



# Now you see her

From *The Great Gatsby* to a new film in which she performs Houdini-style stunts, Isla Fisher's come a long way from a certain Aussie soap. But as *Elaine Lipworth* discovers, she's still a family girl – and every bit as funny as her very own leading man

Photograph by **Amanda Friedman**

Isla Fisher was at a press gathering earlier this year when she was approached by a reporter rhapsodising about her 'wonderful' performance in *Les Misérables*. The reporter said, "You sang so well," Fisher tells me. "I said, 'What did I sing in *Les Mis*?' Fisher mimics her perplexed look. "She said, '*Master of the House*.'" I said, "I believe you are thinking of my husband." It's one thing getting mistaken for [the actress] Amy Adams, which happens to me quite a lot," says Fisher, rolling her eyes. "It's another to be mistaken for a man."

The man in question is Sacha Baron Cohen, the creator of the comic characters Ali G, Borat and Brüno. Fortunately for the reporter – whose faux pas provoked gales of laughter when it could have been met with stony silence – Fisher's sense of humour is as tuned in to the absurd as her husband's.

Would the couple contemplate making a film together? 'I would love to work with him. My favourite comedy is *Brüno* [Baron Cohen's brilliant 2009 celebrity satire]. I could watch it on a loop – it's so ahead of its time.'

As it is, the 37-year-old's resumé includes an award-winning role in *Wedding Crashers* (in which she played the sex-crazed Gloria) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. Her most recent part was Myrtle, the ill-fated mistress of Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, and she's about to star in the stylish new thriller *Now You See Me*, opposite Woody Harrelson, Jesse Eisenberg and Mark Ruffalo.

Fisher and Baron Cohen met in 2002 at a party in Sydney, where the Australian actress had spent her late teens and early twenties filming the soap opera *Home and Away*. They married in Paris – 'our favourite city' – in 2005. They are one of the entertainment industry's most private couples. Usually they live quietly in London with their two daughters, Olive, five, and Elula, two, but they have temporarily relocated to Los Angeles due to work commitments.

Fisher and I meet at 8am in the Chateau Marmont hotel. Studio executives and actors are midway through power breakfasts on the bright terrace but we're cocooned in a cosy low-lit alcove surrounded by dark wood, heavy brocade curtains, flock wallpaper and ornate mirrors.

She is petite, pretty and summery in a floral top and purple Paige jeans – but the air-conditioning is so aggressive she soon

wraps a cream cashmere shawl around her shoulders. She kicks off her shoes and settles into a bottle-green sofa, tucking her legs beneath her and ordering porridge and a large latte.

This hotel is apparently a lucky spot for Fisher. She gestures towards a faded velvet sofa where the director Baz Luhrmann auditioned her for *The Great Gatsby*. 'It happened on that sofa, over there. It never crossed my mind that I'd be picked to be in a Baz Luhrmann movie. I couldn't believe it. I had such an iconic role in a classic book.'



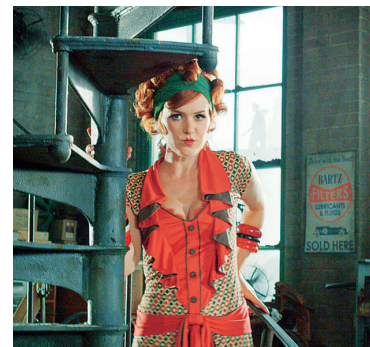
'I now understand the lure of action movies – I never could before. I'm a bit of a 'fraidy cat. I'm so afraid of regular things'

Myrtle Wilson is exactly the kind of part that appeals to the actress. 'Family is 100 per cent my top priority. So I'm much more comfortable doing supporting roles right now. And often,' she reflects, 'they're the most interesting. You get to be a character actress.'

Fisher's next film, *Now You See Me*, features an ensemble cast that also includes Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine. She plays Henley, a feisty, Houdini-style escapist who is part of a group of magicians whose act involves performing live bank robberies and handing out the cash to the audience.

Fisher performed all her own stunts. In one scene her character carries out a complicated underwater escape,

wrists and ankles padlocked in chains. She spent months training for it in a north London swimming-pool, learning to hold her breath for up to three minutes. When they filmed it, she says, 'I ran out of air, took the skin off both knees and hurt my ankle



Clockwise from left Performing a stunt in *Now You See Me*; in *The Great Gatsby*; with Vince Vaughn in *Wedding Crashers*



when my chains got caught under a metal grill at the bottom of the tank. I managed to get free and stay calm,' she says. 'It was scary but you've got someone standing by with an oxygen tank, and there is a quick-release switch that empties the tank in 75 seconds.'

She took inspiration for her character from the American escapologist Dorothy Dietrich. 'She can catch a bullet between her teeth. She's fabulous – YouTube her,' she insists. 'I now understand the lure of action movies – I never could before. I am a bit of a 'fraidy cat. My first instinct was to decline the role, politely. I'm so afraid of regular things.' Such as? 'Driving [in Los Angeles]. People say, "Take the freeway," and I'm like, "There



are so many cars on the freeway, I'm taking the side roads." I wanted to learn to be braver, and I think I did.'

There was also an ulterior motive at play: a desire to work with her idol, Sir Michael Caine. Fisher appointed herself the 80-year-old actor's personal assistant. 'Yes,' she says with a laugh. 'I was Sir Michael's general gopher. Everybody loves him, but I don't think anyone on the movie loved him quite as much as I did. I was always asking the first assistant director: "Have you got Michael Caine's chair?" "Where is Michael's water?"' Fisher also spent time with the actor's wife, Shakira. 'Michael brings Shakira along wherever he goes. I think of him as somebody who really has done it right. He's got an incredible body of work and yet he's maintained a wonderful, healthy marriage and is very close to his daughters,' says Fisher.

She is similarly committed to her home, and is fiercely guarded about her marriage and children. We've met

on several occasions but the subject has always been strictly off-limits.

Fisher is close to her mother, the artist and writer Elspeth Reid, and visibly relaxes when she talks about her. Reid, she says, is her role model, teaching her to be 'analytical, open-minded, gregarious and optimistic'. In her teens, they collaborated on a couple of young-adult novels. They are currently working on a screenplay for 'a thriller that's a throwback to the films that we love: Goldie Hawn in *Deceived*, Sandra Bullock's *The Net*. We wanted to write a female-driven film with a protagonist who is a regular woman we could relate to'. There is one problem: 'I keep writing jokes all the time,' says Fisher. 'I can't control myself. But jokes in a thriller are poor taste. I said to Mum last night [Reid is visiting Fisher in California at the moment], "I think we should write a family dramedy next."

Fisher's mother is Australian. Her Scottish father, Brian, worked for the United Nations, the World Bank and Save the Children - jobs that meant

a lot of moving around. Fisher credits the experience with teaching her the value of comedy. 'I went to a different primary school every year. I needed to get people to like you is to make them laugh. I can't psychoanalyse it,' she says, twisting her shawl around

**'An easy way to get people to like you is to make them laugh. My theory is that I had to be adaptable'**

her arms, 'but my theory is that I had to be adaptable.'

Her parents divorced when she was nine and Fisher and her two brothers (she also has two stepbrothers) moved with their mother to Perth, in Western Australia. Her mother was very liberal, so, says Fisher, 'there was nothing to rebel against. We were raised with very little discipline. I never had a curfew.



Fisher with her husband, Sacha Baron Cohen, at the Oscars in 2007

Mum's argument was, "It's far better for you to be getting up to mischief under my roof." So she let us throw massive house parties where we played drinking

games and drank Victoria Bitter while she was locked away so she wouldn't hear her furniture getting smashed.'

Fisher recently became an ambassador for Save the Children. In January she flew to São Paulo, Brazil, on the charity's behalf, to talk to young mothers participating in a pioneering breast-feeding and milk-donor programme, which has helped to slash death rates of infants under five by 50 per cent. 'It was a life-changing trip,' she says.

Fisher breast-fed her daughters until they were two. 'What I loved about breast-feeding was that bond of one-on-one time. The serotonin that's released calms you down and connects you to the baby.'

Her next project is a crime comedy based on the Elmore Leonard novel *The Switch*, with Jennifer Aniston. When she's not working, she says, 'I love to cook. But I'm a bit rubbish. I tend to start something and then dip into a book or have a conversation and come back and everything's burnt.'

Fisher checks the time - she has an audition later in the morning. 'I actually

love auditioning. I love the nerves that go with it.' She tells me about an early experience. 'When I first came to Hollywood, aged 25, I was poached by a big agency. I thought all my dreams had come true. I sat in a big boardroom and they said, "Isla, you're going to be a star." They told me they had the perfect role. It would define my career. They would send it that day.'

'So home I went to my tiny apartment that was more like a dog kennel beneath a big LA house. The script arrived, crisp and shiny, with a cover note, which read: "Dear Isla... For your consideration, the role of Al." I thought, "Al?" I raced through the script and discovered that Al was a 50-year-old African-American male. That was my first experience of Hollywood. These people couldn't even remember what gender I was!'

The peals of laughter ringing out from our table are so loud the waiters and suited-and-booted breakfast crowd all turn to look at us. 'I did find it funny,' she says. ●

*'Now You See Me' is out on 3 July*

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