

Emma Thomson interview

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Emma Thomson Interview, 1995

Emma was just gorgeous. She had her legs curled up on the sofa and it felt like we were a group of best friends who's gotten together for a girlie chat. There were about 3 other journalists. At that point, we all believed she and Kenneth Brannagh were happily married and Britain's movie star royalty, but just days later her and Kenneth announced their separation. In retrospect, as you'll see when you read the interview, she actually was frank about how difficult the relationship was and the writing was on the wall, so to speak - but none of us wanted to read it. If Emma could be every girl's best friend, one's life would be perfect. She's wise, she listens, she's interested and interesting. She wasn't there to just promote a movie. She took the occasion to have a conversation. She's one of those - those top stars - who is genuinely interested in the human condition, that quality which always produces the best actors - people who are able to truly empathise with another character, with another person's life and feelings. At the time of the interview, Emma lived in West Hampstead (perhaps she still does), and I lived nearby in Hampstead - and, to be perfectly honest, I used to often wish I knew her well enough to pop in for a cup of tea (or bottle of wine) at will and just chat and chat and chat... The film we were doing the interview for was 'Carrington', the true story of artist Dora Carrington.

Notes on my notepad:

Jeans (barefoot?), long unbuttoned shirt, no make-up. She walks around the room, introducing herself to everyone. Then sits down and says "so how can I help you all?"

You cut your hair for the role, and do a naked scene. Firstly, is it true you walked in on Samuel West to calm him? [laughs] I don't think I calmed him! It was very hard with a lot of the boys. Rupert was fun actually - but Stevie and Sam were quite nervous. Stevie was like: "oh no, I've got to show my body"...and he's got a body of a Greek God! I walked in, I took my dressing gown off, and I said: "look! You're worried, you're worried!" And he said "ok".

Secondly, is there anything you would not do for a film?

[laughs] I wouldn't sort of mutilate myself [laughs] and I wouldn't represent female sexuality as, in ways I think it's so often represented, where it's not active; it's something prurient and exploitative - to use a very deeply over exploited word! But otherwise, no, I don't think so - as long as it felt suitable and appropriate. So often you watch movies and the women are so much more naked than the men, and I get so bored with that. I don't think it's boring and trite (like an unwritten law that we don't see men naked).

Tell us about the scene with Brennan

Come on, I said, put your knee down, let them see your 'handbag' - and I think we shot it like that. But I think probably it's to do with censorship because all censors are male!

So you're very comfortable with yourself; happy in your skin?

Oh absolutely! It's also good because it was very important to me, for instance, that I didn't go to the gym 6 hours a day when I was taking my clothes off; or lose weight or anything else. Absolutely not. I was eating like a horse because if you're going to represent your body on screen, it's very important again not to sell your sex down the river by representing a body that you've been working on, and one that doesn't represent a female body. I think you do see an ordinary normal female body there which has the kind of requisite amount of fat in the requisite places, which is what we're mostly like.

The movie's such a force of sex and love. Did you work in this heightened state for quite a few months - condensed into two hours?

That's right, and it's quite difficult for an audience - because you keep on being asked to accept new relationships. It was very intense, very intense - but it was such a wonderful group of people - all the actors were so giving, and Jon was there in the middle as this rock around which we all danced, this sexual dance, but the boys were terrific. I mean, I spent the whole summer kissing young men - it was terrific!

It makes one think one's own life is so boring - as a mother - after watching this movie (says a female journalist who's quite obviously a mother!)

Do you mind that? Being a mother to your child?

It just makes you ask questions about your own life (replies the journalist)

I know exactly what you mean - because it challenges our sense of danger really. Because she lived - ok, only until 39 - but every moment was really lived. And she never settled into all those ruts that we're encouraged to attach ourselves to and go down, without veering to the left or right. And I suppose that that group of people - that's what they were about really.

They were asking questions. They were deconstructing myths of Victoriana and Empire, and I guess a lot of people are doing that now as well. We're all in the process I think - women especially - and you'll know, if you're a mother and you work - you're asking questions about: how do we do this? how do we achieve this? how do I work and do this other job which is so demanding and difficult.

I think that's probably the most important question that we face as we go into the new millennium.

In the film, men have a great difficulty dealing with her

Yeah, well she was perverse and wilful, and a terrible liar - and this fight to preserve her integrity and not to be invaded in any way, particularly in the early years of her life, caused them tremendous problems. She really tortured them, but I

don't think out of malice or anything. It was just that she did not want to be pinned down in any way. Of course Luton was the perfect choice because he was never going to want that from her. He wasn't going to want motherhood from her, but the bizarre thing is she ends up in a domestic situation which on the outside - certainly to us - looks like a form of imprisonment in itself.

She gave up her art for him

She didn't really.

In the beginning she's successful - but later she paints but does not sell

Like so many women artists, like so many.

But she was part of a cultural group

Yeah, I know - but the form in which she chose to live her life was really mitigated against her, because she left the world of artists and painters really when she fell in love with Luton, and she moved into a world of writers and intellectuals who were not encouraging to her in any way. They found her strangeness and her ignorance off-putting. I mean, Luton didn't; he thought she was a great artist and always tried to encourage...

He says: why not exhibit?

But as she says: "I don't paint them for other people, I paint them for us." And I understand that, I really understand that. It wasn't something that she was interested in, and so, this is what makes it so interesting - is that someone who seems prototypically feminist on the outside of it, actually made all these decisions from a totally personal point of view. It wasn't like I might say: "well, I'm going to go out there and do that because I want to prove to the world", like I always wanted to prove that I could write.

And that was something I wanted to prove to men.

It wasn't that Carrington wanted to prove anything; she didn't want to prove anything; she just had to live her life in this way. A lot of it was escaping from a family background that she found completely despairingly boring, but she's a completely unexpected personality.

You can't put her into any category. She's utterly original. [Interestingly - this is exactly how I would describe Emma Thomson. She has her own thoughts. Seriously, you don't realise till you spend time in that world, and then spend time in the non super-successful world - how many of us just regurgitate thoughts and ideas that we've been spoonfed in the media, in school, by our friends and peers - without even realising that we've become too lazy - or ignorant - to realise that these are not our own personal thoughts.]

She has sex just for others.

She didn't enjoy it at first. It took her a long time to learn how to enjoy sex at all, and I'm sure that's to do with the fact that she just didn't want to be invaded physically, as well as spiritually. And Luton didn't - he allowed her her freedom, somehow, and his very intellect, his very wisdom and his very wit and humour just liberated her, and I really understand that so well.

It's just that form of companionship which she wanted most of all, and she did learn in the end; in the end I think she enjoyed her sexual relationships with women almost more, but there's no questions that her sexual relationships with Bfs was very fulfilling, but it wasn't anything else. She couldn't go and stay with him; it was always Luton, always Luton, and these things came second.

Does your own personality incorporate some of the character or was this just a professional performance?

I don't think you can avoid a certain amount of osmosis when you're playing a character. I'm not a method actor - though I think it's fine whichever way you may do it, but I think if you really do it you can't really avoid certain aspects of the character ingraining themselves because you're with that 16 hours a day for months, and the further away that character is from you, the more likely you are to change. That's what's frightening about acting, although I would be very wary about taking on a vicious serial killer!

What parts of Dora did you take back with you?

I think the loneliness was quite difficult to work with and a sense of being outside everything, and not sort of belonging anywhere.

Does that mean when you went home you couldn't plunge back into being a social butterfly?

Well, I never have been a social butterfly, and of course, you know I live with the most anti-social man on the face of the earth. I was actually very lucky because while I was making the film I was living at home so I thought that had I been away all the time, it would've been much more difficult, but the fact was I had home and Kenneth to go home to every night so I was safe, and I was saved probably from a lot of angst because of that.

Was it good also to get back to one steady relationship after the extravagance of Dora Carrington?

Well, I mean - first of all - the notion of it being boring in one relationship is of course not true, unless the relationship is boring - but it's not a boring relationship. It's all over the show and you don't know what to expect next, but the thing about Carrington is that she did essentially have one relationship - everything fed into that. So I know it sounds odd, but she was monogamous really. She wanted Luton and he was all that she wanted, but the fact...it wasn't as if I could make the decisions about her character; they had already been made for me because she has lived her life. It's not like taking a fictional character and then playing that - because you can go all sorts of different ways, you know what I mean? I mean within the bounds of the story. But with Carrington, there was no choice which I found quite frightening actually. During 'Frankenstein', Kenneth was talking about the importance of you being in the same business and understanding that he took so much of the part home...

I think so. Some people say the opposite - they say actors shouldn't be married to actors. But I've always said, perhaps because I was brought up by a very successful partnership - my parents were very happily married for 27 years and they were both actors - and I've always felt that it's that thing of understanding that's so important. I mean not necessarily that you understand successfully all the time - you don't, and living with Dr Frankenstein was not easy - but at least, maybe

you understand after the fact, so I think it works much better that way, and we have tremendous independence and that's very important.

Do you find sometimes that you're so involved in what you're each doing, that you seldom see the other person?

Of course.

That must be a worry.

I don't know. How do you live your life? How do people live their lives? What is the norm? There is no norm. And what is acceptable and unacceptable is different for everybody. So there are no rules, absolutely no rules at all. [I love observations like this - realisations like this, when the further away you get from super-successful people the more you find people who live frighteningly by the rules and who project these rules onto those around them and make you feel like you're living your life 'wrong' if you're not abiding by these stupid rules they've been spoon fed by someone. And it scares them if you break these rules because it threatens the very foundation of their existence and how their life makes sense.] It seems you and Kenneth don't have a lot of time away from projects?

I know, but we do. What can I tell you? We work a lot.

You must have a formula by now.

No, everything changes from day to day. There's no sort of one way of living. Sometimes it's harder than other times.

This year's been very bad...

Because of the sheer amount of work and pressure?

Yeah - because 'Frankenstein' was a killer, and then I did 'Sense and Sensibility' - I just finished that a week ago - so I've been three months on location - it's a killer.

Living such individual lives - how does one combine that with having a family?

I don't know. I just don't know the answer to that. I just don't try to see or project or look into the future or anything. I just try and take each day as it comes. I think that's best. It's dangerous but I just think it's useless not to embrace impermanence and all its faults, because I just think that's the way life is.

Did you know much about Carrington before you received this script?

I knew a bit about her, because the project had been around for 20 years. It took a long time to raise the money - partly because of the subject matter - a lot of people said "we don't want to make a movie about a poof who lived with a girl". It was that sort of reaction for a long time, but I went and auditioned / screen-tested for it about 10 years ago - I'm now 41-years-old - so she's sort of been in the system for a long time.

In Venice, your character Dora Carrington, says: "Do you ever think about dying and watching him die". Is it easier being famous, to face death - knowing your's and your husband's names will live on?

Oh no. Well, that's not true, it's just not true. I mean I don't like this idea at all. I think that the nice thing about being an actor is that you don't leave any stuff lying around - no buildings, no rubbish. I think it's best to come on the journey, enjoy the journey, and fuck off - and don't leave anything. I've never had that strange, bizarre quest to make your mark. In two generations time, it's going to be "who won the Oscar last year?"

You leave videos of yourself

But that's not why I do it.

But it's a form of immortality

Yeah, I suppose so - but who cares? They'll be gone in a 1000 years. I don't really think about it like that at all.

Where do you keep your Oscar?

I've got it in the downstairs bathroom at the moment! It's really nice, and it's not disrespectful at all. It's just that it looks a bit 'oooh tres' anywhere else in the house.

Do you have any of Carrington's paintings?

I've got...Kenneth gave me an amazing present two years ago, when he knew I had the film - which was a fireplace - you know, she did a lot of decorative art - and she painted a fireplace, tiles for a fireplace for her brother Noel in 1930 -

How did he acquire it?

He found it somewhere in America - he just went and searched.

Are you becoming a mother anytime soon? [There had been rumours in the press.]

I'm supposed to be pregnant at the moment! But it's not true. I think this is my 'other life' - the media life. It's fascinating to read about. The story came up because I wasn't doing 'The Crucible'.

Why aren't you doing 'The Crucible' - because of the intensity of your work recently?

It was, it was a lot of things. I'm loathe to talk too much about it because someone else is going to do the job brilliantly and I didn't want to...but I was asked to do it, and I really wanted to do it, and I didn't realise that I was being insane to even think about doing another movie after 'Sense and Sensibility' which was such a huge project, huge commitment and I suddenly...

It broke my heart to say no - I love Dan [Daniel Day Lewis], and I want to work with him so much again, and we wanted to do this so much, but I just knew that I couldn't regenerate enough. I just couldn't. I would've started rehearsals August 14th. It's mad. You just can't.

And it's terribly important to be able to say NO at the right time.

What made it the most important professional decision I've ever made certainly was that I wanted to do it so much.

Are you just physically exhausted?

Yeah, I'm very, very tired; but it's not just physically - because for me, every film is like there's so much - because it's a family, you create a family, you live with this family for three months; every moment of every day you belong to 100 people and you must give everything you have and it's a huge labour of love which is undertaken with the utmost; well it's the most wonderful job in the world, but what you mustn't do is be greedy or overdo it - because then you won't have enough to give people.

How does it feel becoming the victim of rumours? How do you cope?

I ignore it - roundly. It's easy to ignore. It amuses me. Honestly, it's fine. It's like I have an image of the 'other person' - this media image of mine - it's like a separate person, a different person, and it just doesn't worry me at all.

I enjoy the moments like this - where I have to communicate with people, and talk, and see everybody face to face, and really discuss whatever we're discussing.

And otherwise, I just don't worry about it because all the rumour stuff is from people who you haven't talked to! Or who don't know anything or are making things up! And there are so many wild rumours - it's quite interesting - you are quite detached because it's got nothing to do with you!

Have you made a conscious decision to not have children because of work, or do you feel your biological clock? [At the time of this interview Emma was still married to Kenneth Branagh and did not have children. She actually does now have a child.]

I honestly think I'd react to getting pregnant in the same way as to anything really. I'd just say: "oh great, something new, something different", but I've never actively wanted to have a child, but that's because I'm so...I have tremendous fulfilment in my work and in my life.

You don't have to have children to be a mother.

All your maternal instincts - you can use in all fields of life; you don't have to have children. And I think sometimes we need people who don't have children, for children. I think it's a completely different relationship to children. I think they're terribly important. When people say: "he or she is so marvellous with children - it's such a shame they didn't have any", I say: "NO, because look how they belong to other children who aren't their's". It's like there are plenty of people's children to mother; you don't have to have your own, and if you have your own it makes it impossible actually, or very difficult, for you to expend energy on other forms of mothering. I really think that's terribly important to understand.

[This is a sentiment that I have requoted innumerable times to my various single friends who panic about not having had children yet. And it has been such a help to so many of those friends.]

For now, what do you have planned as your future projects?

LIFE! That's my future project - living - because I must.

You're in a fortunate position where work is offered to you. Do you ever wake up and think I'll never work again?

No, I really don't. Not because, but because if nobody asks me to do something, then I'll start writing stuff.

You are a little like Dora Carrington in not having children

Yes, I suppose that's true. She did to a certain extent 'mother' Luton although it's a very particular kind of mothering. She created, though, a LIFE - that's what I think is so wonderful - the forms of life that she created for him were very artistic. Jane Hill, who wrote 'The Art of Dora Carrington', feels cheated. I don't, because I do believe that the artistic expression should be allowed to flow into domestic life, and that's what we should be able to appreciate. I think that the Victorian notion of family values and ethics and nuclear family goes a long way to destroying that, destroying our notions of living as being a worthwhile thing to do - because we're all so intent on achievement - which is nothing. [I am so, so in agreement with Emma - but I'm also aware that it is easier for those who have achieved to say that achieving is nothing...but then they can say it from a position of authority, since they have - so they know from experience...]

It's very difficult - these are very big questions, but they're as important now as they've ever been. The film kind of asks: "well, how do you live? Do you live? Do you live?"

Did you like Dora Carrington?

Very much; very, very much. I miss her very much. I think I understood her in so far as you can understand any other human being. I did my best.

I empathised with her which I suppose is slightly better than understanding her, which is always SO depressing, isn't it? To be understood? When people say "oh, I so understand you", you think: "fuck off! You know, don't be so fucking patronising." It's desperately patronising; but to feel with someone - that's much more valuable!

So are you going to live by getting the milk and papers?

Minutae. You begin to crave it. I might make jam.

[The publicity agent walks in to asks us to wrap it up, and someone mentions how Emma paints with her left hand in the movie...]

Dora Carrington was right-handed but I'm left-handed, and I thought that nobody would care much [laughs] - it would've looked odd if I'd tried to paint with my right hand. I paint a bit, and I do take lessons, and all that sort of stuff. And I carried on from where the other artists had left off; and I also invented a way of holding the brush which was [demonstrates] - I remember asking: "is this alright, because it feels good".

[And then it's time to go.]

Thank you very much - nice to meet you.

Thank you Emma - fantastic to have met you.