



# IT'S GREAT WHEN YOU'RE KATE... YEAH!

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THERE ARE THREE  
THINGS EVERYONE  
SEEMS TO KNOW ABOUT  
'PEARL HARBOR' STAR  
KATE BECKINSALE...

**“Dressing up as somebody else and meeting great people just seemed, as it does now, like a jammy job”**

**K**ate Beckinsale breezes into the lobby of London’s furiously fashionable Sanderson hotel as if it’s her second home. Whereas once her preferred interview venue was the Shepherd’s Bush branch of Café Rouge, where she worked one summer, she now seems more at ease in the chic and glamorous surroundings of one of the world’s hippest hotel bars.

This is (though she’d protest) the perfect environment for the Kate of today. Starring in *Pearl Harbor*, this summer’s biggest blockbuster and, at \$135 million, the most expensive film ever to be given the green light, she is on the verge of the fabled Hollywood breakthrough. Dressed down in jeans and a denim jacket, she looks every bit the amiable English beauty, but Kate is undeniably entering a crucial stage in her career. *Pearl Harbor* will take her from being one of the finest British character actresses of her generation to a major movie player, the Next Big Thing or, as Hollywood would have it, the new Kate Winslet. Beers down the Bush are simply not quite show business.

A Diet Coke and Marlboro Lights are ordered and she sparks one up. “Now then,” she says, leaning back slightly nervously. “Where shall we begin?”

### **THREE THINGS EVERYONE SEEMS TO KNOW ABOUT KATE BECKINSALE: NO 1**

Kate Beckinsale is the daughter of British comedy actor Richard Beckinsale, who died of a heart attack in 1979 at just 31, when Kate was five. Co-star in two legendary Seventies sitcoms, *Rising Damp* and *Porridge*, Beckinsale has become a TV icon because of their enduring appeal and frequent repeats. His portrayal of the ingenuous, deadpanning Godber opposite Ronnie Barker in *Porridge* is a classic of understated comic acting.

“I’ve made it a rule not to discuss anything that happened more than 10 years ago,” Kate warns, good-naturedly, at the start of our chat. Yet she means it, tired of being cast in a tragic light – “I’m not exactly Sylvia Plath.”

“I’ve probably seen more of him on television than I did in real life,” she explains, when Dad later crops up unavoidably in conversation. “I guess I’ve inherited his energy and sense of humour – one of the high priorities in my family life was laughing and making stupid jokes – but it’s really hard to say now because he did die an awfully long time ago.”

Kate was born Kathrin Romany Beckinsale in 1973 and brought up in Chiswick, west London. When Kate was nine, her mother, stage actress Judy Loe, began living with theatre director Roy Battersby, and Kate had to adjust to a new family of four stepbrothers and one stepsister.

“Yes, it *was* something of a surprise,” she says, laughing. “They were all older than me and my stepbrothers arrived at an age when I wasn’t all that keen on boys. I was convinced that my stepfather would beat or poison me; I thought I was going to be separating peas and beans on a stone floor.”

It was a house full of actors and theatre people and Kate had early experience of star roles. At just three weeks old she very convincingly played a crying baby in a television play; at nine she was making an army-training film with her mum and Charles Dance.

“If you see your parents really enjoying their work and all your mates are impressed by what they do, then dressing up as somebody else and meeting really great people seems so much better a prospect,” she says. “It seemed, as it does now, like a jammy job.”

Kate admits, however, to mostly being an angry and aggrieved child, to being, as she once put it, “a traumatised posh girl”.

“I was a passionate child – especially about my friends – but I was also very stumpy and furious. If somebody hit me or any of my friends I’d steam in there and beat them up.”

There are, indeed, certain words which crop up again and again in the articles written about Kate Beckinsale, all of them, I tell her, beginning with “s”.

“Oh, God,” she says, folding her arms. “What are they?”

“Strong-minded.”

“Who, me? I don’t know about that.”

“Self-confident.”

STYLING: MAYA RAHME  
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**Kiss me Kate**

"Growing up in a house full of boys did not give me much of an opportunity to walk in beauty like the night. So it's a funny thing talking about my looks. I get embarrassed and feel a bit shifty and hot."

*White shorts by Gucci*

**"I think at the beginning of my career I was determined not to be a weak and wussy woman – which I obviously was"**

This is met with silence and an inscrutable look. "Steadfast," I continue.

"That sounds a bit like 'stout'. Is 'stout' in there?"

"No, but stocky is." She flashes me a sideways glare. "Only joking," I add.

"Yeah, stocky – and shirty."

"And, of course, steely and spiky."

"I'm always amazed because I don't recognise myself in any of those descriptions. I think at the beginning I was determined not to be a weak and wussy woman – which I obviously was. But when you feel out of your depth, you either stop or you say [she leans forward and puffs out her chest]: 'No, I'm tough and I've got my big boots on.' I was 18 and there was probably a lot of adolescent beefing. Anybody who's my age now would look at me and say, 'Oh yes, aren't you so political and feminist – when what you really need is your mum.'"

Kate's reputation for prickliness does precede her, perhaps because she has played an imposing roster of baddies, busybodies and bitches. Yet she has also at times been outspoken, hot-headed, even foul-mouthed. She knows her own mind, often refuses to discuss certain topics and will not do nude scenes – she recently admitted to taking revenge on one (nameless) director, who had ordered her to strip off, by peeing in his Thermos flask.

She studied French and Russian at Oxford (leaving in her third year, tempted by offers

of work) and possesses a sharp intelligence, easy eloquence and lively wit. She has a strong sense of her own self-worth. It made the prospect of interviewing her slightly daunting. She seems, however, to have changed, because the Kate Beckinsale I spent a couple of hours with could not have been more charming and entertaining. You sense there is still a fractured nervousness in her make-up, but there is a shell of self-belief now. She has a long-standing boyfriend, actor Michael Sheen, and a two-year-old baby girl named Lily. She has a promising film career both in the UK and the US. She seems composed and comfortable with herself. She is happy.

"I really would have liked to have been that outspoken and assertive person you describe, but the bigger picture was that I was under slightly more pressure than I knew I could handle," she says. "I stand by a lot of the things I said, but it's a shame that 18-year-olds are allowed to give interviews to the press. I look at some of my comments and think, 'Oh fuck, that's embarrassing.' Luckily, I'm not a teenager any more, which is a relief."

#### **THREE THINGS EVERYONE SEEMS TO KNOW ABOUT KATE BECKINSALE: NO 2**

Kate Beckinsale had anorexia when she was young. This is another topic she avoids, again because it paints her as a victim and happened some time ago, but she has admitted that it

#### **Pearl before swine**

'Pearl Harbor' was given Hollywood's biggest ever budget, \$135 million. Already insiders are predicting it will do for Kate Beckinsale what 'Titanic' did for Kate Winslet



# It's said that Keanu Reeves wooed her with red roses and invitations to dinner, and even Stephen Fry confessed that, with a few different twists to his DNA, he would fall hopelessly for her

was part of a larger breakdown. While her family could not have been more supportive and laissez-faire – “My stepdad was a Trotskyite and into Timothy Leary and tripping and all sorts of stuff” – and she was doing well at school, twice winning the WH Smith Young Writers Competition, eventually the disturbances of her early years caught up with her. At 15 she stopped eating, weighed little more than five stone at one point and refused to leave the house. When she did go to school, she was disruptive.

“I had this really heavy Freudian analysis for several years, which I’m not sure was the most appropriate thing for a teenager, but I really went for it,” she says, with good grace, when I ask about her time at Godolphin and Latymer school in Hammersmith, west London. “But mostly I was sort of deranged, and not the easiest person to deal with.”

If her troubled teenage years once severely affected her appearance, there is little sign of it now. While she has self-deprecatingly described herself as “a twig with a bottom” and having “small breasts and a pointy face”, Kate actually has a slim, elegant attractiveness. She has large green eyes that are light-sensitive and change colour – “but not at will or anything”. Her thick dark hair, passed down from her Burmese paternal grandfather, falls teasingly over her face. She does a thing with her nose when she laughs, a kind of cartoon scrunch-up that is unbelievably appealing in a naughty schoolgirl sort of way.

Many have fallen victim to her allure. There were reports from the set of Kate’s first major film, Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which she played innocent Hero, that Keanu Reeves wooed her with red roses and invitations to dinner. Even Stephen Fry, who appeared in John Schlesinger’s *Cold Comfort Farm* with her, confessed that, with a few different twists to his DNA, he would fall hopelessly in love with her. Kate, however, is unmoved by the attention. “Growing up in a house full of boys did not give me much of an opportunity to walk in beauty like the night,” she says, lighting another cigarette. “So it’s a funny thing talking about my looks. I get embarrassed and feel a bit shifty and hot.”

## THREE THINGS EVERYONE SEEMS TO KNOW ABOUT KATE BECKINSALE: NO 3

Kate Beckinsale always appears in costume dramas. Since *Much Ado* at the age of 19, she has had major parts in the Hamlet epic *Prince of Jutland*, Schlesinger’s adaptation of *Cold Comfort Farm*, and last year’s Merchant-Ivory adaptation of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*. She also took the lead in the television film of Jane Austen’s *Emma* and has been on stage in Chekhov’s *The Seagull*.

But she has taken on more contemporary roles. In 1998’s *The Last Days of Disco*, directed by Whit Stillman, she was Charlotte, an Eighties New York party girl. In the British comedy *Shooting Fish*, she played an aristocratic con artist, and in 1999’s *Brokedown Palace* she co-starred with Clare Danes as an American tourist wrongly imprisoned in Thailand on drugs charges.

In many of these films, she has displayed an intuitive approach to her craft that has impressed critics and directors alike. Branagh lauded her “strong acting presence”, while Schlesinger compared her favourably to both Audrey Hepburn and Julie Christie, predicting similar success. Yet she has failed to find the right vehicle for her talents; there have been no runaway successes to shift her career up a gear. While she has no doubt chosen projects carefully, there are enough awful films to question her judgement. In *Shooting Fish*, she battled against a screenplay far too rambling and ridiculous; *Brokedown Palace* invited unfavourable comparisons with *Midnight Express*; and worst of all, as she assures me herself, was *Prince of Jutland*, which was “badly written originally in Danish and then appallingly translated into English”. There is a degree of luck in any actor’s career, but Kate has not always helped herself.

Fame would also seem to hold little appeal for her. “I haven’t gone out to be a star. I’ve not gone to the premieres, parties and events, and I’ve not done many interviews and photo shoots. When my daughter was born we weren’t in *Hello!* I find all the stuff that surrounds the business really scary – I would throw up if I had to present an award.”

But Kate’s ability to avoid the limelight is about to change. *Pearl Harbor* will, after all, make her a star. In a movie that also features Cuba Gooding Jr, Alec Baldwin, Dan Ackroyd and Jon Voight, Kate plays female lead Evelyn, a naive Navy nurse posted to the US base in Hawaii while her pilot boyfriend (Ben Affleck) is fighting in Europe. His best friend is also in love with her and a tragic love triangle ensues.

The film is being kept under wraps. There have been no preview screenings and, when I press her for information, she tells me she is “forced at this point by Disney to stop talking”. However, with the A-list team of producer Jerry Bruckheimer and director Michael Bay (*Armageddon*, *Con Air* and *The Rock*) at its core, *Pearl Harbor* is being pitched as an epic action-romance somewhere between *Titanic* and *From Here to Eternity*.

With a large percentage of the budget spent on recreating battle scenes, insiders are talking up *Pearl Harbor* as the most visceral war movie ever. “The real attack on Pearl Harbor can’t have cost this much,” one crew member is reported to have said. It is the perfect movie for the kick-ass Dubya era.

Although Kate tells me she was paid little (“I’m bargain-bucket Beckinsale”), *Pearl Harbor* will bring her big-name recognition. She has a phalanx of Hollywood agents and publicists behind her, another Hollywood film in the pipeline (*Serendipity*, a romantic comedy with John Cusack), and this month her face will beam out from billboards worldwide. She will achieve, at 27, what few British actresses have done: a strong Hollywood profile. It has taken Kate Winslet, Catherine Zeta Jones and Liz Hurley many years of hard labour to achieve a Stateside career.

The spotlight will be sharpest at the film’s world premiere on board a US aircraft carrier in Hawaii on May 21. The event is being talked about, somewhat rhetorically, as Kate’s “official launch party to Hollywood society”.

“It’s hilarious, isn’t it – like *Pride and Prejudice* or something,” she demurs, in a way that sums up her ambiguity at being part of the Hollywood machine. “I’ll have to learn to play the pianola.” **3**  
*‘Pearl Harbor’ opens on 1 June*