



H I G H

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WORDS ELIZABETH AUBREY

FROM *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE* MELEES TO PSYCHIC DUELS AT THE OVERLOOK, **REBECCA FERGUSON** IS GAME FOR ANY CHALLENGE.

WITH SAND-BLASTED EPIC *DUNE* EN ROUTE, WE CATCH UP WITH THE FEARLESS STAR

PORTRAITS CHIABELLA JAMES

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**BACK IN AUGUST 2014, on her very first day of filming on *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, Rebecca Ferguson jumped 120 feet off an Austrian rooftop. Not bad for a sufferer of vertigo. And so impressed was Tom Cruise, that later in the shoot he asked her how she felt about joining him in another stunt — her attached to the wing of a biplane, him piloting it. “I said, ‘You must be *fucking* joking!’” she recalls replying. “What? Absolutely not!”**

This may be the only — and completely understandable — recorded example of Rebecca Ferguson ducking away from a challenge. Over the past few years, she has forged a formidable and unpredictable path through Hollywood, appearing in big movie after big movie but never doing the same thing twice. She’s appeared in *The Greatest Showman*, played an alien in *Men In Black: International* and channelled her inner sorcerer in *The Kid Who Would Be King*. Last year, she shocked audiences as a top-hatted psychopath in *Doctor Sleep*, and she’s set to play warrior matriarch Lady Jessica in Denis Villeneuve’s feverishly awaited sci-fi epic, *Dune*.

When *Empire* tracks her down in early September, she is back on the *Mission* beat, in “the middle of a forest” in her native Sweden, where she’s training for the next two films in the series. Following a long lockdown lay-off, she’s struggling to get back to full fitness. “We are automatically social distancing being on our farm, which is far from civilisation,” she says. “I’m trying to be on top of my schedule but finding my husband’s cooking far too tempting. The trainer’s list says ‘squat’, and mine says ‘massive burger’,” she laughs. Still, even after a giant lunch, you’d be a fool to bet against her.

#### So what’s it like being back on a *Mission* movie?

It’s like returning to family at this point. What’s really fun right now is being in training with Tom, Hayley [Atwell] and Vanessa [Kirby]. They’re not shying back from hiring incredible female actors in this franchise either, which is wonderful.

#### Are you looking forward to getting back into the action?

I think the mental knowledge that you might have a situation that will challenge you, that

is just a part of the job description now. [Laughs] I know I have the right and the respect to say no to anything, but they have made me want to challenge myself. That is what comes with *Mission*. It’s [all] down to action. Tom films for his audience and he will never stop in trying to give the audience what he feels they should have. I mean stunt-wise, oh God. I can’t watch him. I just kind of give him a thumbs-up. I’m like, “Great, Tom, that’s great!” [Beat] “Is he still fucking on there? Is he hanging on or is he down?” [Laughs]

#### Simon Pegg has said that some of the characters will get more of a backstory. Will Ilsa?

I don’t know. To be honest, it’s a very different way of working doing a *Mission* film. We don’t really work with scripts and knowing what is happening. You focus on the training and you have to *love* the fact you get thrown into a situation where you don’t know when a scene is going to get changed, you don’t really know what you’re feeling, how quickly you need to get out of a tight space. It’s actually a wonderful, fun way to work. I remember in *Rogue Nation* where I jumped into a deep-water tank with Tom and I’m supposed to steal a thing and I’m like, “What am I stealing?” and they’re like, “We don’t know



Left: “I love finding the secrets within characters” — Rebecca Ferguson as warrior matriarch Lady Jessica in *Dune*.

yet.” I ask them, “How big is it?” and they’re like, “Hmmm...” I’m asking, “Is it big enough to conceal in one hand? Is it going to blow up the world?” The response was, “Just grab a lighter and run!”

#### *Dune* may be the buzziest film left to come out in 2020. How familiar were you with Frank Herbert’s book, or the existing film, prior to your casting?

I knew *absolutely* nothing about them. I hadn’t read the book and I hadn’t seen the old [David Lynch] film version at this point. I think it was one of those where I got the call: “Denis wants to Skype with you for his next project,” and I was like, “I’m free now!” That evening, I watched the film. I remember when he called and said, “You’ve got it,” I didn’t want to see it again. It’s easy to fall into the habit of mirroring other behaviours and it doesn’t work for me, you just can’t do that.

#### Lady Jessica, the matriarch of House Atreides, is a mother, soldier,

#### concubine and priestess. How did you prepare for playing such a complicated character?

For me, it was very much a new world, which means I’m an open book but an open book that will do research. I love learning new things. When I eventually started reading the book, I found it *so* complex and difficult, I didn’t finish it. It was like doing a crossword puzzle: “What’s in the middle of stone?” and I’m going, “I don’t know — a hard fucking material?” and then it’s like the letters in the middle of the word. My mindset was not there!

#### How did Denis feel about this, knowing that he’s loved the book since childhood?

[Laughs] He’s *such* a nerd about this book! In the beginning he was like, “This book is like the Bible,” and I’d be thinking, “I don’t know what he’s talking about.” I was trying to play it cool. But trying to play it cool? It is fucking *hard*! Denis and Oscar Isaac [who plays Duke Leto Atreides] together on this

book: oh God, Tweedledum and Tweedledee. I eventually sat down with Denis and said, “I don’t get the book. Can you please explain it to me as if I’m a child?”

#### So what kind of research did you eventually do?

I read blogs on people discussing characters. I do a lot of research on fan pages, what they love to talk about characters — I link that together to what Denis and I do with what my thoughts are on the character from the page and what I got from the book. I do a big mixture of it all because I *love* finding the secrets within characters. I love giving you something new and different.

#### How did Denis guide you in the role?

There is an emotion to Denis and when I see him, I light up — I feel excited, happy and challenged by him. He helped me make sense of scenes that I sometimes simplify. He would come in and react to the smallest things I do and correct them.







#### Can you give an example?

Things of habit, like the way I walk. One of the first directions I got was when I had to go and wake up my son [Paul, played by Timothée Chalamet] in a scene. He said I was too stoic and that's one of the things I'm tired of a little with my characters; I love getting the strong female characters — I love playing a queen, a princess, a countess and an agent, they're all great. But there is a vulnerability, as well, to me. I always try and find this in all my characters. But I'm lacking [in expressing it] and Denis found it. He found those moments and said, "You can do it. You don't have to walk like a queen: round your shoulders, slouch a bit more."

#### You've played lots of very multi-faceted characters. But there aren't too many like that in big films...

We are going in the right direction. It's getting better but there needs to be more change: it's *insanity* that we are fighting this still, but we need noise and it needs to be heard. I saw the new [*No Time To Die*] trailer and every time you see something like that [female characters in strong roles] you kind of go, "Yeah, there it is!" but then you think, "I shouldn't have to say [that]." I was on set on *Mission: Impossible*, Tom and Christopher [McQuarrie, director] were like, "Okay, every time Ilsa walks into a scene, it needs to be with a bang — we're bringing this woman forward." I thought, "*There it is.*" I don't have to battle this — I don't even have to put my foot down.

#### How are things changing on set in the post #MeToo era?

*Dune* is a good example of how it should be done. Denis is one of the most respectful, kind, equal, warm human beings, and who Denis is as a person mirrors every single individual on that set, actor to crew, which is how it should be. We're moving forward and I can also feel change from the attitude on set when it comes to harassment, there's a better respect. There's a greater awareness now of what harassment is, but I still think we accept far too much thinking it's okay.

#### And how are you coping with filming in this time of social distancing?

The *Dune* [re-shoot] a few weeks ago went really well. We were one of the first productions that started up. I think we all just felt a massive responsibility to completely and utterly follow all the rules so that filming could start opening up. But one mistake and everyone gets it. If you don't respect the laws, then we can't keep this up and that's then thousands of people not working. It's a huge responsibility.

#### How do you choose what role comes next?

I think it's very much down to automatic gut feeling, that's always number one. It's down to the presentation: who is the film written by? Who wants to be producer and who is it directed by? And that will put my mind into the first stepping-stone... and also how fascinating it is, too. Then it's down to the

**Top to bottom:**  
As MI6 agent Ilsa Faust in *Mission: Impossible — Rogue Nation* (2015); Playing villainous Rose The Hat in *Doctor Sleep* (2019); Cosying up to Hugh Jackman in *The Greatest Showman* (2017).



script and character. I really do want to try and do things that I haven't done before, always.

#### Rose The Hat in Doctor Sleep was a new type of character for you. She pretty much stole the show, in how terrifying she is.

I was so interested in how you make someone scary because I'd never done that before. I got to work with [actor and coach] Terry Notary. He was kind enough to come to Atlanta with the filming and worked with me on how to embody the character of the True Knot — how we circled, how we died, how do you carry a spiritual sort of magic in you, how do you sense things? We just played around with him, and for me, it was magic. It was so much fun to find Rose; it was also very challenging.

#### What were the hardest moments?

There was a scene with Jacob Tremblay — who is probably, by far, one of the greatest actors I've ever worked with — which they needed to edit because [it] was too scary. He started screaming so much when he was being pinned down to the floor or the ground, I burst out crying and tears were pouring down my face. I was worried I was going to ruin it for him. It's not a scene you can do many times, you know — you don't get many possibilities of sounding like an animal being

slaughtered. Meanwhile, I'm wiping my tears away and trying to make it work. Someone had said to me, "Do you get affected by these scenes because he's the same age as your son?" And I had said, "Absolutely not, it's acting." And I had to go back to that person and literally apologise after the scene. When I held his head, just before I was going to start stabbing him... oh my God, that was so intense. In one take, his voice just started shaking and he said, "I just want my mum. Are you going to hurt me?" It was like, "I've got kids: what the fuck are you doing? You're ruining my close-up." [Laughs]

#### Next year's Reminiscence, directed by Westworld's Lisa Joy, is a reunion for you and Hugh Jackman...

Yes, and he is *such* a bitch. [Laughs] I just adored working with him again. I wanted to work more with him, yes, because he's very good, but also because he made me feel so relaxed that I felt I could try to throw myself into areas that I hadn't done before and not be scared of failing. He made me feel very safe. It was quite selfish — I wanted to work with him because he made me feel like I could be better. The people who I've worked with who are very, very famous, like Hugh and Tom, they are so humble and kind. They don't need to prove anything. Meryl Streep is another: I've never seen anyone like her. I mean, when we did *Florence Foster Jenkins*, she would walk out on that bloody stage to entertain the extras. She'd go out and talk to them in-between takes and entertain them. A lot of people wouldn't care; she really did.

#### After Life and Dune, Reminiscence is another sci-fi for you.

I'm not well-versed in sci-fi. I remember filming *Mission: Impossible — Rogue Nation* with Simon Pegg and he was writing *Star Trek [Beyond]* at the same time and I told him, "Oh, I want to be in it," and he was like, "You're not *worthy* of a role in *Star Trek* — you know *nothing* about it or sci-fi!" But I'm not sure I would call *Reminiscence* a sci-fi now. It's more a drama, a space drama set on other planets. It's also a horror: it's scary and provocative, too. It's so much more than a [typical] sci-fi film. I've no idea what genre it will end up in. I'm really excited to find out where people put it. The script is quite complex as well, obviously. [Laughs] Because that seems to be something I'm drawn to. 🍷

**DUNE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 DECEMBER**