



THE ONE TO WATCH

From modern Cinderella to zombie-battling literary heroine, English actress LILY JAMES is breaking the leading-lady mold. CHRISTA D'SOUZA meets a rising star with attitude

*Photographs by JEM MITCHELL
Styling by CAMILLA POLE*

Lily James, star of Disney's live-action blockbuster *Cinderella* (or, as so many of us know her, Lady Rose MacClare from *Downton Abbey*), never gets recognized on the street. Except on this very morning, that is, when she got into a taxi to meet me for lunch in the bar of London's Soho Theatre. "The driver told me [*Downton Abbey*] was the only thing he and his wife ever watched and that I should be proud of being part of such a significant export from the UK," says James. "And he's right, I should! But really, up until right then, I've never been noticed. Perhaps it's because I cycle my bike everywhere with a hat pulled over my head..."

She should enjoy the anonymity while it lasts: James, 26, is one of Hollywood's hottest new names. Having recently returned from a six-month stint in Lithuania, where she was filming a lavish TV production of *War and Peace* – playing iconic heroine Natasha Rostova – she slips in today, unnoticed, in black Acne Studios jeans and biker boots, her brown rather than golden-blond hair

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plastered to her face from the downpour outside. She is feeling a little delicate after a night in London's Dean Street Townhouse ("Champagne and wine!"), but even so, there is a luminosity about James that infuses our dingy booth the moment she sits down. Think Keira Knightley, without the pout ("I've been told we look alike," says James, politely. "I'm a big admirer of hers"), with an hourglass body to boot. Remember the fuss that was made about the blue ballgown scene in *Cinderella*, the rumors that her waist may have been digitally altered to look even tinier? It is cartoonishly nimble in real life, perfectly proportioned for the endless array of red-carpet gowns she wore for the film's promotional tour.





Dress by Valentino;
shoes by Alexander
McQueen; tights by
Falke

Jacket by Loewe; dress by Stella McCartney; boots by Miu Miu; socks by Falke



"I remember coming back from that tour, walking down the street to go to the shops, and realizing I hadn't brought my wallet with me," laughs James. "Everything had been managed by other people for so long that I forgot how to do it myself. I ended up backpacking with a friend in Southeast Asia, staying in huts that were £2 a night, to regain my sanity..."

The whirlwind is likely to continue. Until quite recently, James lived with friends in a basement flat in Peckham, south London, "which was so damp it had mushrooms on the ceiling". Now, she has four upcoming films, a major TV series and a lead role on the West End stage, more of which later.

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First up is comedy *Burnt*, out in October, about a troubled chef, played by Bradley Cooper, desperate to get his third Michelin star. James plays a waitress who is covered in tattoos ("Which I loved; I'm always on the verge of getting one"). She is keen to point out, however, that it is a small part. "Truthfully, I'm a glorified extra in it," she says. "But it was great to get even the tiniest moments with Bradley Cooper, whom I've watched and admired for so long.

"As a younger actress, there's a tendency to prove oneself, to go, 'Watch! I can do this!'" she continues. "But it's about having the emotional intelligence to know what is necessary, to only do what is needed. I'm just obsessed with how and why actors are good. I'm still young enough to be enchanted and fascinated by it all."

Next is *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, based on the cult parody novel of the Jane Austen classic. Alongside Sam Riley, Douglas Booth and Lena Headey, James stars as a badass, musket-wielding Elizabeth Bennet. Yes, she is back in a corset, but this time with slits



Left: Coat by Lanvin;
top by Proenza
Schouler; pants by
Gucci; shoes by
Givenchy; ear cuff by
Diane Kordas.
Right: Jacket by
Tom Ford; dress by
Elizabeth and James;
boots by Jimmy Choo;
earring by Anita Ko;
tights stylist's own



in her petticoats, all the better to perform karate kicks. “My favorite scene is a zombie attack on us Bennet sisters and Mr. Darcy [Riley],” says James. “We’re all running in slow motion, killing, mutilating, blood everywhere...”

An added piquancy? Her boyfriend of over a year, *Doctor Who* actor Matt Smith, plays pompous clergyman Mr. Collins, who hopes to marry Elizabeth. “Yes,” says James, sweetly averting her gaze, “it was fun working with him. He’s such a wonderful actor.”

Born Lily Thomson – she had to change her name as there was already a Lily Thomson on Equity’s books – in leafy Esher, Surrey, James comes from acting stock. Her grandmother was actress Helen Horton, best known as the voice of the computer “Mother” in *Alien*; her father, James, was an actor and musician. She and her two brothers would regularly be taken by their parents to see West End musicals in London (“*Starlight Express*, *Les Misérables*, *Saturday Night Fever*, you name it. I’ve seen *Mamma Mia!*

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about 125 times”). For a real treat, little Lily’s beloved Dad – who died in 2008, when she was a 19-year-old student at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama – would take her to the ballet. “I’d dress up for it and sit on cushions,” says James. “Those times are literally the happiest memories of my life.”

One of James’ most attractive qualities is her honesty. She admits to meditating on Whitney Houston’s *I Will Always Love You* before emotional scenes in *War and Peace*, and loathing the “bosom flattener” she had to wear in *Downton Abbey*. She also readily tells me about the time she did a reading opposite actor Jack O’Connell: when the script called for a kiss, James actually attempted to kiss him, resulting in



Shirt by Helmut Lang; dress by Alexander Wang; boots by Christopher Kane; socks by Falke



Sweater and bra
by Saint Laurent by
Hedi Slimane

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a nervous rash from the embarrassment, "which I've only slightly managed to control since."

It is that beguiling mixture of sophisticated intelligence and breathless ingenuity, as she portrays playing *Downton's* naughty Rose, which sets James apart. One can see why director Kenneth Branagh chose her as his *Cinderella*, and why he then cast her as the female lead in his 2016 stage production of *Romeo & Juliet* at London's Garrick Theatre. (The girl has theatrical form. Only a year out of drama school, she played Desdemona opposite Dominic West in The Crucible's *Othello*; a year after that, Nina in *The Seagull*, both to rave reviews.) Branagh is very much a mentor

to James. "On *Cinderella* I felt so in tune with him, so safe," she says. It is he who encouraged her to emote for a scene without becoming an emotional wreck in the process. It seems James could do with being a little easier on herself: "I have a terror of not living up to my own high expectations. If I've idolized a character, like Natasha [Rostova], I don't want to let her down."

The bar is set high for the other two films on her schedule: *The Kaiser's Last Kiss*, a historical drama with Christopher Plummer, and *Baby Driver*, opposite *The Fault in Our Stars* heartthrob Ansel Elgort. Cue more red-carpet calls – the exciting part for James: "I'm trying to figure out what my style is. Even though I'm confident in my body, I change 500 times before I go out. Unlike my boyfriend, who has the best fashion sense."

Meanwhile, that bike she rode everywhere is still locked to a railing outside her old flat in Peckham. I have a hunch she won't be needing it much from now on.

SHOP LILY'S SHOOT ▶



Jacket and dress by
Balenciaga; earrings by
Pamela Love; ring by
Diane Kordas