

# ‘GEORGE CLOONEY IS MY SECOND DAD’

SHAILENE WOODLEY was a teenager when she landed her first major role alongside Mr Clooney in *The Descendants* – but the pressure of success made her contemplate giving up acting altogether. She explains to *Elaine Lipworth* the lessons she learned from her leading man – and why she’s back in front of the camera in summer’s must-see movie ►

PHOTOGRAPHS  
*Michael Lavine*



**S**HE MAY BE ONLY 22, but Shailene Woodley already counts George Clooney as family and Kate Winslet as a role model.

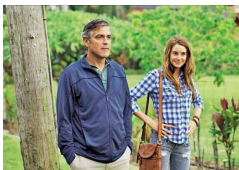
She played George's rebellious daughter in her first major film, *The Descendants*, which led to a Golden Globe nomination ('Oh my God, George is just the best'), and acted alongside Kate ('A really great ally and friend') in the recent teen blockbuster *Divergent*.

Shailene is certainly keeping good company and is on the brink of global stardom herself. Film critics are calling her the next Jennifer Lawrence. And like the 23-year-old *Hunger Games* star, Shailene has avoided syrupy girlfriend roles, mixing indie films, such as the excellent *The Spectacular Now*, with mainstream, big-budget fare such as *Divergent* (she is currently filming the sequel *Insurgent*).

In this summer's much anticipated release *The Fault In Our Stars* (based on the bestseller by John Green), Shailene stars as Hazel, a witty, intelligent 16-year-old with thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs. The film's title is inspired by a line in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* about fate and personal responsibility. At a cancer support group, the pretty teenager meets Gus – played by Ansel Elgort (who had a small role in *Divergent* as Shailene's brother) – a wisecracking, good-looking boy in remission after losing a leg to osteosarcoma (bone cancer). Laura Dern plays Hazel's mother. It's a three-Kleenex weepie. 'If you don't cry there's something wrong,' smiles Shailene. The film has all the heart-rending emotion of the 1970 classic *Love Story*, which dealt with cancer too, but it's also funny and irreverent.

'I wanted the role so badly, I sent John Green a long email about how I had to play Hazel. Later I said to the producers, "Please let me audition, and if I can't audition, I'll be a PA or an extra or a caterer,"' she says.

I first met Shailene on the set of *The Descendants* in Hawaii; at that time she was a sweet, hippyish 19-year-old, with fantasies of becoming an organic farmer rather than a movie star. She hasn't changed much and seems both mature for her years and youthfully enthusiastic



From top: Shailene with Ansel Elgort in *The Fault In Our Stars*; as Tris in *Divergent*, and with George Clooney in *The Descendants*

about life. Sunning herself on the balcony of her Los Angeles hotel room, where we meet to discuss *The Fault In Our Stars*, there is nothing 'entitled' about this actress. She is barefoot, wearing jeans and a silk top: 'I have no idea who designed them, they're my own clothes.' She doesn't own a house or even a mobile phone, though she has one on loan from a film company she's been working with so they can keep in touch with her. And she's not keen on shopping for clothes either: 'I can't remember the last time I bought anything.'

Raised with her brother Tanner by parents Lori and Lonnie (who have since divorced) in Simi Valley, California, Shailene started acting when she was five. Diagnosed with scoliosis at 15, she had to wear a back brace for two years. 'It's just what I had to go through. Some people have crooked teeth and have to wear braces.' Was it challenging? 'Not really,' she shrugs. 'There's no sense wallowing in self-pity.'

That same year, Shailene landed the starring role as a high-school pupil dealing with an unplanned pregnancy in the TV show *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. A couple of years later, the director Alexander Payne cast her in *The Descendants*.

'People are always asking, "Are you prepared for the Hollywood life?" But that doesn't exist,' says Shailene. 'You see people looking beautiful at the Oscars, but at the end of the night, you go home and still have dirty dishes in the sink.'

Here Shailene explains why young love is the real thing...

**Age can't define love.** I was in a relationship that was very intense when I was 17. I definitely had those feelings of lust and infatuation. The love that I experienced with him was true in that moment. As a teenager you're not jaded, you are free to be vulnerable because you're not putting up big walls.

**I've never been in a relationship as an adult.** Often, when you're older, you're thinking, 'I have to have a child. I have to be married,' so maybe you settle for something that you're not fully satisfied with. As adults, we're more rigid.

**The Fault In Our Stars is a cancer movie that's not about cancer.** It's about two teenagers falling in love. It doesn't focus on death, it celebrates

life. We wanted to bring light to a situation that is often looked at in a dark manner. Obviously they are both going through hard situations, but they're both sarcastic and witty and strong.

**I met teenagers who have tumours.** The support group in the movie is actually made up of people, not actors, who were either in remission or have cancer. They're normal people going through stuff like, 'I want to kiss a guy.' I didn't talk to them about what it is like to have cancer: I got to know them as human beings. You realise, 'You're the same teenager as I was. You're angry. I was angry when I was your age. Yes, you're dealing with something that is so above and beyond anything that I dealt with, but that's not who your heart is. Cancer doesn't define you.'

**It was awesome working with Ansel. He brought a lot of light to my life.** We became really close on *Divergent*. It was cold filming in Chicago; it was a hard shoot and he was a really beautiful light, literally. Going straight from that film to *The Fault In Our Stars* was such a gift, because we were able to be comfortable around each other and bring our natural chemistry to the screen.

**People say that John Green gives teenagers a voice,** but I think he hears the voices of teenagers, and there's a big difference. He hears what they're going through and who they are and understands that they're intelligent, witty, smart human beings entering the world with fresh eyes.


**I had to learn how to talk as if I wasn't getting enough oxygen** and how to pull around an oxygen cylinder. You only have one arm that's accessible because you're constantly dragging a tank. It helped me empathise with Hazel. I met people who were in similar situations to her and learned what she would have to go through physically. To breathe naturally is such a gift.

**Laura Dern is one of my pillars.** Laura is pretty much the same mum with Hazel as she is with her own kids. Hazel's mum treats her like a regular teenager – who just happens to have to take pills every three hours.

**Kate Winslet did Titanic** when she was my age, so she has given me great advice about how to handle things. She told me that you can't control what people think or say about you, so make sure your foundation is strong.

**I fell into this business by accident.** Being an actress wasn't something I ever aspired to. It ►





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◀ started as a hobby – instead of gymnastics I took theatre classes. But acting became my passion. My parents gave me three rules growing up: get good grades, stay grounded and have fun. If I did all those things, they said I could continue acting.

**After *The Descendants* I decided I was never going to act again.** I felt a lot of pressure. People were saying, ‘I can’t wait to see what you do next...’ and I was, like, ‘Oh, now I’ve got to do something for other people.’ Before, acting had always been for me. I thought about quitting to become an organic farmer in Hawaii. But my mum said, ‘Shai, you’ve got to ignore all the other stuff and act for yourself,’ and I realised that I could just do what I love and have fun.

**When I was a teenager I was called ‘anorexic’ because I was so tiny.** I was very insecure about being skinny and tall. But I think as a teenager nobody really considers themselves beautiful. You’re insecure. It was hurtful, but that is what high school is all about – falling on your face. You have to ask: am I going to give somebody else my power or am I going to recognise my own worth? You have to get to the depths of not feeling great in order to recognise the highs and realise that everyone is insecure, and that was a profound realisation for me.

**I think that everybody needs to be naked around each other at least once in life.** When you see people’s bodies, it immediately removes your own insecurities and it breaks down walls. You get back to the core of what being human is all about.

**My mum taught me about being positive.** I am close to my parents – they are both psychologists who work in the education system. Empathy and compassion were ingrained into me at a young age.

**George Clooney is my second dad.** When I was backpacking through Europe with a friend, we stopped by at his house on Lake Como in Italy for a few days. We literally showed up with backpacks. It was really fun and it’s so beautiful. George is a great host. He uses his good for so many people, doing random acts of kindness. He’s the dude that will go up to a homeless person, give them some money and say, ‘Go find a place to live for two weeks, get your feet back on the ground.’ I would work with him again in a heartbeat.

## SHAILENE’S SURE THINGS DEFINE YOUR STYLE

**I don’t spend any money on clothes. I own enough to fit in a carry-on suitcase. I like to be as comfortable and casual as possible. I think it’s fun to put on lipstick and to wear heels, but I don’t need five pairs of jeans and five pairs of shoes.**



## YOUR ROLE MODEL?

Anaïs Nin [left]. I wish she were still alive so I could stalk her and talk to her! I love the connection that she had with her own sensuality and femininity.

## WHO MAKES YOU LAUGH?

My musician friend Nahko. And Theo James [her British co-star in

*Divergent*] makes me laugh really loud. English humour is perverted, raunchy and dry.

## FAVOURITE FILMS?

*The Goonies* [left] was important to me as a kid. I loved that sense of adventure and of fighting for what you believed in. And I am such a romantic – I loved *Pretty Woman* and *Dirty Dancing* growing up. We need

some more great romantic comedies.

## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

I’m rereading *Henry and June* by Anaïs Nin. It’s my bible.

## FAVOURITE WAY TO SPEND SUNDAY?

I would spend 45 minutes in the gym, some time at the beach, followed by a hike, and then go to dinner with a friend. I love walking; in London, New York and Paris people walk, but in LA nobody walks.

## LIFE MOTTO?

You do you and I’ll do me.

**Random acts of kindness are important.** You can be a huge activist and try to save the ocean, but until you are nice to the dude at the grocery store who is having a tough day, nothing is going to change.

**If acting stops being fun, I’ll stop.** I would do something else. I would still like to do organic farming and open a restaurant.

**I love anything to do with food,** from planting a seed and watching it grow, to harvesting fruit. I love cooking and using whatever is left in the fridge. If I have a little leftover rice and some vegetables, I just mash it all up, or I cook eggs, because that’s so easy.

**I love foraging – going out into the wild, finding edible plants,** bringing them home and using them for culinary or medicinal purposes. I have foraged all over Southern California and on the East Coast in Maine. You come home with a bag full of stuff, whether it’s stinging nettles, wild leeks, wild onions or wild radishes. You can cook nettles like spinach and make a lasagne or soup. When I dig my hands in soil and connect with the earth, I feel restored and very balanced.

**Factory farming is disgusting.** That’s what started me on my journey of learning about the ecosystem and about wild plants and animals. I am not a vegetarian but I think that you should be very careful about where you source your meat.

**I make my own toothpaste out of clay.** I mix it with a little bit of coconut oil and some essential oils, or baking soda and arrowroot. You can add peppermint or cinnamon oils so that it doesn’t taste gross. It’s also more environmentally friendly to make your own, because you don’t have to waste a plastic tube every few months. And it is fun! I make my own deodorant, too, out of baking soda, coconut oil, arrowroot powder and essential oils. But I haven’t made any recently, which is why – and I am sorry – I stink so badly right now! I really do – the wind isn’t blowing your way yet.

**I am living out of a suitcase at the moment,** which is lovely. I’m travelling a lot, and when I’m in LA I stay with different friends, couch surfing. I don’t want to own a house, not at all.

**I really love London.** I love the British humour, and I also love that it feels European but everyone speaks English! And I think the food in London is some of the best in the world, but nobody thinks that’s true, which is weird. My favourite restaurants are The Duke of Cambridge in Islington and Andrew Edmunds in Soho.

**When fate shows up, be ready.** Success is part luck, but I’m also a big believer in manifestation. You can’t sit on the couch and say, ‘I want A, B, and C in my life.’ You’ve got to go out there and seek it; you’ve got to believe it’s going to happen, then it will.

**Instead of living your life in fear and insecurity,** own your day, because it might be your last. It might be your last morning – you might not even make it to this afternoon, so live your day with love and compassion and kindness, because that is the only thing life can be about. The only thing. ■

■ The Fault In Our Stars *will be in cinemas from 19 June*