

WOMEN *of the* YEAR



ROCKING THE BOAT

Emma Thompson wears chiffon sequined dress, £3,495, Amanda Wakeley. White-gold ring, £9,000, Maurizio Pintaldi. See Stockists for details. Hair by Paul Merritt at Jed Root. Make-up by Tania Courtney at Mandy Coakley, using Chanel Christmas 2010.



ROLE MODEL *of the* YEAR

EMILIA

After a year of career highs, the outspoken actor and activist talks to *STEPHANIE THEOBALD* about depression and the joys of family life
Photographs by *NICK HADDOW*.
Styled by *NATHALIE RIDDLE*

It's a bouncy ride, interviewing Emma Thompson. We are lying on a double bed in an Oxfordshire mansion and Thompson's pathological interest in just about everything is giving the mattress a rigorous workout.

The famously outspoken actor, producer, writer and activist is talking passionately about depression ('mine metabolised into crippling pain, and that was interesting'), child-rearing ('your mistakes are their building blocks... but God, it's interesting!'), ageing ('I look in the mirror and I see my wrinkles on my face and I think, "Oh, I am old! How do I feel about that?") and her recent charity work for survivors of abuse, torture and rape ('I'm very curious about all those experiences and what kind of suffering that produces in a person').

After a while, her universal interest in the whole world makes her so hot that she hops off the bed to remove the blue mohair Margiela cardigan she has been wearing for the *Bazaar* shoot in the gardens of the estate owned by her friends, the film producer Eric Fellner, and model Laura Bailey. (Thompson also donned a slinky chainmail look – she doesn't mind 'doing a few posh dresses,' she says.)

Now she slips into a simple white cotton dressing gown. She looks handsome and rakish – a bit like Julie Andrews in *Victor Victoria*. It's also pleasantly shocking to see that no, she probably hasn't had any 'work' done, as she has always insisted. She is radiant, and yet her face can still tell a story. And what a fantastically successful story it has been: a sparkling career spanning more than 30 years that is still going from strength to strength. Thompson remains the only person to have won Academy Awards for both acting (*Howards End* in 1993) and writing (the screenplay for *Sense and Sensibility* in 1996), and this year she was honoured with her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The *Nanny McPhee* films, for which she plays the leading role and writes the scripts, have proved a Hollywood triumph, and she is about to don 'fluffy socks and fleeces' to write (in long hand) the third installment in the front room of her West Hampstead home, having already penned a script for a new film version of *My Fair Lady* earlier this year.

But alongside such high-flying achievements, Thompson's modus operandi has made her the 'thinking woman's' poster girl, an actor who refuses to conform to expectation. There is a rare honesty to her that you don't get with many of Hollywood's luminaries, who insist on the presence of their agent at interviews (you certainly won't find many bouncing up and down on a bed urging you to eat chocolates and drink wine).

This candor seeps into Thompson's performances, too. She's not just a versatile actor with an ability to switch from roles in Hollywood comedies such as 2008's *Last Chance Harvey* to playing Sybil Trelawney in the *Harry Potter* films; she also has the power to convey emotional turmoil in a way that is both unexpected and deeply moving. *Love Actually*, for instance, is usually remembered for the almost unbearably poignant scene where she plays the wife who discovers her husband is philandering, but who pulls herself together for the sake of her children.

As for her politics, they don't seem to have changed much since her Cambridge University days when she drove around on a motorbike with a shaved head. She is still just as unafraid of being controversial; she bought a plot of land near Heathrow Airport to stop the building of the third runway, and threatened to resign from the set of *Brideshead Revisited* when film executives asked then 25-year-old Hayley Atwell to slim down for her role ('Everyone has to be so small – it's as though actual women are an endangered species'); and her latest project, Safe, is the initiative of human rights group the Helen Bamber Foundation, of which she is chair.

For the Safe campaign, which aims to help those forced into labour or sexual exploitation (an estimated 27 million people around the world), Thompson rallied together actors including Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, Thandie Newton and Helen Mirren, and asked them to be photographed in locations that defined 'safe' for them. The results are both intriguing and moving. Moore's safe place is in the corner of a bookshop, Newton's is in bed and Rachel

Weisz feels free up a tree. Anjelica Huston wears a pair of shades, 'which makes you realise a lot...' Thompson says, looking ruefully into her glass of wine.

Thompson needs to be super-busy. It has 'saved' her, she admits, on many occasions. Writing the script for *Sense and Sensibility* in her mid-thirties pulled her through the 'ghastly, painful business' of divorce from her six-year-long marriage to fellow actor and director Kenneth Branagh in 1995.

She has been famously outspoken about the depressive episodes that she has suffered throughout her life, with a level of frankness hitherto unknown in Hollywood circles. 'I

think that if you're in public life and you're projecting confidence, it's very important to admit to another side that can be very vulnerable to the kind of chemical imbalance that depression is,' she says. 'Then at least there's a little reality check – people can think, "that's not real, that glamour, because there are other aspects to that kind of life or that kind of person."'

It is still hard to reconcile Thompson's accounts of mental anguish with the image she presents in her working life. Susanna White, director of the second *Nanny McPhee* movie, says of her: 'She's very confident and knows exactly who she is.'

Thompson's face breaks into a girlish grin. 'Actually,' she says, taking a swig of white wine, 'I couldn't be more confused or stumbling about in the dark at the moment if I tried. And I'm 51 years old! So you just go, "Well, all right, just accept it – if that's how I feel, that's how I feel."'

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The 'noonday demon' first hit in her final year at Newnham College in Cambridge. On the surface, everything seemed perfect; she was the bright eldest daughter of actor Phyllida Law and Eric Thompson, the producer and soothing voice behind *The Magic Roundabout*. She'd got into the university's Footlights comedy troupe and even caught the attention of a London theatrical agent in her first year.

But behind the scenes, it was another story. When her beloved uncle died and her father had a massive stroke, she says she 'became slightly dysfunctional. I couldn't really do anything – had no energy. I remember my tutor stopping me in the street on my bike and saying: "I'm worried about you."'

Thompson didn't tell anyone that she and her sister Sophie (who is also an actor) were trying to teach their father to speak again. 'I just kind of soldiered on through it, wondering why I felt so desperate,' she says.

She was still suffering from clinical depression when, at 24, soon after graduation, she landed the lead role in a West End production of *Me and My Girl*. By this time, the depression had metabolised into physical pain. 'I used to get terrible lower-back pain. I was crippled by it. I had MRI scans, thought I had cancer of the spine... I remember one day standing up, sneezing, and it was as if my back burst into flames.'

A friend put her on to an American doctor. 'He had a diagnosis that he calls TMS: tension myositis syndrome. He looked at me and said: "You are exactly the type of personality that experiences this kind of pain. It's an A-type personality that's extremely self-punishing.'" When she accepted the diagnosis, the pain eventually dispersed. 'If I get very angry, I'll still sometimes get feelings in my back as a form of pain. When they diagnose depression, some clinicians will say it's anger that's not metabolised – anger that's metamorphosed into pain.'

Although the physical pain lessened, the depression returned again after the birth of her daughter Gaia, who Thompson had when she was 40 with her second husband, the actor Greg Wise. She wanted to have another child, and struggled through three IVF cycles during a period she describes as 'hellish'. 'You want another one, you just do. It's something biological. Once that touch paper has been lit, it somehow leads to this insane desire for 17 children.'

In 2003, she and Wise adopted a former child soldier from Rwanda, then 16-year-old Tindyebwa Agaba (known affectionately as 'Tindy'), finally moving on from the IVF nightmare.

I sense that Thompson has had other breakthroughs, too, *vis-à-vis* the turmoil of her internal existence. She uses the word 'healing' a lot, and she's keen to talk about the things she does to avoid sinking too deeply into melancholy.

As part of the Safe project, she was photographed naked in a river near her second home close to Dunoon in West Scotland, a clue to one of the things that keeps her sane: nature. 'There are no mirrors – nothing reflecting anything back

at you,' she says, smiling. 'You just live inside the trees and grow back into the earth, somehow. That, to me, is the most healing thing – going to Scotland and growing a beard, basically.'

Thompson and the family have a 'regular hootenanny' when they are in Scotland, she says. 'We all just really go bananas. A lot of it outside – bouncing into rivers and lochs and things. That's terribly important. Especially as you get older. Moderation's a marvelous thing, but it's also terribly important to lose yourself in a communal wild riot.'

Food, too, gives her that safe feeling. 'We always have a family meal together. Greg always buys me a cookery book for our trips up to Scotland. It was on onions this year.'

And yet, she's aware that the food can be problematic for women, and refuses to have anyone talk about diets in front of Gaia, now 11 years old. She smiles as she recalls a trip to Los Angeles in June for a tribute gala for *The Graduate* director Mike Nichols. Thompson was wearing a décolleté Vivienne Westwood frock. 'It was fascinating!' she says. 'Tom Hanks and Jack Nicholson and all these blokes going, "Whoa" because you've got your boobs right up and your bust is made bigger.' She couldn't work out if they were 'attracted or repelled'. 'Maybe a bit of both, because they're all so used to waifs... little girls.'

There is something very likeable about Thompson. You sense there's a lot of bravado mixed in with the confidence, but this only makes her more admirable because she has to constantly push herself. 'My life's motto,' she says, shrugging, 'boils down to, "Try and make things a bit better, if you can, then bugger off."'

With that, she swigs back the last of the wine, slams the glass down and makes one of her grins.

A couple of days after our interview, Thompson sends me a handwritten letter saying what a pleasure it was to talk, and how 'it occurred to me to send you my favourite bit of writing about depression – 19th-century style'.

It's a letter penned in 1820 by Sydney Smith, the English writer and clergyman, beginning: 'Nobody has suffered more from low spirits than I have done,' and continuing with 20 points on how to make things better, from 'live as well as you dare'

to 'short views of human life – not further than dinner or tea'. The fact that someone should have their favourite piece of depression literature at hand strikes me as touching, and also fabulously defiant.

Indeed, defiance is a quality that Thompson possesses in abundance. In her career, the actor-screenwriter is undoubtedly looking at the stars, yet she has the fascinating ability to appear down to earth – one of us, beset with all our doubts, ambiguities, sadness and joy. But because she's Emma Thompson, she's damn well going to make the best of it.

The Safe exhibition, hosted by Chanel, is showing in London in November. For details, visit www.helenbamber.org. □

EMMA'S WORLD

What was the highlight of 2010 for you?

'A whole week of perfect weather in Scotland during the May half-term. Everyone thought we had been to the Caribbean.'

Biggest challenge of the year?

'Accepting the effects of gravity.'

What is your enduring philosophy?

'Only be original.'

Success is...

'the by-product of hard work and, more often than not, unhelpful.'

What are your ambitions for 2011?

'I'm hoping finally to clean out the loft.'