

'I swore I'd never wear a CORSET' AGAIN

So what persuaded *Game of Thrones* star NATALIE DORMER to get laced back in for hotly anticipated new BBC drama *Picnic at Hanging Rock*? She tells *Elaine Lipworth* how being 'profoundly bullied' as a teenager gave her empathy for her most complex role yet ►

PHOTOGRAPHS KYLE ALEXANDER



I wouldn't go back to my teenage years for love nor money,' says Natalie Dormer, crumpling into a deep, throaty laugh. You know the girls who everybody thinks they want to be – the ones who are dating the sexy boys, like the captain of the football team? I was nowhere near them. I was never an alpha girl and those girls terrified me...they still do.'

Natalie and I are chatting over tea in Southwest London, close to the home she shares with her fiancé, Irish director Anthony Byrne. Wearing a striped Cas top and Mother jeans, the 36-year-old *Game of Thrones* star looks fantastic, having just returned from a relaxing trip to see her sister in Brighton. But the glamorous actress, whose notable roles range from Anne Boleyn in *The Tudors* to Cressida in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* blacksmiths, reveals that she had very little confidence growing up. 'I was incredibly geeky and had no sense of style. I came out of my shell a bit when I was doing my A-levels and found drama, but I really didn't get into my stride until I was pushing my late 20s,' she says.

She confesses that she was 'profoundly bullied at school' and says the attacks took the form of 'meanisms, name-calling, having the things I cared about undermined as worthless or pretentious'. Never mind that Natalie became head girl and vice-captain of the netball team – if anything those accomplishments counted against her in the eyes of the resident 'mean girls'. And as the actress points out, 'The true cleverness of psychological bullying is that if you are asked to describe to a teacher what someone has actually said or done, it looks like nothing at all.'

We are deep in discussion about the nature of adolescent angst and the horrors of bullying because it's one of the themes at the heart of Natalie's latest project, the spine-chilling TV miniseries *Picnic at Hanging Rock* – about three girls at a finishing school who mysteriously vanish, together with their headmistress, in the wilds of Australia during a

Valentine's Day outing in 1900. A reimagining of the 1967 movie by Joan Lindsay, the story was originally told on screen in Peter Watts' classic 1975 film version, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is echoed into the fabric of Australian folklore to such an extent that many people believe the fictional disappearance of the girls actually took place. 'The novel is revered. It's like Australia's



Natalie as headmistress Mrs Appleby in the new BBC adaptation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, above left, and playing Margery Tyrell in *Game of Thrones*



Love Eterne: it's part of their national identity,' she says.

The series explores the 'turbulent emotional landscape of the girls' world,' says Natalie, who stars along with a talented group of Australian newcomers. It looks at the hysteria a group of girls can create. We see them screaming as they come off the rock and can't find their friends and how they can wind each other up. 'The film also addresses the struggles they have moving into womanhood, asking, "Do I have powers over me?" and "What do I do with these powers?"'

They are themes that still resonate today. 'Hormones don't change. That search for identity and the wondering "Who am I?" are as relevant in 2018 as they were in 1900,' says Natalie. 'Now, teenagers deal with different anxieties, too, with the advent of social media. They feel, "I'm meant to think like this or like that." But the message within *Picnic* is universal: "Whatever people think or say of you, you've got to be true to yourself."

Natalie is magnetic as the unfurling and tyrannical headmistress Hester Appleby, who has arrived in Australia from London with the goal of reinventing herself. Spike's running from her demons [the series hints at an earlier abusive relationship]

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at a time when women had no autonomy to do that,' says Natalie. Posing as an aristocratic widow, she opens a college for young women in a gothic mansion and becomes fixated with instilling purity and refinement in her charges. 'There are flashback scenes to the grimy, rat-run streets of London,' says Natalie, 'definitely

switching from well-spoken English to broad cockney as she describes Mrs Appleby's murky past. 'She's not the class that she's pretending to be – she's very much a working-class girl.'

Given the rich complexities of the part, it's interesting that Natalie almost turned down the role because she was wary of getting typecast. 'I was suspicious about putting on a corset again so soon after leaving *Game of Thrones*. I swore I would never wear one again! She had a dramatic change of heart, however, after receiving a beautiful letter' from the director Lynskey.

Konrads, convincing her that the series would be 'bold and different, a stylised mash-up of gothic horror with romance and comedy'.

Another draw: 'I'd never been to Australia before! Highlights of the shoot included filming in the Macedon region near Melbourne, at the legendary Hanging Rock itself. It's a stunning volcanic rock formation that comes out of nowhere and has been sacred to Aboriginal communities for millennia,' she says. Also

intriguing was the supernatural element of the drama, which 'comes straight from Joan Lindsay's novel'. The author 'didn't wear watches because they stopped on her' – there was something of the white witch about her'. She was obsessed with the idea that time is non-linear and just a construct we humans have created,' says Natalie. She believed that energy can go round in circles.

Unlike Peter Watts' film, which depicted Mrs Appleby as a sadist, Natalie portrays a nuanced tyrant. 'The appeal was fleshing her out. Monsters rarely think they are monsters – and she's not a psychopath, she is damaged goods. Deep down, bullies are the most insecure people; their problems always lie within themselves. That's what I was told when I was ➤

‘I MY FIANCE AND I COULDN'T WRITE IN THE SAME ROOM. DOORS GOT SLAMMED’

NATALIE'S NEEDS

- FAVOURITE BREAKFAST
Smoked salmon and scrambled eggs.
- THREE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE YOU...
Gin, tonic and lemon.
- WHAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE ABOUT YOU?
I like ironing.
- PLAN B
If Tony Robinson would let me take over as presenter of *Time Team*, I'd love that.

WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?
My dog Indy, a Rhodesian ridgeback. At the beach in Brighton, where my sister lives, she sticks her nose in the sea. It's just sheer pleasure and it makes you wonder why we can't have simple, visceral reactions to our surroundings.

WHERE ARE YOU HAPPIEST?
If I'm not on a film set, it's walking Indy.

WHAT MAKES YOU CRY?
The list is far too long. I started crying the other day when I listened to the Grenfell Tower testimonies.

TREASURED POSSESSION
I'm a hoarder. I have a hundred and one champagne corks – and now I can't remember which cork was from which celebration!

TEEN IDOL
Tori Amos. When I was a teenager going through those troubled years, she was my heroine. I was obsessed with *Little Earthquakes* and *Under the Pink*.

MOTTO
Every girl a burden, every burden a gift.



► bullied at school and I never really understood it until I was an adult because it was so hard for me,' says Natalie, who works with Escher Ramirez's charity Childline. 'Hester Applehead could have done with therapy because she is the least emotionally self-aware woman I've ever played! [Natalie has had therapy herself and is a strong believer in the benefits of counselling. - I think it is very healthy.]

Raised in Reading by her mother Claire and stepfather Gary, Natalie is close to her younger siblings, who are in their 20s. Mark is a second officer on a big millionaire's yacht - 'I can't tell you who' - and Samantha is a midwife - 'so I've already got her lined up,' says Natalie. 'Just not yet,' she throws in before I get the chance to ask about her plans to start a family. Engaged to Anthony since 2011 (they met more than a decade ago), she won't say when they plan to walk down the aisle.

At school, Natalie could often be found in the library: 'I loved history and English.' Offered a place to read history at Cambridge, she just missed the required grades in her A-levels. 'Of course it was terrible, because I had been academic and that is where I had found my self-worth. Instead, she attended the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London. 'Was it fate? Well, I do believe that you may have a difficult or upsetting experience and, at the time, you can't understand what the benefit of it is. But further down the line you can face the pain and harness the lessons that you learned.' Now in my 30s, I think that there are cars, you are dead in life and it's how you play them that matters.' She has learnt to be philosophical. There have been times when she has been invited to meetings with directors she admires, then I haven't got the job. I've cried and thought, 'Oh my God, I'm never going to do the kind of work I want to do,' but later down the line our paths have crossed again.

Early on in her career, Natalie also learned not to get complacent. After my first film, *Casanova* with Heath Ledger and Jeremy Irons, I was unemployed for ten months. It was one of my biggest lessons.

It means she doesn't take anything for granted, certainly not her life-changing role as the ambitious Margaret Tyrell in *Game of Thrones*. Accounting for the show's phenomenal success, Natalie credits the great writing. There are so many characters you can latch on to. 'There's also the fact that, while the series is fantastical, it reflects the power plays of the real world.' There are no regrets that her character, the Queen of Westeros, was killed off two years ago (like so many others in the long-running drama). 'Five years was the perfect time [to play her] and now I

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KYLE ALEXANDER/AUGUST, CAPITAL PICTURES, © HBO, REX/SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY IMAGES

get the best of both worlds because I can watch it on my sofa and get a kick out of it, going: 'Oh my God, they've done *what?*'

'Releasing me meant I could return to the stage,' says Natalie, who triumphed last year in the West End production of David Ives's dark comedy *Venus in Fur*. She was also free to film a long-term passion project, *In Darkness*, a psychological thriller she wrote with Anthony. Set in London, the film stars Natalie as Sofia, a blind pianist who becomes entangled in the criminal underworld and Russian mafia after overhearing a murder in the flat above her. Writing with Anthony was challenging, she admits, 'because couples say terrible things to each other that you would never say to your best friend. We learned very quickly that we couldn't write in the same room. Doors got slammed at various points and I wouldn't necessarily rush into writing with Anthony again, but I have huge respect for him. On the set, it was a different story. He pulls out the best in me as an actress. We were simpatico and it was beautiful.'

As Sofia, Natalie learned how to navigate London without her sight by working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). 'You're never going to fully appreciate what it's like because you have the safety net there - your eyes - but I have to do a massive shout out to the RNIB because they gave me my cane lessons and showed me how to walk up and down the street and navigate around my own house. You realise you know a lot just by memory and sound.' Making the film has given her a new

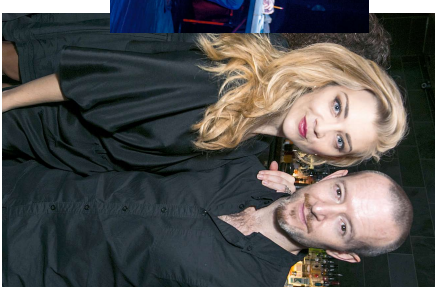


From left: with Jonathan Rhys Meyers in *The Tudors*; her acclaimed stage role in *Venus in Fur*; Natalie and her fiancé, Irish director and writer Anthony Byrne

appreciation of life. 'You get your priorities straight. As I've got older I've got better at understanding that you need quality of life as well as work. For her relationship, that means 'forcing off time to see each other and being a bit disciplined about it. It's tough, as an actor - you find yourself being flown to far corners of the earth - but that's where technology is the saviour. Thank God for WhatsApp and FaceTime. And you know what they say: absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

Natalie emphasises the importance of staying calm and finding equilibrium. A long-time yoga enthusiast, she is a dedicated runner and has taken part in the London Marathon twice. 'Running is a physical discipline and a mental meditation. It lifts the endorphins and balances the mind.' And she is an advocate of meditation. 'Anthony and I took a course in Transcendental Meditation. It's particularly busy or on a long-haul flight. It's how I bring myself back down.'

Very much her own woman, Natalie has little in common with the one she will be portraying in her next role, *Game of Thrones* star Victien Leish. She brought the rights to a biography of the screen legend and is producing a miniseries about her life. But she has a deep empathy for the screen icon. 'For too long she has been defined as being part



of a couple [with Laurence Olivier] as opposed to the individual she was. Victien Leigh was a trailblazer as an actress in her camera technique, but she was also a very troubled woman with a mental illness that she fought heavily. I think her story needs to be told. People know the broad brush strokes - *Come with the Wind*, her beauty - but they've completely missed her humanity and strength. Both are qualities the actresses share.

Before we part, I ask Natalie about the distinctive tattoo on her left arm which reads 'Fear is the mind-killer'. 'It's a line from Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*,' she says. 'People say, "Natalie Dormer likes to play strong women"; I say, 'I like to play complex women who are terrified but courageous, they're pushing through the fear.''

Which is exactly what Natalie has always done herself. Now embarking on an exciting new chapter, the producing and writing mean flexing my muscles on the other side of the camera. Not that she'll be giving up her day job. 'I will always be a gun for hire because acting is my passion,' she says.

But I like the storytelling role; having a bit more control of my destiny,' she says. 'I want, as she says, "the we all want as women."'

■ Picnic at Hanging Rock will start on BBC Two on 11 July. In Darkness will be on DVD and Digital from 9 July and in selected cinemas from 6 July