



IRISH EYES

Saoirse Ronan is only 21 but already has two Oscar nominations under her belt. Jane Cornwell tells why you need to learn how to pronounce her name.

Saoirse Ronan might already be a household name if only people knew how to say Saoirse. Pronunciation is never a problem on the Emerald Isle, where the actress has lived, on and off, since the age of three: Sersha. Neither is the spelling of such tricky Irish names as Eilis (Ay-lish), the character Ronan plays in *Brooklyn*, a 1950s-set drama about an Irish country girl forced to seek opportunity in New York. Eilis finds love in her adopted home, but is called back to Ireland where she meets a new paramour, and thus must choose between two men – and two very different ways of life.

“I’d been on the lookout for an authentic Irish project for a while,” says Ronan, 21, curled up on a couch in a boutique hotel in Soho, London in a pair of cream palazzo pants, her white Louboutin brogues tucked beneath her. “I couldn’t find anything that wasn’t that stereotypical down-the-farm, no-potatoes thing.”

A meeting with Irish director John Crowley and English writer Nick Hornby, who adapted *Brooklyn* from Colm Tóibín’s popular novel, reassured the former child star that here was the perfect vehicle for her first adult role. And she was right: earlier this month Ronan received a best actress Oscar nomination for *Brooklyn*.

It’s her second Oscar nomination; her first was at age 13, for her performance as a sly tween aristocrat in *Atonement*.

Make-up free apart from the pawpaw lip balm she dabs on at the start of our interview (“Great Aussie stuff; I brought it to impress you”) and more comfortable in jeans and trainers than the outfit she’s wearing (which has been borrowed for a photo shoot – “I want to keep the shoes but I’m not allowed”), Ronan is refreshingly down-to-earth. While Oscar talk is waved away with a grin, her passion for the film is palpable.

“*Brooklyn* is an Irish story but with universal themes,” she says in her gentle lilt. “Longing, grief and loneliness are things that affect all immigrants, whether they’re your ancestors or they moved over last week. We’ve also had an amazing reaction from people with no connection to Ireland; we can all relate to the grief that comes with leaving your childhood home and saying goodbye to everything you’ve known, probably for the rest of your life.”

The film’s surprise success has largely been put down to Ronan – hers is a compelling performance, alongside such

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acting royalty as Jim Broadbent, who plays a kindly Irish priest, and Julie Walters, in her element as a bossy boarding house owner.

It was only once the movie had been wrapped that she realised how closely art and life were entwined: Ronan was born in the Bronx to Irish immigrants, who, initially, were in the US illegally. Her mother, Monica, worked as a nanny, while her father, Paul, was a construction worker and bartender before taking up acting. When the family moved back to Ireland it was to County Carlow in the south-east, to a one-pub village just 20 minutes from Enniscorthy, where the Irish scenes in *Brooklyn* happen to be set.

“*Brooklyn* is totally my mam and dad’s story,” says Ronan, who is only just able to watch the film without bursting into tears. “They arrived in New York without anything and basically made a life for themselves. It’s my story too,” she says. “I made a decision to move from Dublin [where her parents relocated when she was 18] to London for a while. I didn’t want to be one of those actors who’d grown up in the industry and didn’t know how to pay a bill or wash their clothes or not know how much a pint of milk is.”

For much of 2012 Ronan lived on her own in leafy Highgate, north London. It was a big move for an only child whose parents, particularly her mother, had always accompanied her on film sets and to interviews: “I was the age when many people go off to university,” she says with a shrug. “And this whole other world opened up. I’d walked through the fire

and it was tough and scary and I came out the other side.”

The fire? “Yeah, you know, getting used to doing your own washing,” she says wryly. “That fire. That really terrifying fire.”

As a baby she accompanied her father on set when he was working on movies such as the IRA drama *The Devil’s Own* (“Apparently I met Brad Pitt when I was two; I don’t remember and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t”). Home schooled while living in Carlow, she would put on shows in her bedroom: “It was my dream to be Jean Butler in *Riverdance*. I’d position all my teddy bears around me like my dancers and I’d be in the middle in my little velvet dress and red shiny shoes, pogoin’ away.”

She made her screen debut in a 2003 Irish television medical drama called *The Clinic*. “As soon as I got on the set I felt at home,” she has said. “I liked pretending. I liked the challenge of somebody asking you to do something then trying to do it.” At age 11, she appeared as Michelle Pfeiffer’s daughter in the film *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, complete with an impeccable American accent. The film’s vocal coach recommended her to director Joe Wright, who cast her alongside Keira Knightley and James McAvoy in *Atonement*.

“Keira and James looked after me on set, which made a huge difference,” she says. “Since then I’ve always been conscious when I’m working with younger people of giving them your time and energy. Rachel Weisz was like that with me, and Guy Pearce (her co-star in Gillian Armstrong’s 2008 supernatural thriller *Death Defying Acts*) – who is still one of my favourite people in the world.”

Ronan was in New Zealand filming *The Lovely Bones* with Weisz and director Peter Jackson in 2008 when she and her parents flew to Los Angeles to attend the Oscars ceremony, then flew all the way back within 24 hours. Her overriding memory of the event, she says, is sitting in the front row and feeling hungry.

“It went on for 3½ hours. Jon Stewart was presenting and he came around with a box of liquorice, which kept us going for a bit but not that long. My category was the very first one and when I didn’t win, which I knew I wouldn’t, I was like ‘Mam, I’m feeling sick, can we leave now?’” She laughs, and shifts around on the couch. “Me mam said she was glad I didn’t get it, because to get an accolade like that you need to have struggled a bit more, have a career to fall back on.”

Next month Ronan be in New York,

making her international theatre debut on Broadway in a version of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.

Asked if she has a career plan, she shakes her head. “Not really. I just go for great scripts,” she says. “But eventually it would be nice to be more creatively involved in filmmaking, whether through directing or producing. “Over the last couple of years I’ve felt really strongly about how women are perceived in the industry, and within a movie.”

She smiles. “I want to see female relationships on screen that are authentic and realistic, so that hopefully we can get to the stage where we don’t need to have this conversation anymore. Where for someone to be a female and a director is not this novel idea.”

Last year she publicly backed the Yes side in Ireland’s historic gay marriage referendum. “It was an amazing day,” she says of the 62 per cent victory. “I looked around at Dublin and it felt like I was in a new modern city.”

Ronan is single again, after dating English actor George MacKay who she met in 2013 on the set of Kevin Macdonald’s *How I Live Now*. “I am more than happy to be single; it’s empowering to have so much energy, especially with all the attention *Brooklyn* is getting,” she says.

Not long after our interview, at the Hollywood Film Awards in Los Angeles, Ryan Gosling presented the actress with the New Hollywood Award for her performance in *Brooklyn*. But first he gave a lesson on how to pronounce her name: “It’s not Say-or-see or Seer-say or Sorcery, though it probably should be,” he said. “It’s Ser-sha like inertia.”

Saoirse Ronan. We’d better get used to saying it. •

THREE FACTS SAOIRSE RONAN

Ronan was a frontrunner for the role of Katniss in *The Hunger Games* but lost out to Jennifer Lawrence.

She felt like her childhood ended when her sheepdog, Sassy, passed away. “Having her put down was the saddest day of my life.”

She loves the music in her parents’ CD collection: the Smiths, Talking Heads, David Bowie. She saw Fleetwood Mac in concert three times in a row.