

DRIVING *Miss Maisie*

Maisie Williams never set out to be an actor, let alone a superhero. *Game of Thrones'* seemingly fearless warrior tells **Jane Cornwell** what she's really scared of – and what comes next.



Maisie Williams would love to face her fear and visit Australia one day, as soon as she can find time in her super-busy schedule. It's not the flying she's worried about, or the fierce sun on her fair English skin, or even any lukewarm reception – for what *Game of Thrones* fan doesn't adore the hit series' bad-ass tomboy, Arya Stark? As phobias go, her hang-up is pretty garden-variety: spiders.

"There are spiders in your capital cities too, right? Like, giant huntsmen? My friend told me they just appear on your bedroom wall out of nowhere," declares the actress, 20, chatty and animated on a hotel couch in Soho, central London. "I'm hugely arachnophobic." She flashes a grin. "Maybe I'll stay in the water."

Discovering that Maisie is as squeamish as the rest of us can feel a little disconcerting. After all, this is a woman known for playing characters as fearless and feisty as they are complex and multi-layered. There was the unhinged Lydia in 2014's school-set mystery *The Falling*; the witty but vulnerable Casey in *Cyberbully*, a 2015 television docudrama exploring the dark side of social media; and homeless teenager Millie, building a raft to sail across the Atlantic in 2016's whimsical New Orleans-set drama, *The Book of Love*.

And, of course, there's Arya, the teenage warrior she has played since the age of 12, growing into the part and celebrity (and into Arya's pageboy haircut) as *Game of Thrones* – now seven series in – became the world's most popular television show.

None of which is why she is here today, dressed in a black Miu Miu mini-dress with a white Peter Pan collar, her toned bare legs a legacy of her intensive dance background.

Her latest project, a stop-motion prehistoric comedy called *Early Man*, sees her adopt a Scandinavian accent to play Goona, a sparky cavegirl who befriends the film's hero, Dug (voiced by Eddie Redmayne), and helps him to negotiate a series of warring, goofy gangs from the Stone and Bronze Age civilisations.

"It was a challenge for me as an actor to only use my voice," she says of the film directed by Nick Park

and created by the Oscar-winning Aardman Animations, of *Chicken Run* and Wallace and Gromit fame. "But I was sooo thrilled to be asked, because I've loved Aardman since I was a kid."

Her collaboration with Aardman was all the more exciting because Maisie grew up in Bristol, the city in south-west England where the company is based. To be working in the studio that assumed mythical status in her childhood was as electrifying for her as any of Arya's vengeance-fuelled antics.

Two other new films underline her remarkable versatility as an actor: *Departures*, in which she plays Skye, a British teenager with a terminal illness and a bucket list. ("I put a lot of myself into this role so it is going to be hard if people don't like it," she says.) She is also as appearing as Wolfsbane in the much-anticipated X-Men spin-off horror flick, *The New Mutants*, about a bunch of teens with superpowers.

Maisie never set out to be an actor. The youngest of four children (she also has two half-siblings), Margaret "Maisie" Williams was raised by her mother, a former university administrator, and her stepfather, a business consultant, in a middle-class home full of rough-and-tumble and healthy competition. She says she was always making her family laugh by doing funny accents and "generally dicking about". Self-consciousness, you feel, has never been a problem.

Cocky and charismatic and a bit small for her age, Williams was doing courses in ballet and modern dance when she was spotted by an agent and auditioned, unsuccessfully, for 2010's *Nanny McPhee* sequel.

Her next try-out pitched her against hundreds of other hopefuls vying for the role of Arya Stark in HBO's glossy adaptation of George R.R. Martin's multi-volume saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. She got the part, despite never having taken an acting lesson.

Sensing that her daughter was on the cusp of something big, her mother gave Maisie, then 14, permission to quit full-time mainstream education to be schooled by a tutor, a decision that provoked controversy in the British press.

Arya's mission to avenge her parents' murder, often passing as a boy in a man's world along the way, remains one of *Game of Thrones*' most riveting storylines. It's no wonder that art and life seemed to combine,

and the forthright Maisie became a sort of feminist It Girl as well.

Asked if she thinks the selfie generation has become too solipsistic, less engaged with the world at large, her brown eyes flash.

"It's such a short-cut to slam the younger generation for taking too many selfies. Okay, we're pretty self-obsessed, and that's what the internet has brought, but we're also very connected and understanding. If it was down to us, Hillary [Clinton] would have got in and Brexit would not have happened."

Maisie never set out to be a spokesperson for youth, either, but she's not shy of using social media to make a point – and praises its benefits, especially for an actress. Posting on Instagram and tweeting on Twitter are vital ways of interacting with her millions of fans, though she keeps her private life private as much as she can.

Her boyfriend, Ollie Jackson, who she's known since school in Bristol, isn't quite so circumspect. A university student who may or may not share her current London home, Jackson (who she calls "OJ") is fond of posting wittily captioned pictures of the couple in various international locales. A photo of the couple posing on a staircase, titled "Dem Pins", draws attention to her fabulous legs.

"Haha, that's just my boyfriend," says Maisie (Jackson calls her "Raindrop"). "He can do what he wants." She stretches her legs out in front of her, flexing her platform heels. "I actually get trolled all the time for my legs. I don't know if they're great or really manly."

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Maisie has had to cultivate a thick skin to deal with internet trolls. During interviews in 2015 to publicise *Cyberbully*, she spoke of sitting on a train with her mother and scrolling through abuse on her phone about her portrayal of Arya Stark, all from people she'd never met. It was nasty, she said, but also something she could draw on for the role.

"Just because you're an actress and you're famous doesn't mean you have less insecurities," she says. "People look at your job and your life and think, 'How can you ever be unhappy?' But of course there are times when things really get to you."

That doesn't mean she's going to tailor her opinions and play at being "nice", nor will she stop championing the importance of feminism and checking her white privilege. "Being a feminist is just about equal rights," she says. "In this world we're living in now you're a normal person if you believe in equal rights between the sexes, the sexualities, the races, for trans people, between everybody."

Authenticity is important to Maisie, who has co-founded a production company, Daisy Chain, with the aim of making gritty works. One is *Stealing Silver*, a short film about a troubled young woman (Maisie) forced to deal with a mysterious neighbour.

Another is an untitled project she wrote on the *Game of Thrones* set. "It's something I've wanted to tell for a long time, so I thought I'd give it a go. I journal a lot but it's never poetic, more raaaar..." she grins, miming a set of claws and hinting at a stream of consciousness.

Since she returned to London after filming *The New Mutants*, Maisie has been too busy to journal, however. Instead she's been hanging out with her "normal" friends, who help keep her grounded. At some point in 2018, she says, she'll be making time for a holiday, maybe visiting her boyfriend's relatives in New Zealand and while she's down there, Australia.

"I guess I'll have to handle the spiders," she says.

You'll be in the water anyway, I say.

She pulls a face.

"But the sharks!" she exclaims, throwing up her hands in mock horror. "What about the sharks?" •

Early Man opens in Victoria on March 29, and NSW on April 12.