



# *BURNING* BRIGHT

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No longer the next big thing, with a clutch of films coming out, Felicity Jones is now getting all the attention she deserves. By Jane Cornwell.

Sometimes, when being Felicity Jones gets too much, Felicity Jones likes to wander down to Hampstead Heath, the ancient park that is one of London's best-loved green spaces. Then, with her back against the trunk of her favourite old oak tree, she'll take out her sketchpad and draw.

"They tend to be slightly abstract, usually terrible pieces of artistic endeavour," says the petite actress, 32, sitting in a suite in a posh London hotel and looking every inch the English rose in a royal-blue jumpsuit with puff sleeves and a floppy bow collar. "I just sketch to relax and only when I'm at home. It's nice doing something creative with absolutely no pressure."

The Oscar nominee has been rather under the pump of late, what with a clutch of films about to come out, a veritable showroom's worth of red-carpet events to attend and a constant stream of scripts vying for her interest. Long hailed as the next big thing, Jones is finally an A-lister to be reckoned with. But her forthcoming roles as, variously, Dr Sienna Brooks in the movie adaptation of Dan Brown's *Inferno*, rebel fighter Jyn Erso in *Star Wars* spin-off *Rogue One*, and a young mother in the big-bucks fantasy drama *A Monster Calls*, look set to give her the sort of shimmering fame she doesn't seem to want or need.

"It's a side of the profession you don't ever quite get used to, though I know it's a two-way thing," says Jones, an Oxford University graduate, when asked how it feels to be feted and fawned over. "But the people who come up are so polite. The letters you get have such genuine feeling."

She smiles charmingly, revealing those ever-so-slightly buck teeth. "I haven't had to sacrifice too much privacy and anonymity to do what I do. Which is great, because I love what I do" – the self-effacing Jones has referred to acting as a calling – "and I want to keep doing it."

We are here to talk about *Inferno*, the latest addition to the \$1.2 billion Robert Langdon franchise after *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and *Angels & Demons* (2009). Tom Hanks reprises his role as the famous symbologist, who this time around wakes in an Italian hospital with

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a headache, visions and amnesia. Jones' character Brooks, a lab-coat-wearing environmentalist, is quickly Langdon's right-hand woman, racing with him across Europe to a) help him recover his memory and b) quash a deadly virus aimed at wiping out half the world's (over) population.

Brooks isn't what she seems, of course. Nothing is. This time the clues are to be found in Dante Alighieri's epic 14th century poem about his journey through hell, which Langdon and Brooks pore over in galleries and on laptops, and which is visualised via a series of cryptic psychedelic dream sequences conjured on hand-held cameras by Academy Award-winning director Ron Howard.

"Ron's style of shooting here is much more immediate than his other Dan Brown films. Shooting in real locations" – including the medieval piazzas of Florence and on the roof of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice – "matched the tone of the film and made it this very pertinent situation we're facing today with climate change and overpopulation. One reason I took on the film is because it felt so current."

Howard's immersive rehearsal techniques dovetailed with those of Jones, a method actor who goes deep into researching her characters, building them from the inside out. Brown's book, which gives Brooks a backstory as a former child prodigy with a formidable IQ, was used as a reference, a springboard.

"We had months of reading through the script and making changes and correcting mistakes in rehearsal, so I felt part of a family." She pauses, grins. "But the day before any shoot is always vomit inducing."

Watching Hanks at work helped to keep Jones grounded. "Tom is always absolutely focused and there's no messing around on set; his priority is making the best film possible.

"He's also incredibly down to earth," she says, her green eyes wide with admiration. "He never takes any of his fame or success for granted."

Neither, indeed, does Felicity Rose Hadley Jones, who grew up Bournville, an upscale suburb of Birmingham in the English Midlands, the second of two children born to a journalist and a

saleswoman who met while working on the local newspaper and split when she was three. Felicity and her elder brother, a film editor whose wife hails from Brisbane ("Briz Vegas? Ha! That's so funny"), were brought up by their mum. "I was raised to live in the moment."

Currently splitting her time between north London and Brooklyn, New York, Jones' crisp vowels belie her consonant-dropping Brummie origins, which are obvious, she says, once she's had a drink or three and offer scope "to be teased if I ever got a big head".

Success, creatively speaking, came early, after a 10-year-old Jones began attending after-school workshops held by Central Junior Television, an influential youth drama group. There was a part in a children's TV series and the film *The Treasure Seekers* with Keira Knightley (18 months her junior). And for over a decade, from the age of 15 and right through her English literature degree at Oxford, she played wild child Emma Grundy in much-loved BBC Radio series *The Archers*. "It's a British institution, and where I learnt my craft," she says.

Since then she's hopped from period drama (*Brideshead Revisited*) and Shakespeare (*The Tempest*) to the romantic comedy *Chalet Girl* (for which she spent months learning how to snowboard) and 2011's entirely improvised coming-of-age drama *Like Crazy*. There's been a mystery thriller (*True Story*), a role as Charles Dickens' mistress (*The Invisible Woman*) and another as a mysterious assistant in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

Oh, and she's also done theatre, including Michael Grandage's production of *Luise Miller*, by 18th century German playwright Friedrich Schiller, at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2011 (Jones turned down the lead alongside Julia Roberts in the film *Mirror Mirror* to do it).

Too versatile to be typecast, too talented to be ignored (and with her Holly Golightly looks, too beautiful – she's been the face of both Burberry and Dolce & Gabbana), Jones has quietly commanded more and more of our attention.

Her 2014 portrayal of Jane Hawking in the film *The Theory of Everything*

(alongside her friend Eddie Redmayne as famous physicist Stephen Hawking) got her nods from the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes and Britain's BAFTAs. And little wonder: Jones' performance as the woman who cares for Hawking and his three children as his motor neurone disease progresses and his scientific celebrity increases, is a master class in roiling, finely nuanced emotion.

"I'm obsessed with subtexts," she told *The Guardian* newspaper. "I love that we don't often say what we feel. The gap between the two ... I like it when actors reveal a lot without having to say it."

Just as she likes being tested, forced out on a limb, as she was when filming *Rogue One* with maverick British director, Gareth Edwards: "He loves to bring the improvisation process to his

six phrases in Italian that will be totally useless in real life. Maybe at parties they'll be useful to bring out; I could do some kung fu while speaking Italian, then if it's snowing leave on my snowboard."

All of which would certainly leave potential suitors awe-struck, should Jones be the slightest bit interested. Her last documented relationship was with sought-after British sculptor and internet artist Ed Fornieles, with whom she split in 2013 after a 10-year relationship.

His response was to create a kitsch illustration of himself and Jones and their three imaginary children in front of a suburban home. "You're also mourning the death of the future you were going to have with that person," Fornieles told the London *Evening Standard* at the time.

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films and often holds the camera himself, changing position depending on what the actors are doing and trying to find something unexpected and spontaneous in the moment."

Even in the kung fu scenes? That buck-toothed smile. "Even in the kung fu scenes," she says.

Jones underwent intensive daily martial arts sessions to prepare for her role, making kung fu another specialised skill in a career filled with them. "I've never done anything anywhere near that level of physical preparation for something," she says, "which was partly why I wanted to do it.

"As an actor you get very skilled at these obscure things that you may never use again. For *Inferno* I learnt about

"I have had love and lost love," Jones, ever dignified, told Britain's *The Telegraph*. "I learnt so much from that relationship and I am glad that person was very, very important to me and I had him in my life."

If Jones is seeing anyone now, she's not saying. She'd rather talk about art. "I've loved art since school, where I had this great teacher who was very glamorous and would show us paintings by contemporary artists like Georgia O'Keefe and encourage us to just get out there and draw."

Speaking of which, might there be an exhibition – works on paper by Felicity Jones, say – in the pipeline?

"Ha, no way." She flashes a grin. "Acting is more than enough." •



Top: Felicity Jones (seated, at left) with co-star Tom Hanks and director Ron Howard on the set of *Inferno*. Above: with *Theory of Everything* co-star Eddie Redmayne at the Toronto International Film Festival, 2014.

## FIVE FACTS *FELICITY JONES*

Having met Lena Dunham a few years ago while Dunham was promoting her film *Tiny Furniture* and Jones was promoting *Like Crazy*, Jones did a cameo in *Girls* in 2013. "It was the biggest 'pinch me' moment," she has said.

In 2012 there was an online campaign to have Jones cast as the lead in *50 Shades of Grey*. She turned the role down.

She's a fashion junkie. "I've always loved fashion. I had my monthly subscription to *Vogue* and style magazines like *The Face*. Now I've been on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, which is surreal."

After starring in and producing a short film – 2013's *Emily*, with her friend Caroline Harvey – she'd love to direct her own film. "My brother is a film editor and it's so much a part of our family, that process from beginning to end. I'm fascinated by it."

Her favourite Australian actor is Guy Pearce, with whom she worked on the acclaimed 2013 romantic drama *Breathe In*. "Such a great actor!" she enthuses. "So grounded and focused on doing good work, and not at all interested in being famous."