackmailed by Clive Owen's MI5 operative into spying on them, after she botches an IRA bomb plot in London. It's a tough act asking an audience to sympathise with a terrorist, but Riseborough carries it off with a quiet, remarkable performance. That's because Colette is more than a zealous partisan; she is first and foremost a mother, reluctantly betraying her own flesh and blood to ensure the welfare of her child.

"For me, the truly interesting thing about Colette is that she can be anything," Riseborough says. "She has no idea what she can be or who she is. The situation she finds herself in informs so much of who she is and what she does. She's never been afforded the time to go through any kind of self-development, or even to have a moment to figure out what she likes or dislikes. Her life has never been about her."

Riseborough conveys a turbulent cauldron of emotions – paranoia, guilt, claustrophobia, fear – while maintaining an air of placidity, prompting Marsh to praise her subtly expressive face as "a beautiful instrument for feeling, the way an old-fashioned silent film actress' face would be".

Set in the early 1990s during a spike in IRA violence, *Shadow Dancer* covers touchy ground, and it has left ▶



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Riseborough feeling reluctant to discuss her preparations for the role. She did meet Irish nationalists who underwent similar experiences during the Troubles, but she doesn't want to reveal what they discussed. "It's still an open wound," she says, before adding that she sees Colette's story as universal. "We've all been in a situation where the thing that we love, that we are trying to protect, is the thing that's trapping us. In this film, it happens to be her family."

Riseborough encountered no such issues with her own parents. "Working-class Thatcherites" as she once described them, they have always encouraged her and her younger sister to pursue their creative passions. "My parents are not and never have been ruled by fear, and that's been great for me," she says.

Born and raised in Whitley Bay, near Newcastle, she recalls adoring Shakespeare and performance from an early

age, but took a few youthful detours (such as running a Chinese restaurant with her childhood best friend, Cyan) before applying to and being accepted by RADA.

After graduating in 2005, she soon landed several TV jobs, waltzing straight into a trilogy of plays about London teens at the National Theatre. She also won the 2006 Ian Charleson Award for exceptional performances by British actors under 30 for her epic double-bill turn in Sir Peter Hall's productions of *Measure for Measure* and *Miss Julie*. A supporting role in Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky* was followed by her small-screen turns as Thatcher and Angelica Fanshawe in *The Devil's Whore*, before she was swept up by a vortex of film work that continues to this day.

Off-screen, Riseborough is very much her own woman, with an eclectic, idiosyncratic sartorial sense. She adores thrift-shop jewellery and hand-me-down items, and mixes up vintage and modern fashions. "Most of what I wear is recycled," she says. "I like my clothes to be old friends." But neither would she call herself a clotheshorse.

The fact that she was being dressed by Galliano wasn't a major factor for Riseborough when it came to playing Wallis Simpson. "Fashion was the furthest thing from my mind," insists the 30-year-old actress, who donned 72 different outfits as the Duchess of Windsor. "The clothes and the jewellery were just an outlet for Simpson's perfectionism."

It's a shame *W.E.* ended up being trashed by the critics: while its modern-day story line was certainly a damp squib, the period strand was rather well done and might have yielded an award or two for Riseborough had its director, Madonna, not come with such a large target on her back.

As with most actors, Riseborough has a nomadic lifestyle. When she first left RADA, she only wanted to be in London. "All of the great theatre is there," she says. "But I found that you can live anywhere. What I love doing is reflecting life, and I have to enjoy it. So if one place doesn't work out, I'll move somewhere else."

She has spent quite a bit of time in the US with her boyfriend of three years, American graffiti artist Joe Appel, flitting between LA and the tiny Idaho town where his parents live. She has also lived in New York and shared a flat in Hackney with her friend Cyan; now, she says, she is plotting a move to Paris.

While it's easy to picture Riseborough sitting in a Montmartre café debating French philosophy and downing espressos (although she usually favours tea), it seems she's going to have to get used to spending more time in the States for now. This year, she was cast in her first Hollywood film, *Oblivion*, and has been busy shooting the sci-fi thriller in Louisiana and New York alongside co-star Tom Cruise. She will also team up with her good friend Alexander Skarsgård, whom she first met when they were both living in LA.

"I'm incredibly picky about what I do work-wise and I don't ever want to put myself in the position where I would have to do something that wasn't an artistic choice," Riseborough says. She maintains that although her career might be on the up and up, her motivations remain the same. "I've never made a choice that's fuelled by money, and I'm lucky that I can do that. I really don't need to have lots of nice things to be happy." ■

Shadow Dancer will be released on 24th August in the UK

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian

FROM TOP With Clive Owen in *Shadow Dancer*; in 2010's *Made in Dagenham*; as former prime minister Margaret Thatcher in *The Long Walk to Finchley*; and as Wallis Simpson in *W.E.*