

QUEEN of SMARTS

Game of Thrones' most glamorous schemer Natalie Dormer tells Hannah James about her latest role: fashion maven with a flair for feminism



NATALIE WEARS
Max Mara jacket, top
and pants, maxmara.com

As the ominous motto in TV juggernaut *Game of Thrones* goes: “Winter is coming.” But Natalie Dormer, who plays Margaery Tyrell – the silk-swathed power player whose response to the question: “Do you want to be a queen?” was, “No. I want to be *the* queen” – has an altogether sunnier outlook than her fictional rivals.

And why not? After first garnering plaudits being seduced by Heath Ledger in 2005’s *Casanova*, the actor, now 34, weathered the obligatory young-thespian dry spell waitressing and temping, but soon returned to her corsets to play Anne Boleyn in the 2007 TV series *The Tudors*. (When asked why she took the role, given all the nudity it involved – she has plenty of sex romps with a brooding Jonathan Rhys Meyers as Henry VIII – she said

to be its Face of the Future for 2016. If you look at the list of names previous to me, any actress would be chuffed to be on that list, with that sisterhood.”

It’s no surprise to hear her use the potent term “sisterhood”; Dormer has been outspoken about her feminism in the past. She champions her sisters in her work (“I appreciate scripts that empower women,” she tells me), but she also walks the walk. In 2014 she supported the UK’s Because I Am A Girl campaign, calling for an end to violence against women and children, with a powerful photo of her wide-eyed, porcelain-skinned face scrawled with words taken from the accounts of abuse victims.

However, it’s difficult to imagine Dormer suffering herself to be overlooked because of her gender. In conversation, she comes across as strong-minded and self-aware. Down the line from her base in

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frankly, “I made the decision because I was unemployed.”)

Via a memorable role in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Parts 1 and 2* (the soldier/filmmaker Cressida, whose iconic half-shaved head surely sparked a thousand teenage tributes), and less memorable ones in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Madonna’s panned *W.E.* and *Rush*, Dormer’s global break-out came courtesy of the smash-hit fantasy-romp *Game of Thrones*. Her latest accolade is the Women in Film Max Mara Face of the Future Award, previously held by such luminaries as Rose Byrne, Emily Blunt and Katie Holmes.

“Max Mara is committed to supporting the arts and culture and fostering the next generation,” says Dormer. “I’m honoured

London, her voice is clear and confident, a testament to her upbringing in the affluent commuter town of Reading, in England’s south, with her mother, stepfather, who is a builder, and a younger brother and sister. She’s described her background as “fairly conventional”, and her sensible voice could almost be that of a lawyer or school principal. If I hadn’t already known she’d been head girl at school (defying bullies to get there), I could have guessed it. Although an excellent student, she missed out on the grades needed to study history at Cambridge University, and went to drama school in London instead.

Given the success she accrued in her teen years, both academic and sporting (she was vice-captain of the school netball team and took dance lessons), it’s no ▶

surprise she's self-disciplined enough to run marathons as a hobby. In April she took part in her second London Marathon, where she recorded an impressive time of 3:51, which was 30 seconds slower than her first attempt in 2014. When a reporter questioned her about it, Dormer said, "I don't give a f*ck what my time is; it's about ChildLine [the children's charity she ran to support] today." Despite that, it's a safe bet she intends to smash her PB when she runs in the New York Marathon in November.

Her no-nonsense manner makes Dormer a sparky interviewee. She firmly sets me straight in response to a question about the frequent violence portrayed in *GoT*, particularly towards the female characters. Do you feel a responsibility to portray strong women? I ask.

"I understand what you're saying," she replies coolly, "and the answer is very simple: I'm an actor and my bible is my text. As an actor, my job is to be a vessel for the writer's words. Actors get asked all the time about the subject matter of what they're saying – journalists should learn that these are questions for the writers, not for the actors."

Those writers may make her job difficult at times, she believes, but she has to do it anyway: "Actors are trained to be Richard III, the most horrific villain in history, and also Florence Nightingale, a saint. We will find a way to personify

overcome their trials and challenges on a day-to-day basis, because that's what we're all trying to do."

One of the challenges Dormer herself has successfully overcome was the dearth of such nuanced, powerfully realistic roles for women – that's what led her, together with her fiancé, director Anthony Byrne, to write and develop her own film script. It's taken a while, but *In Darkness*, in which Dormer plays a blind musician who hears a murder taking place in the apartment above her, starts shooting next month.

"Anthony and I started writing it about six years ago, because that's how long it takes to get independent films financed and get people's schedules to line up," she explains. "When we started writing it, it was because we were both frustrated, and yes, because I was frustrated with the quality of characterisation of the scripts that were coming in front of me. But in those six-and-a-half years, I obviously then had the privilege of *Game of Thrones* and *The Hunger Games*, and seeing a revolution-slash-renaissance in three-dimensional females written. So it's been a very interesting one, because I started the process way before the future looked much more optimistic, like it does now."

Dormer's agent deems further questions about the film and her future, which presumably will include

IRON MAIDEN (clockwise from right) Dormer as Cressida in *The Hunger Games Mockingjay – Part 2*; in the UK's Because I Am A Girl campaign; with fiancé Anthony Byrne; running for charity; on set with Jennifer Lawrence; front row at Max Mara; in *Captain America: The First Avenger*; as *GoT*'s Margaery (at right); stunning on the red carpet; in *The Tudors*.



The admission feels like a rare chink in the armour of professional confidence that Dormer wears.

She is confident, however, about the power of clothes – and her ability to deploy that power. Her style forms an important part of the way Dormer thinks of herself: "I'm a Londoner, so there's always an element of classical feminine, but with kind of a street edge. I think, when you're a Londoner, there is something of a hangover where you've still got Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen in the back of your head; the construction of the beautiful tailoring, but deconstruction [too]." She pauses, then adds with an earthy laugh,

"And also, I'm an actor, so I'm always wearing one too many scarves and hats, because that's what we do. You've got to keep the larynx warm, and the beanie and the sunglasses when you're in the airport, so there's also an actor uniform. I don't know why we do it, it's just part of our culture."

And for a working member of that culture, clothes are a crucial tool of the trade. "There are some roles where you step into the costume, and you assume the role immediately because it changes the way you move. Obviously if you're Margaery Tyrell in long silk skirts, or Anne Boleyn in a tight corset, or you're in soldier fatigues as Cressida in *The Hunger Games*, it immediately changes the way you move and feel about yourself. That's why costume is so vital to characterisation."

Her portrayals of Boleyn and Tyrell share more than just corsets. They're both consummate politicians, scheming and plotting to achieve their ascent to power. This is, in fact, oddly similar to a comment she made on her decision to take on the lead role in *The Forest*, a horror film released this year that was set in Japan's real-life "suicide forest" and widely acknowledged to be a less than impressive vehicle for her talents. "I had been a lead on stage and TV," she

reasoned, "so, in a very academic sense, I needed a project to prove I could handle being a lead on a film."

This kind of strategic career planning is admirable, but unusual, surely, in the freewheeling artistic circles she moves in. It's more typical, perhaps, of the Cambridge graduate she so nearly became.

Dormer won't be drawn, however, on whether she shares this trait with her most lauded characters, focusing instead on the rise to worldwide fame they have granted her. Her attitude to this veers between thankfulness and exhaustion. As a cast, she explains, "Our recognition on the street bumps up every year. What's most incredible about that is it's international – you're not just talking about your hometown or LA or New York, you're talking about when you go to a quiet obscure town in Spain when you're on holiday with your family."

She's still stricken with remorse over one such interaction: "I was in Dublin and we were having a family crisis. My other half and I popped out for coffee – I was in near tears – and a fan stopped me in the street. I gave him really short shrift, and the look on his face... It's always haunted me. Because that's your fan, that's someone who loves the show, who has no idea what you're going through on a personal level, and it's because of them you are employed. I dream about finding that guy one day and saying, 'Look, I'm sorry.'"

It sounds as if she's being unduly harsh on herself for her Dublin lapse. To her, though, it's all part of being good at her job. "It's part of the package as an actor. If you reach a certain level of profile, you have to be aware that people feel like they know you, even though they only know your characters. You have to really try and separate your personal and professional persona in such a way as to be graceful at all moments."

Whether the eternally graceful Dormer will achieve her *GoT* character's ultimate desire of sitting on the Iron Throne, not even she knows. But judging from her own equally powerful determination to succeed, the real-life future, to use her own word, looks optimistic. ☺

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"I'M SEEING A RENAISSANCE IN THREE-DIMENSIONAL FEMALES [BEING] WRITTEN"

and make three-dimensional and real any character we are given by our writers."

Well, that's me told. But of course she's right; that is precisely her job. And not many actors could parlay justifiable irritation at being asked the same question for six years straight into such a reasoned analysis. "I look to play women who feel real, who feel three-dimensional and also a bit contradictory, because I think you and I are contradictory; that's what it is to be human," she continues. "So if there is a pattern of me playing strong women, it's because I think I see that in the script when I get it. I just want to play real people who

a wedding at some point, too personal, so there's no word on when she'll tie the knot with Byrne, whom she met in 2007 on the set of *The Tudors*. But the actor has been more candid in the past, admitting, "We've just been so busy that we haven't managed to get around to planning it."

Something she *will* discuss is the new addition to her family: "I just got a new puppy! Since I got the dog, my wardrobe has been firmly split between what I wear with the dog, and what I wear only away from the dog."

The Max Mara items she was given as part of the award she just won, of course,

are firmly in the latter category, and she speaks of them with real reverence. "They gave me this fantastic look, an amazing pair of camel-coloured high-waisted trousers that are this divine soft fabric. They have such an elegant movement to them. The silhouette reminded me of Katharine Hepburn from the 1940s. Every woman should have a warm, comforting, effortlessly graceful Max Mara jacket that she can sling over her shoulders, especially in British winters."

Dormer's poise in front of the camera, however, didn't always come naturally.



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"I'm classically trained [as an actor], and in that three-year training, you won't have a lesson in how to pull the right angles or the best body shapes on a photo shoot. Those add-ons are something you learn very much on the job. It's taken me over a decade to reach a level in my career where I have just enough man-hours, and enough experience of photo shoots, where I feel I can bring something to them, you know?"