

IMPOSSIBLY KEIRA

SHE IS A SEEMINGLY UBIQUITOUS RED-CARPET AND FASHION DARLING, BUT THE REAL KEIRA KNIGHTLY IS A "WOMAN'S WOMAN" WHO PREFERS TO LIVE ON THE CREATIVE EDGE, WRITES JANE CORNWELL.

Keira Knightley is all over London: on bus stops, in Tube stations, pouting from billboards. Dewy and tousled-haired, reclining behind a bottle of Chanel perfume, she is forever fixing me in her khol-rimmed gaze as I make my way to a grand hotel in Whitehall to interview, well, Keira Knightley.

"There's a lot of me about," says the 29-year-old English star, folding her long, sylph-like limbs into an armchair in an upstairs suite. "It's quite intense; I'm on, like, every second bus stop. But I always think that even though it looks like me, it isn't really me. I'm so not into dressing up, as far as the glamorous thing goes."

Knightley pauses and looks down at what she's wearing: nude stilettos and a nubby boucle-weave dress by Chanel Couture, on loan for the magazine photo shoot she did earlier in the day. Her chestnut hair is sleek, styled. Her face – all dancing eyes, thick brows and high cheekbones – has been professionally made-up.

"Er." That trademark mischievous grin. "I promise you, putting on a cardigan and being a bit sloppy is much more me than all of this."

Little wonder, perhaps, that Knightley pounced on the chance to don wartime woollies and play dowdy cryptologist Joan Clarke opposite Benedict Cumberbatch in *The Imitation Game*, a biopic of Enigma codebreaker Alan Turing that is already tipped to earn Cumberbatch his first Oscar nomination. Clarke is Turing's colleague, best mate and, briefly, fiancée; their relationship is part of the bigger story of a man who helped Britain win World War II, and was then pilloried and persecuted for being gay.

"I first read about Turing in 2009 when there was this big push to have him pardoned," says Knightley (Turing

received a Royal pardon in 2013 for his conviction for homosexuality) "I was shocked and angry and I remember phoning my agent and saying, 'Look, if there's ever a film about all this, I want to be a part of it.'"

Knightley is good like that. In among the Hollywood blockbusters and costume dramas she's best known for – *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Pride and Prejudice* – are the self-testing roles that she's actively sought out. Roles such as Sabina Spielrein, the hysterical mental patient-turned-psychoanalysis pioneer who becomes sexually involved with her psychoanalyst Dr Carl Jung in *A Dangerous Method*. Or the tragic aristocrat in *Anna Karenina*; or brittle head teacher Karen in *The Children's Hour*, a play that was revived in London's West End in 2011.

"I like playing awkward women," Knightley says. "Women that I wouldn't necessarily warm to if I met them. But that wasn't the case with Joan; for me it was a real opportunity to play such a strong character, particularly when there are so few women in the field of mathematics, science and technology. She overcame incredible odds."

Diagnosed as dyslexic at the age of six, Knightley has said that she's rubbish at maths herself. Reminded, she smiles. "Well, I guess I've done all right so far," she quips, alluding to her high-paid, multi award-winning A-list status, and

maybe even her lucrative sideline flogging haircare products and Chanel perfume. "So I'm not too worried," she shrugs prettily.

She reaches for the glass of water on the table between us but instead of taking a sip, misses her mouth and sends liquid cascading into her lap. It's an endearingly clutzy moment. Knightley stares at me with her mouth open for a beat or two, mock incredulous.

"Ahhh." She holds out her hem and shakes it. "That was a good one. I suppose I'm quite lucky there are so many holes in this dress since it will dry quickly, and I have to give it back."

I half expect Knightley to whip off her frock and hang it over a radiator to dry. The willowy actress is famously relaxed when it comes to showing off her body; earlier this year she agreed to pose topless for the US magazine *Interview* on the condition that her boobs would remain completely unPhotoshopped, in a protest against artificially perfect representations of women.

"I think as far as actors and models go their attitudes to nudity are different to someone who perhaps doesn't use their body as part of their job," she says. "Where I get uncomfortable is when my body is digitally manipulated, either by paparazzi photographers or on film posters. For the poster for *King Arthur*" – the 2004 flick in which Knightley played Guinevere as a Celtic

warrior – "they gave me these great big double-Fs! It was astonishing!"

Shot by fashion snapper Patrick Demarchelier, the photo for *Interview* sees Knightley naked but for a pair of black trousers and three-quarter-length lacy gloves. Her hair is wet, lips slightly parted in what seems to be her default posing style. If she looks defiant, feminist-strong, she's meant to: "That was a conscious decision," she says.

So does she ever workshop her career choices with her husband, Klaxons keyboardist James Righton (whom she married in May last year), or with her parents, actor Will Knightley and actress-turned-playwright Sharman McDonald? Knightley bursts out laughing.

"Oh my God, my mum would so have done topless," she says. "She was a proper '70s hippy. My parents are interested but kind of not at the same time; they are there to be an ear. But no, I never ask anyone. I just go with what I feel comfortable with." Another smile. "If I'm not comfortable then I don't do it."

Hippies, indeed: Knightley's parents were broke and living on a diet of lentils, bread and tomatoes in suburban west London when Keira, the second of their two children (she has an elder brother, Caleb) was conceived. The family finances ebbed and flowed; Knightley has told of her constant desire as a kid to be "useful financially". Aged three, she famously demanded her own agent, having twigged that a phone call from an agent usually meant good news.

She was six when her parents let her sign up to a children's agency, with the proviso that she worked only in school holidays and that the better her grades the more auditions she got to do. In her teens she had a small role in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* before her breakthrough role in 2003's *Bend it Like Beckham*. Then came *Pirates of the Caribbean* and then, suddenly, Knightley seemed to be everywhere.

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**THREE
FACTS:
KEIRA
KNIGHTLY**

*During filming of
The Phantom
Menace, Knightley's
resemblance to
Natalie Portman was
so strong their
mothers had trouble
telling them apart.*

*Knightley is a self-
described shoe addict
– her favourite
brands are Prada and
Jimmy Choo.*

*To overcome her
dyslexia as a child,
her mother made her
recite Emma
Thompson's Sense
and Sensibility
screenplay aloud.*

She'd planned on going to drama college after acting her way through high school, but the roles kept coming so she ended up doing her learning on set and on stage, effectively teaching herself how to act. Her rapid success, arguably coupled with her astonishing prettiness, saw her both praised and vilified; few young actresses continue to divide public opinion in the way Keira Knightley does.

For a while she became tabloid fodder, unwilling to leave her north London home for fear of being followed by paparazzi: "They'd be trying to get a reaction shot," she told *Time Out* magazine. "They would call me a whore or a shit actress or try and start a fight with my boyfriend/husband/father."

It's not like that any more, says Knightley, who pulled back from the limelight in her mid-20s, taking more roles in independent and art-house films. These days she goes about her business as usual, incognito in her bit-sloppy gear, foiling all who assume she's always dressed up and glamorous.

Warm, witty and unaffected, Knightley is great company, a woman's woman. How is it for your husband, I start to ask, and she cuts in before I've finished my question. "Being married to me?" More laughter. "That's a question for him! But he's incredibly cool and I have to say I've been incredibly lucky with all the guys I've been out with." So has Righton penned any songs in her honour? Her eyes twinkle. "No!" she roars. "Where are my f...ing songs?"

While she's often in the crowd at Klaxons' gigs, she happily admits she knows very little about music. "Hobbies, hmm ..." She frowns, thinking. "I read books. And I read scripts, of course."

Next year she makes her Broadway debut playing the title role in a new adaptation of Emile Zola's play *Thérèse Raquin*, about an unhappy wife who has an affair with one of her husband's friends, with tragic consequences.

It's another of the awkward, difficult women that Knightley relishes playing, this time in the seedy world of 19th-century Paris. The costumes will undoubtedly be spectacular: "I bet," she says. "But my favourite era for glamour is still the 1940s. I actually can't think of any era that is more glamorous, not that I went that far with Joan [Clarke], who was, you know, a bit more focused on the breaking of the Enigma code than fussing over what she was wearing."

Interview over, I head home, passing posters and billboards of the not-really Keira Knightley. Who, as I whiz by on a bus, suddenly seems to be winking. ●

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Ends

Jane Cornwell