

Being Blunt

Clever, self-deprecating, straight-talking, Emily Blunt is that rarest of birds – an A-list star with a sense of humour. The British actress gives KATE SALTER a crash course in Hollywood survival

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK DEMARCHELIER

It is Paris fashion week and the lobby of Le Meurice, one of the city's most opulent hotels, teems with men and women who would look at home on a catwalk. Upstairs Emily Blunt, the new face of Yves Saint Laurent's Opium perfume, is cosseted away in a plush suite. Bottles of the perfume decorate the room, the air is thick with the heavy fragrance and a trailer for the new television advert starring Blunt plays on a loop on a large screen in which she talks about her role in the advert ('I'm a woman, on a mission – in really high heels'). I am told that Blunt will be ready to see me soon, but first she must have her make-up reapplied. Five minutes later a grey-haired Frenchman with an impressive coiffure

goes to attend to her hair. It begins to feel like waiting for an audience with J Lo.

As soon as I am greeted by Blunt, however, it is clear that she finds all this palaver most amusing. As the hairdresser leaves she is unable to contain a conspiratorial smile. 'He told me I kept messing up what he'd done, so he insisted on giving me another blow-dry,' she says. Her eyes are indeed immaculately pencilled, her hair is cut in a short, chic bob and she is dressed head to toe in black Yves Saint Laurent. On screen her porcelain skin, wide-set blue eyes and fine bone structure are deployed to full effect, but in person it is Blunt's sardonic, slightly lopsided grin and irreverent sense of humour that you notice first.

Patrick Demarchelier for Yves Saint Laurent Fashion by Yves Saint Laurent. Make-up by Lloyd Simmonds, creative director of make-up at YSL



In the television advert Blunt prowls the darkened hallways of an expensive-looking apartment, searching for a bottle of perfume that is guarded by a leopard. When I tell her that I've been watching the trailer for the advert in the room next door, she says, 'God, I'm *so* un-French in that trailer.' She adopts a grating, nasal voice, 'I'm a woman, on a mission – er, in really high heels,' mimicking herself. It is almost impossible to pay Blunt a compliment because of the constant self-deprecating banter, but it is a mark of just how much of a bona fide superstar she has become that her face is now capable of selling millions of bottles of perfumes. Why does she think she was chosen? 'I don't know. I've *no* idea,' she says, wheezing with laughter. 'There was no one else? They made a mistake, a terrible mistake.'

It is the first time that Blunt, 28, has fronted a beauty campaign, despite having previous offers. 'I think that I've been wanting to make sure that when I did it it would be the right thing,' she says. 'There's such an aura of scandal around this perfume that I was quite attached to the idea of doing it from the word go. I'd been asked to do a couple of things but none were as classy as this. And I got to work with a leopard.'

The leopard and its co-star had minimal interaction, about which Blunt is secretly relieved. She says she suggested wearing a dress in the advert rather than the classic Yves Saint Laurent tux. 'But I got word back,' she continues in a perfect French accent, 'that the leopard trainer says, "If you have flowing fabric around the leopard the leopard will go *crazy*." So I said yes to the tux.'

One of the things Blunt liked about the Opium campaign was that 'it's not necessarily going for the obvious – it's something a bit more mystical and weird'. For someone who is so hard to pigeon-hole herself, it's easy to see why she found this attractive. She once said, 'If I open a script and the description reads "nice, normal girl", I slam it shut,' and Blunt's CV is intriguing simply for its variety: she has done everything from cult indie films to period dramas, romantic thrillers, horror, comedy, even an animated children's film and a guest role in *The Simpsons*. It does seem as though she has tried her hand at an awful lot. 'You mean I'll say yes to anything?' she jokes.

With so many films under her belt, is she still at the stage where she has to fight for the parts she wants? 'Oh, God, yes,' she says, eyes widening. 'Yes, absolutely. Because the good stuff – everyone wants the good stuff. We're like savages,' she says and starts to laugh again. 'There's not much meat on the bones in this industry so all the women go crazy when there's a great role.'



'There's not much meat on the bones in this industry – women go crazy when there's a great role'



From the top: Blunt with Natalie Press in *My Summer of Love* (2004); behind the scenes of the Opium advert; and as Emily in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)

One such role for which she fought off the competition was the imperious Emily, personal assistant to Meryl Streep's fashion editor, Miranda Priestly, in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). The producers had thought the character should be American, but Blunt read for the part in her own accent. It paid off and Blunt turned in a brilliant comic performance, transforming what could have been a flimsy pantomime baddy into an acute study of the cowardice and desperation of someone who undermines others because she is

undermined herself.

Blunt, of course, shrugs off her ingenuity and says she only got the part because during the audition she was panicking about missing her flight – fear being an integral part of her character in the film.

'I was so frantic that they



said, "Yep, that's it." That kind of *reeking* of desperation to get out of the room was what did it.'

If *The Devil Wears Prada* was the film that got her noticed in America, it was an independent British film, *My Summer of Love* (2004), that caught the attention of British critics. Blunt played the manipulative, upper-class Tamsin who starts a relationship with a local working-class girl (played by Natalie Press) while on holiday in Yorkshire. She won the Most Promising Newcomer award at the *Evening Standard* British Film Awards and was nominated as British Newcomer of the Year at the London Critics Circle Film Awards.

Since then she has had roles in many more mainstream films but says that independent cinema will always be her first love. 'They're the best parts and the best scripts, usually. Sometimes the bigger-budget films are made for teenage boys, so the girl parts are one-dimensional or rather idealistic and I don't know how to play The

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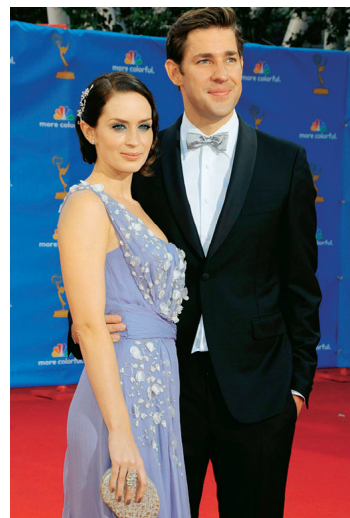


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INTERVIEW

Girlfriend part – there's nothing there for me to do. There are fantastic roles out there for women, you just have to sift through all the c— to find them.'

Blunt recently finished filming her first lead role in a mainstream American comedy, *The Five-Year Engagement*, in which she does in fact play The Girlfriend part. It is produced by Judd Apatow, the writer-director of hugely successful 'buddy' comedies such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up* and *Superbad*. Some have accused Apatow of sexism, saying that his female parts are stultifying bores who are there simply to make the male lead look even funnier. Blunt says she was determined



Blunt with her husband, John Krasinski, at the 2010 Emmy Awards

'As a child I didn't speak much because I couldn't. I just soaked it all up like a sponge'

this wouldn't be the case with her role. 'When I signed up to it I said I don't want to play someone who's just a nag, so they wrote it with me in mind and with my input. It's really refreshing because my character has as many set pieces as Jason's [her co-star, Jason Segel].'

She points out that Apatow also produced *Bridesmaids*, the slap-stick female-led comedy that has divided audiences with its graphic, scatological mishaps. 'I think there's a tendency to think women can't be funny,' she says. 'But you look at someone like Kristen Wiig [the lead in *Bridesmaids*], I think people like her are real trailblazers for girls in the comedy world. If you love it or hate it you can't deny that *Bridesmaids* is such a big film for women. It was a really important film to happen.'

There can't be many actresses who could pull off playing Queen Victoria and also star in a Judd Apatow comedy, but there is something so fearless about Blunt, you feel she is not afraid to give things a bash. It's clear that Blunt loves to laugh – she is rarely serious for more than a few seconds – but she says she feels confident expressing her funny side on film thanks to her childhood.

'I grew up in a family where there was lots of laughter and people doing impersonations,' she says. 'It was a rowdy, fun household – I'm one of four kids – and everyone to this day is still doing impersonations of each other and telling stories.'

Blunt's father is a criminal barrister and a QC and her mother now teaches English after giving up her acting career to raise Blunt, her elder sister, Felicity, and her two younger siblings, Sebastian and Susannah. Blunt went to private school in Roehampton, Surrey, and it was while she was at sixth-form college that her acting career took off.

But before that, from the age of about eight until she was 13, Blunt suffered from a debilitating stutter. When I ask her about this it is the only time in the interview when her grin fades and she becomes pensive. 'As a child and early teen I didn't speak as much – because I couldn't. Maybe that was a good thing because I soaked it all up like a sponge. But I don't remember it as a conscious thing. I think I was just not wanting to talk. Too embarrassing,' she says with a resigned shrug.

After the age of 13 it became less severe, and by 16 Blunt had been signed by a theatrical agent and was cast opposite Judi Dench in a West End show. Blunt says that she will always be a stutterer, and it comes on when she's particularly tired or stressed. 'Weirdly enough, I stutter less with a person I'm unfamiliar with,' she says. 'And then with my family or my husband it'll come out more, which is strange.'

Last year Blunt moved to Los Angeles where she lives with John Krasinski (who plays the Martin Freeman character in the American version of *The Office*), whom she married last year at George Clooney's estate on Lake Como. It was a small, intimate affair and ever since the couple have kept a low profile. Blunt is open about most things, but will not discuss her private life other than to say, 'We have lots of friends who aren't in the business and we don't really go to the sceney places.'

What does she think Americans make of British women – given that we seem to have a reputation for bad teeth and being overly hirsute? 'Do they say we're hairy?' She peers at her own arm resting on the sofa, then at mine. 'I've heard people say they find British women intimidating. But people also say that British women are so much fun because of their laid-back sense of humour.'

For someone so forthright, Blunt must have a grand plan of where she wants to take her career next. 'I believe in a plan,' she says, 'but I think it has to be ever changing, because it's such a precarious job. You can't rely upon the machine, so all you have are the choices you make.' As she's tried her hand at most genres, is there anything left she'd like to do? She grins. 'I haven't done a Western yet and I would quite like to do a Western.' ●

Emily Blunt is the face of Opium by Yves Saint Laurent. Opium is available nationwide

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