



BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

ERIN DOHERTY, STAR OF *THE CROWN* AND *THE CRUCIBLE*, IS HAVING A MOMENT.
HERE, THE PECKHAM-BASED ACTOR DISCUSSES THE ATTRACTION OF COMPLEX CHARACTERS
AND CONFRONTING HER OWN DEMONS

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erin Doherty has a high cockney inflection and speaks quickly – words fall over each other in an enthusiastic jumble. She says ‘crikey’ a lot, which I thought, and I could be wrong, fell out of favour among people under the age of 50 quite a while ago. Her heritage

is Irish, but she grew up in Crawley (near Gatwick Airport), where she attended a local comprehensive.

So I don’t think it’s unreasonable to say that the 30-year-old found an unlikely counterpart in Anne, Princess Royal, who she played in series three and four of Netflix blockbuster *The Crown*. And I don’t mean it was an odd casting choice; critics were unanimous in their praise of Doherty’s performance – the series creator was put under pressure to add in more scenes with the Princess because people loved her so much, and he credits Doherty with single-handedly revamping Anne’s popularity.

But the accent? There’s no trace of it. So how did Doherty get Anne’s low received pronunciation down to a T? She would walk around London listening to interviews with the young royal to prepare, she says. No, Doherty was the only woman for the job. What I was referencing was not the fact that she played the Princess, but that she found something of a kindred spirit in her.

“I’m not a royalist,” says Doherty. “But [Anne] as a person? I love her. I can’t get enough.”

We’re sitting in a poky press room in the bowels of the National Theatre. The actor, who is on her lunch break from rehearsing her new play (more on that later), is smaller than I imagined; her hand feels super-dainty when I shake it. Perhaps I thought she’d be bigger because of her imposing presence in *The Crown*.

Doherty has described the Princess Royal as a “rock star”, citing the 1974 incident during which she was nearly kidnapped from her Rolls-Royce. Anne’s retort when the assailant told her to get out of the car? “Not bloody likely!” The actor also sympathises with her character, arguing that, although “many things are easier for [the Royals]”, she “wouldn’t wish being born into that family on anyone”. Doherty heard the pressure of being a princess in Anne’s tightly-controlled voice: “Listening to her speak I was like, ‘Oh, she’s resisting, she feels contained’. You can learn a lot about where someone is at mentally from the way they use their voice.”

After *The Crown*, Doherty landed the lead role in the BBC One psychological thriller *Chloe*. Doherty portrays Becky, a young woman in a dead-end job, living with a mother with early-

onset dementia, whose only hobby appears to be stalking an old friend, Chloe, on social media. When said friend mysteriously dies, Becky takes on a new identity and infiltrates Chloe’s circle; a move that seems partially motivated by a desire to find out what happened to her, and partially as an obsessive outlet for her own mourning.

The isolating effect of social media is a major theme in *Chloe*, and this is also taken up in Doherty’s next project: a new production of *The Crucible* at the National Theatre, where she’ll play Abigail Williams (hence the reason I find myself on the South Bank watching Doherty eat a satsuma in rehearsal-wear – a baggy white T-shirt, gilet and pair of jeans).

What does social media culture have to do with Arthur Miller’s 1953 play about the Salem Witch Trials? Well, *The Crucible* was originally an allegory of McCarthyism – the US strategy of weeding out communists with often baseless accusations during the Cold War. Lyndsey Turner, who is directing the National Theatre production, takes these themes of abuse of power, and the repercussions of blindly following doctrine and abandoning common sense, and applies them to one of the modern age’s most hysterical phenomenon: cancel culture.

“Lyndsey is going, ‘right, why does this story need to be told now? What messages can we ping out while remaining loyal and respectful to the text?’ Which I think is why art is so glorious,” says Doherty. “The way that people are nervous to put their beliefs out there because of what may happen to them – that really rings through in this play.”

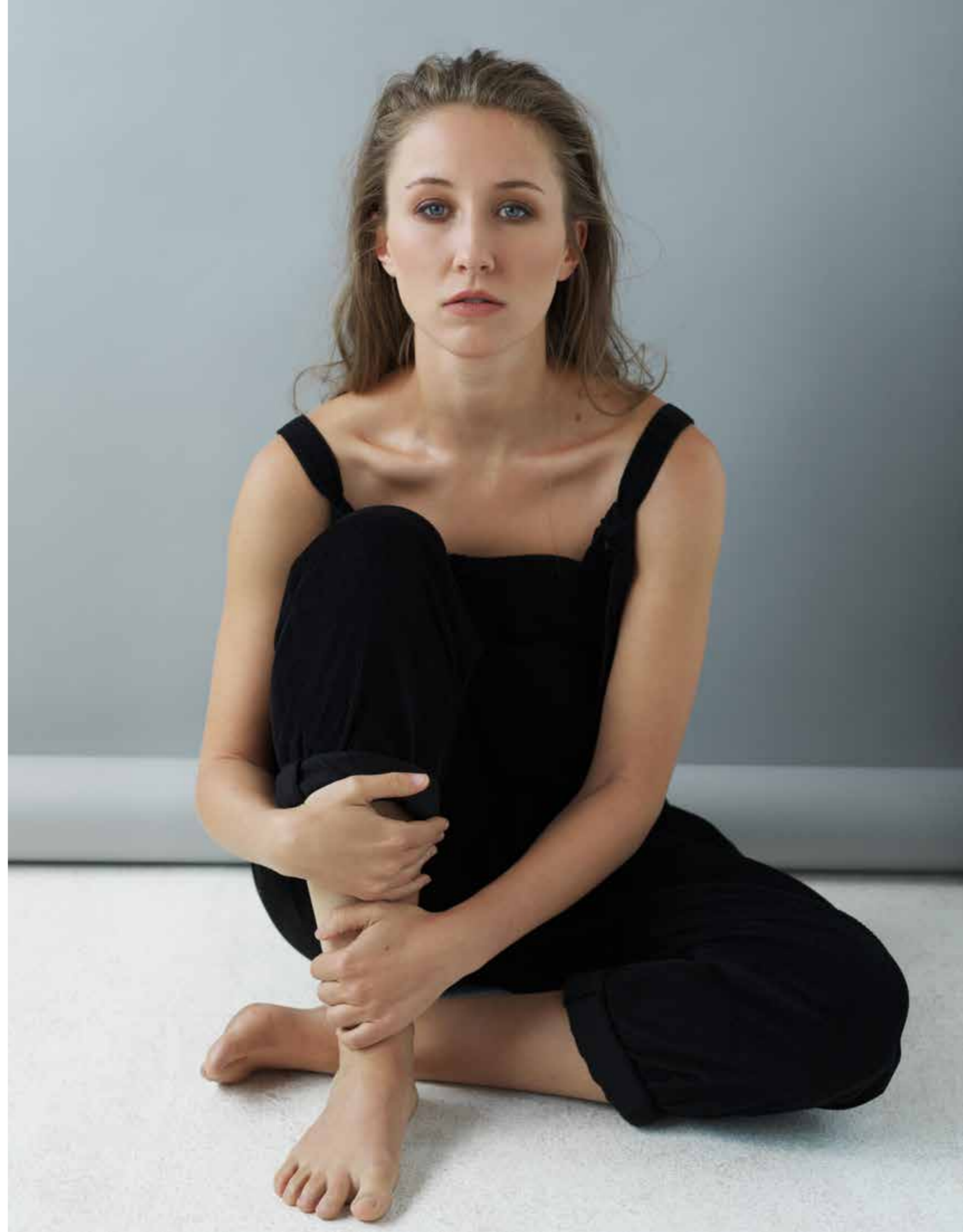
Anne, Becky and Abigail all have something in common: they are complex characters who are not explicitly ‘good’. This is important to Doherty – she says she can’t relate to them otherwise.

Princess Anne, as a royal, has her detractors, of course, but Doherty empathised with her inner conflict and managed to “give [Anne] a heartbeat”. Becky is a duplicitous individual, but the actor felt it was important to understand where her “questionable decisions... came from”.

“I fully connect to [Becky] because I feel like there’s never been more of a disconnect in terms of being ‘with people’ online, but actually being sat in your room at home alone,” she says. As for Abigail, she is both an antagonist and a victim, which makes her Doherty’s favourite role to date: “On a day-to-day basis I’m confused by her. She really is walking that line.”

“The longer that I am alive on this planet, the more I realise that people are not simple. There is no right or wrong, black or ▶

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► white. Everything is grey. Human beings are messy, and there’s beauty in that,” Doherty continues. “That’s what leads me from character to character – I’m like, well, what’s the flaw within this person? What are they running from?” Anne, Becky and Abigail all have light and dark in them – like the actress herself.

Doherty has been open about her mental health, stating in an Instagram post that she sometimes “struggles to leave the apartment”. But she’s also, it seems, proactive about dealing with it. She has been in therapy for six years, and her favourite book is *The Body Keeps the Score*, a work about the effects of trauma. She says that, in a parallel universe, she would have liked to work in the field of psychology: “I just love people. I love trying to figure out why they do what they do.”

This acute understanding of her own mind, however, seems accompanied by a hyper-awareness of her perceived shortcomings – she’s a little hard on herself, I feel, and it makes me sad.

“I’ve experienced a lot of anxiety around being a good person,” says Doherty, and, indeed, that rhetoric comes up multiple times during our interview. “It’s okay to have qualities about yourself that you don’t like... There’s something about not judging yourself and just going, ‘okay, this is where I’m at’. I don’t think I’m a bad person.”

I get on the Circle Line feeling strangely protective over Doherty, who describes herself as a “simple person” who loves nature, and is never happier than when she’s sitting on a bench or under a tree reading, writing or listening to music. Her idea of the perfect day is walking the dog with her sister and mum, before coming home, watching a film and eating chocolate.

Although it’s fair to say that Doherty is fast on her way to becoming acting royalty, she suffers no delusions of grandeur. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she admitted that she finds being in the public eye “jarring”, and considers red carpet appearances “unnerving”. She has discussed feeling star-struck when meeting co-star Helena Bonham Carter, who portrayed Princess Margaret in *The Crown*, and recalls the moment she plucked up the courage to tell Bonham Carter how much she loved her in *Harry Potter*. The Bellatrix Lestrange actor pointed her finger at Doherty as if it were a wand and shouted “Avada Kedavra!”

Doherty also reminisces about visiting Olivia Colman’s cabin when they were filming the show (Colman played Queen Elizabeth), and how they would play games to keep themselves entertained. I can picture it – I can’t imagine anyone not getting along with Doherty. During our interview, she is working overtime to make me feel comfortable, nodding coaxingly when I ask my questions, agreeing enthusiastically with my commentary and laughing at my jokes. When we’re finished, she gives me a hug. “That was awesome!” she says.

The actor’s masterful portrayal of complex characters battling internal demons stems, she hints, from her own darkness. But to me, Doherty is light. Buoyant. Radiant. She brightens the proverbial room with her earnestness, which is a rather rare commodity these days. ■

‘The Crucible’ runs at the National Theatre from 14 September to 5 November, tickets from £20, nationaltheatre.org.uk