

SHE'S FRANK, SMART,
FUNNY AND UNLUCKY
IN LOVE. HERE BOND
GIRL AND EX MODEL
OLGA KURYLENKO
OPENS UP TO
JANE CORNWELL.

Olga Kurylenko's
people have booked
a table for two in a
cafe in Chelsea, in
the heart of discrete,
upper-crust west

London. It will just be the two of us – no
bodyguards, no PR girls flashing the five-
minute sign, none of the media-minder
business often associated with celebrity
interviews, especially ones with stunning,
critically-acclaimed French-Ukrainian
actresses on the cusp of A-list status.

We're meeting to talk about her role in
Russell Crowe's directorial debut, *The
Water Diviner*, a drama about an
Australian farmer, Joshua Connor
(Crowe), who travels to Turkey in search
of his three sons, missing after the 1915
Battle of Gallipoli. Kurylenko plays
Ayshe, the mysterious woman who owns
the Istanbul hotel in which Connor stays.

There have been no press screenings,
so I haven't seen the film. But the official
trailer, with its swirling dust storms,
swelling string music and exploding
World War I battlefields underscores
The Water Diviner's wannabe
blockbuster status. There's a scene
where Ayshe delivers linen to Connor's
room, her eyes big and sad under her
headscarf. "There is nothing there but
ghosts," she says, a beguiling mix of
beauty, strength and fragility.

"Her husband has also disappeared
in the war," 35-year-old Kurylenko will
tell me once she arrives (I have received
a text saying she is running late). "But
Ayshe refuses to marry her husband's
brother, as was the tradition in Turkey,
because for her it is love or nothing.
I admire this feminist spirit."

Unusually, perhaps, for a woman who
has been a model, a Bond girl and
appeared naked in her debut film, the
2005 French indie flick *L'annulaire* (titled
The Ring Finger in Australia), Kurylenko



understanding
OLGA

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also calls herself a feminist. A magazine interview she gave while in a relationship with Danny Huston, her co-star in the US TV series *Magic City*, reveals a fiery, independent streak: “I never wanted to depend on anyone or stick to a certain kind of life because I had no other choice,” she said. “I would have died.”

Kurylenko and 52-year-old Huston – the son of renowned Hollywood director John – split earlier this year after two-and-a-half years. Her previous marriages to a French photographer, then to an American entrepreneur, both ended in divorce. Not that I’ll be quizzing Kurylenko about any of the above. Our table-for-two has come with provisos: there will be no questions about politics or her private life.

I see her first through the window: hurrying down the Kings Road in jeans and sunglasses, her newly red hair in a ponytail, a camel coat tied tightly around her hand-span waist. Her face, all Slavic cheekbones and pillowy lips, looks solemn, almost severe, until she comes inside, takes off her glasses and lights up the room with her megawatt smile.

“I am so, so, so sorry,” she repeats, removing her coat to reveal a long-sleeved white shirt and a delicate necklace with a tiny gold heart. Her nails are painted gold; gold studs adorn her ears; her only make-up is a slick of lipgloss. “My mother has been staying with me for the past couple of months,” she says by way of explanation, gesturing over her shoulder to the home she has bought nearby.

“My mom is an artist, and a dreamer,” she says. “She’s crazy but amazing. I left home when I was 16, so being with mummy again is taking getting used to.”

Born in Berdyansk, a seaside town in the former Soviet Union, Kurylenko was raised by her mother, Marina, and grandmother, Raisa; her father, a poet and dancer, wasn’t part of the equation. Olga grew up painting, dancing, wanting to be a doctor (“My grandma was a doctor, I was always performing operations on my teddy bears”). Aged 14, on her first holiday in Moscow with her mother, the willowy teen was spotted on the subway by a model scout. “My

mom calls that moment a miracle.” Kurylenko curls her pale hands around a cup of black tea. “I’m more realistic. Amazing things happen, but it depends on what you do with them. You can screw it all up or you can sustain it.”

She returned to Moscow to modelling school, and her career took off. At age 16, she found herself in Paris, in demand and on her own. “I was so lonely,” she says. “I still have the diary I kept back then; when I open it I have to close it straight away. There are so many dark thoughts. But I stuck it out because I could see the opportunities ahead, which I would never have had in the Ukraine. We also really needed some money.”

Kurylenko became fluent in French, then English. In between magazine covers and becoming the face of brands such as Clarins and Helena Rubinstein she started taking acting classes and felt happier, more herself.

“Modelling is fake. Acting is real,” she says. “I didn’t want to be any old actor, either. I wanted to take risks.”

The actors she admires are the chameleons, the boundary pushers: Cate Blanchett, Kate Winslet and Emily Watson and French stars Isabelle Huppert and Charlotte Gainsbourg. Encouraged by her acting teacher, she auditioned for *L’annuaire* and scored the lead role, aged 24: “I was so raw and unknown but [director] Diane Bertrand believed in me, which was amazing.”

There was more nudity in the 2007 action movie *Hitman*, then more action opposite Daniel Craig as the sultry, muscular Camille in 2008 Bond film *Quantum of Solace*. Mindful of Bond Girl typecasting, she changed gear and went skipping through cornfields with Ben Affleck in Terrence Malick’s dreamy art-house film, *To the Wonder*. She shapeshifted again to ride pillion with Tom Cruise in the sci-fi thriller *Oblivion*, before teaming up with Pierce Brosnan in the spy drama *The November Man*.

When I ask her how she handles the next-big-thing hype, she looks around and grins: “People aren’t exactly chasing me down the street,” she says. “In fact, when they meet me they always tell me how different I am from

my image. And then I think, ‘Do I really seem that unapproachable?’”

Kurylenko is frank, smart and funny and our table-for-two conversation feels more like a yak between close girlfriends than an interview; perhaps inevitably, we end up talking about men. She’s single by choice, she offers, taking time out after heartbreak.

“I really think that all men and women need each other for is love,” she says. But for Kurylenko, love hasn’t always gone smoothly. She recalls a “horrific relationship” with a “destructive” man. “I have never given anyone as much as I gave this person; he tortured me emotionally and gave nothing back,” she says. She looks sad. “It’s not his fault. He’s damaged. Even his friends said go away from him, but I thought I could handle him because I am strong.”

Kurylenko’s career, however, is an entirely different story. She counts off her upcoming films on her elegant fingers: *A Perfect Day*, a comedy-noir with Tim Robbins; *Momentum*, in which she plays a thief on the run from Vincent Cassel’s gang of assassins; and, of course, *The Water Diviner*, filmed in Sydney (which Kurylenko adored) and Istanbul.

“I hadn’t realised that Gallipoli was the

deadliest battle in Australian history,” she says. “I did a lot of research, watched documentaries, read books. Russell gave us all this famous novel to read...” She presses her temples, annoyed to have forgotten the title (it was *Birds Without Wings* by Louis De Bernières).

“Russell was amazing. It was his first film [as a director] but it was as if he’d done it every day. Because he’s an actor, he gives some of the best direction I’ve ever had.” A smile. “His acting was so natural, coming through his eyes; I’m like, ‘Where’s the effort? I don’t see the effort!’” It’s the only remotely luvvie thing Kurylenko will say.

She tells me about her time in Istanbul, when she took a boat down the Bosphorus, stopping for a Turkish coffee en route and having her coffee grounds read by a fortune teller.

“I was going through this horrible relationship at the time and this woman knew nothing about me but she said, ‘Oh, I see this man who is important in your life but there is something not right.’ I thought, ‘I swear to God I know who you are talking about!’”

She laughs, sits back. “Anyway, she said I had many great projects ahead. A lot of important things to do.”

Kurylenko is known for her charity work, particularly her support for Hope and Homes for Children, based in the UK. “They are all about kids growing up in adoptive families, not institutions. Kids who aren’t touched develop all kinds of psychological problems. I went to an orphanage in Ukraine where some of the children were rocking themselves; I just wanted to hug them all.”

It’s a long way from Berdyansk, Ukraine to London, England via Paris and Hollywood. But Kurylenko remains remarkably – stubbornly – unaffected. We talk more, about her love of art, her friends (all non-actors), her nagging feeling she doesn’t really belong: “I try and be normal, but I’m not.”

Eventually she puts on her camel coat and we go outside, where we kiss on each cheek and say goodbye. “I hope you understand me,” she says. Then Olga Kurylenko sets off the way she came, back towards megastardom. ●



*Her first acting appearance was in a video clip, **Love’s Divine**, by Seal.*

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She studied piano for seven years as a child.

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She has been married twice – in 2000 to a French photographer, and in 2006 to an American businessman.

