



An innocent abroad

One minute Hailee Steinfeld was your typical tweenage girl; the next she was wowing critics, being nominated for an Oscar and then taking the lead in Julian Fellowes' new film. Now 16, she tells *Elaine Lipworth* that life is, like, totally surreal. Except that she still has to clean her room...

Photograph by **Josh Olins**

Four years ago Hailee Steinfeld was an aspiring child actress with stars in her eyes. Her parents were shepherding their then 12-year-old daughter to auditions around Los Angeles – along with hordes of other Hollywood hopefuls. When she was hired for an “exciting job” promoting a line of back-to-school clothes for the budget American department store Kmart, Steinfeld was delighted. “I had six auditions and finally got the part. Basically it was a bunch of kids in a classroom going, ‘Yeah, my jeans are really great.’ I had friends calling me, saying, ‘Hey I just saw your commercial.’ It was the coolest thing.”

But just months later Steinfeld was chosen from 15,000 young actresses to take the lead in a film by Joel and Ethan Coen (the directing duo behind *No Country For Old Men*, *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo*). She starred opposite Jeff Bridges (a former child actor himself) and Matt Damon in a raw, atmospheric remake of the John Wayne Western *True Grit* (1969), itself based on Charles Portis's novel. Stealing every scene, she played Mattie Ross, a tough, spirited, smart Arkansas 14-year-old who hires Rooster Cogburn (Bridges), a hard-drinking one-eyed US Marshal, to hunt down her father's killer. Going from Kmart to *True Grit* was “obviously

a surreal jump”, says Steinfeld. Not since Jodie Foster dazzled critics as the streetwise prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976) opposite Robert De Niro has a youthful performance elicited such an enthusiastic response from the film industry. It led to an Oscar nomination, just a few weeks after Steinfeld's 14th birthday.

We meet at a restaurant in a shopping centre close to the family's home, an hour's drive from Los Angeles. Steinfeld's father has dropped her off. It's a muggy afternoon and we settle for a shady spot in the patio garden under a sycamore tree, surrounded by rose bushes. Now 16, Steinfeld wears no make-up or jewellery

and is dressed in a black sleeveless Miu Miu maxi-dress. The designer dress is no surprise – Miuccia Prada made Steinfeld the face of her Miu Miu line two years ago. “That was my introduction to fashion,” says the actress, perhaps not realising that most teenagers’ introduction to fashion is more likely to involve Boots make-up and Topshop skinny jeans. She is willowy with shining, brown almond-shaped eyes inherited from her part-Filipina mother.

“It is all surreal,” she says frequently throughout our interview – and who can argue with her? Steinfeld had never

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been abroad before the global press tour for *True Grit*. In the past two years she has barely been home. She has been all over Europe and America, filming a rom-com with Keira Knightley (*Can a Song Save Your Life?*), *Ender’s Game* with Harrison Ford and *Three Days to Kill* with Kevin Costner.

Last year Steinfeld was in Italy shooting *Romeo and Juliet*, in which she plays Juliet. Adapted and produced by Julian Fellowes (the Oscar-winning writer of *Gosford Park* and *Downton Abbey*), it also stars the 20-year-old British actor Douglas Booth as Romeo. Paul Giamatti and Damian Lewis co-star. “Every girl wishes she was Juliet in some version of their life,” says Steinfeld, who didn’t have to audition for the part. She was at home when the film’s Italian director, Carlo Carlei, called asking whether she was interested. “After 20 minutes of jumping up and down and screaming, I was like, ‘Yes! Absolutely. Of course I am!’” Fellowes spent a lot of time with the young cast during filming. “We did dinners all the time in Italy with [Fellowes’] wife and his son. It was really great getting to know them.”

Unlike Baz Luhrmann’s modern re-imagining of Verona’s star-crossed lovers in his 1996 remake with Leonardo

DiCaprio and Claire Danes, Fellowes’ interpretation is traditional. “Medieval Italy. Velvet, silk and damask costumes. Climbing roses. Beautiful Italian architecture – that sort of thing,” he says of his production.

“I had watched Franco Zeffirelli’s [1968] version with my grandma,” says Steinfeld.



Clockwise from above Steinfeld as Juliet, with Douglas Booth as Romeo; in *True Grit*; in a Kmart campaign



“I was actually reading the play in school [she is home-schooled] the same time that I received the script,” she says, running her fingers through her thick curtain of waist-length brown hair. “The rivalry between the Montague and the Capulet kids seems very modern to me. Juliet is a free spirit, full of untapped love and passion. I think a lot of girls can relate to her. And it’s very relevant in terms of kids defying their parents.”

Steinfeld celebrated her 15th birthday while shooting the film, making her closer in age to Shakespeare’s heroine (who is 13) than any previous screen Juliet. She was entrusted with picking – or at least having a strong say in the casting of – her Romeo. “I read with Douglas in London and we had a

connection that really worked. Of course he is very good-looking,” she says of her on-screen lover, “but he’s also so talented and sweet – the perfect Romeo.”

What was the most challenging aspect of the film? “This movie had my first death scene, which was pretty intense.” And the kissing scenes, she says, were “awkward, because you have to forget that there are 10 or 15 people standing watching you. It was embarrassing”. She fiddles with the fabric of her dress, winding it around her wrist. “We started with the balcony scene. ‘Hey nice to



meet you, balcony. Let’s go!” She claps her hands. “But Douglas and I jumped right in.” There is plenty of passion but no nudity. As Steinfeld says, the love scenes “were done appropriately and tastefully due to my age; because I am a minor there are restrictions”.

She worked with a voice coach on her English accent, which is flawless in the film. But “every time I try to do a British accent now, it goes into some weird Australian thing”. Steinfeld says that tackling Shakespeare for the first time “was like learning a new language. I had to translate each line so that I would

understand what they were saying, but it became fun. It was neat. I was always running lines with my mum.”

At times Steinfeld comes across as far older than she is. Talking to her can feel like talking to a seasoned Hollywood player – she speaks fluent film jargon and A-list names trip off her tongue. Then she will suddenly, and endearingly, show her age with a burst of teenage exuberance. In one scene, she tells me, “Douglas and I run out of the house, down these steps, wearing slippery shoes that had no traction. We were holding hands and I was afraid that I was going to fall because I had the long dress on and I was, like, ‘If I’m going down, you’re coming down with me.’” Sure enough, Booth slipped. “It was the classic banana fall,” she says with a giggle. “He fell on his bum.”

Has she ever been in love? “As a teenage girl, you want to believe you’ve

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been in love,” she says slowly. “It was hard for me at first trying to understand the character, but I pulled from personal experiences and from people around me. I’m 16,” she says with a smile, “I’ve not had a boyfriend.”

Earlier this year Steinfeld sat next to Miuccia Prada at a dinner in Paris following the Miu Miu catwalk show. “We went to one of her favourite restaurants. I remember the food was so exotic, just the craziest meat and fish.” She looks down at the hamburger she is eating and smiles. “I’m very plain when it comes to food, so I didn’t eat much. Mrs Prada complimented me on how I looked, which I thought was funny because of course I was wearing Miu Miu.”

There was some controversy surrounding Steinfeld’s first Miu Miu advertising campaign in 2011. One image, featuring the actress sitting on a train track looking tearful and vulnerable, was banned in Britain by the Advertising Standards Authority, who described it as “irresponsible”. But Steinfeld won’t

talk about it, saying only that “Bruce Weber [the renowned fashion photographer] captured some really beautiful moments.”

Steinfeld was born and raised in Thousand Oaks, a middle-class suburb of Los Angeles. Her father, Pete, is a personal trainer and her mother, Cheri, an interior designer. She has an older brother, Griffin, 19, who is a racing driver. Steinfeld decided she wanted to act at eight years old. “My cousin, True, was doing commercials. I’d be sitting watching TV and she would come on the big screen. It seemed so accessible.”



Above With her brother, Griffin, at the Oscars in 2011. Right With her friend Taylor Swift this year

She started attending classes and “fell in love with the fact that you get to do so many different things within acting. Now in one movie I’m learning how to play guitar, the next I’m learning how to ride a horse.”

She made a few appearances in television shows while attending the local state school. But when she was 12 the decision was made to home-school her. “I sort of had trouble fitting in at school,” she says. “I don’t know if being bullied is the right word, but there is always somebody that is going to make a mean comment or who’s not going

to like how you wear your hair. I had a bit of that. Now I’m in an online home-schooling programme and have a tutor who travels with me when I am working,” she says.

She has remained friendly with the same “small group of girls” she has known since primary school, but she has made some high-profile new friends too. A few weeks ago Steinfeld was photographed on “a girls’ weekend” with a group that included Taylor Swift and Lena Dunham, the creator and star of the hit television show *Girls*. “Lena is so funny. She is one of my favourite people in this planet.” They had been to see Swift in concert. “Taylor played a show in Dallas and then we flew to Rhode Island [to Swift’s home]. There were a few other friends there. We baked Rice Krispie treats, took a bunch of pictures, walked on the beach.” Having friends who are also in the public eye is “nice”, says Steinfeld, because “they understand a lot of what you go through”.

Steinfeld’s mother arrives and makes her way over to tell us our time is up. The actress has to have her hair and make-up done for a red-carpet event later in Beverly Hills, where she will accept MaxMara’s Face of the Future award (previous recipients include



Katie Holmes and Emily Blunt). The morning after we meet, mother and daughter are flying to Romania, where Steinfeld will start filming the war drama *The Keeping Room* with Sam Worthington. It all

sounds impossibly glamorous, I say.

She shrugs. “To be honest, my life hasn’t changed. I live at home under my parents’ rule; nothing is different.” Her bank balance, she says, “is not really a thing that I’ve ever actually thought about. It doesn’t affect my everyday life. The only thing that has changed is that I’m becoming a lot busier. I still have to clean my room, do my homework, wash the dishes and vacuum the floor. I am the same as any other girl my age.” ●
“Romeo and Juliet” is out on 11 October