

hot air

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Jodie Foster is almost too good to be true — intelligent, likeable and, despite a series of harrowing roles, supremely sane. KAREN MOLINE talks to the star who has made the successful transition from self-confessed 'Bossy Little Thing' to 'Boss Woman'

fostering SUCCESS

'I love being ordinary,' says Jodie, who lives alone in a modest house in the unfashionable Valley area of Los Angeles, 'and it's the side of me that I want people to think of. I'm not very emotional. I analyse things. I wish it was less that way. But I can't change it. It's my nature.'

CALLING Jodie Foster a BLT is no reference to the classic American sandwich of bacon, lettuce and tomato. In her case, the letters stand for Bossy Little Thing, a phrase she herself coined when Jonathan Kaplan, the director of *The Accused* — the film in which Jodie's harrowing portrayal of a rape victim brought her an Oscar two years ago — jokingly asked her who was the boss on the set. But Jodie Foster doesn't mind being called bossy. In fact, she rather likes it.

'I put BLT on some of my crew jackets,' she explains with a glint in her direct blue eyes, 'because it's a part of my personality that I kind of like and am not particularly embarrassed about anymore.' She tosses back her hair, blunt-cut and honey blonde. 'I'm not very emotional. I analyse things, and it's much to my chagrin, you know. I wish it was less that way. Perceiving the world as emotional as opposed to intellectual is not something that comes naturally to me.' She shrugs, ever the realist. 'But I can't change it. It's my nature.'

Jodie's nature is one of such intense pragmatism and fierce intelligence that it has always kept her grounded. After making 28 movies in her 28 years, she has managed the difficult transition from precocious child star to supremely professional adult actress without a downward spiral into Hollywood-fuelled self-indulgence. It is what she so effortlessly uses to make FBI trainee agent Clarice Starling, her character in the brilliant and terrifying *Silence of the Lambs*, so utterly sympathetic as she matches minds with a diabolical serial killer (played with devastating menace by Anthony Hopkins). It also helped keep her sane in the aftermath of the hideous nightmare that

began on March 31, 1981, when John Hinckley Jr attempted to assassinate President Reagan in a bid to win the undying love and attention of the actress he had first seen as a 12-year-old prostitute in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

'I love being ordinary,' says Jodie, who lives alone in a modest house in the unfashionable Valley area of Los Angeles, 'and it's the side of me that I want people to think of. Yes, I grew up in extraordinary circumstances — and certainly my experience of life has not been your everyday experience,' she adds with understatement, 'but that's why I've always put my hand out to try and figure out where I fit.'

That Jodie is avowedly so 'normal' can be seen as a direct testament to her mother, Brandy, with whom Jodie has a deeply loving and trusting relationship, and who single-handedly raised her brood in difficult circumstances. Brandy already had three children—Lucinda, Constance and Buddy—when she divorced her husband, Lucius Foster, only to find herself already three months pregnant. With the arrival of Jodie, born Alicia Christina in 1962, it was a struggle to make ends meet. (Jodie has only seen her father four times in her life.) Young Buddy became a successful actor in commercials, and it was while his little three-year-old sister was tagging along to an audition for suntan lotion that he found himself edged out by her bare posterior (in the now-famous advert where a puppy pulls down her bikini bottom) when she became the 'Coppertone Girl.' Jodie made commercials and minor films until she was 12, when Martin Scorsese cast her as a wine-tipping smart-
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mouth in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. Impressed by her no-nonsense demeanour, he then cast her in the far more controversial *Taxi Driver*, for which she received not only a Best Supporting Actress nomination, but a realisation of what 'acting' was. It wasn't playing herself, as a child. It was about 'taking a leap', about empathy, about specific skills that she has learned to fine-tune to an acutely accurate pitch. Jodie Foster is one of those rare actresses who makes it all look desperately easy.

'When I was a kid, while other kids were sitting around worrying about zits, I was making movies about real subjects,' she says. 'I understood what *Taxi Driver* was about, what I was playing. But I come from a family that doesn't believe in withholding the truth. They believe in protecting me and keeping me from harm, certainly, but I grew up in a very safe and very strict environment. Very classically oriented. We drove European cars and had beautiful leather-bound books and stuff like that. We looked at art and went to museums. We were liberals. We were out there.'

'My mom read all my scripts because when I started I couldn't read very well,' Jodie adds with a laugh. 'Now I like her to know what I'm doing. I certainly like her opinion. Mom is my friend, and someone I respect immensely. I need opinions from people I trust... from people who don't want anything from me. I have a safe group of people that I've known for a long, long time. One instinct I feel I've honed over the years—that has always been there—is an instinct for trustworthy people. That have a quality of morality.'

Brandy also made certain her intellectually gifted child received a proper education, and enrolled her in the Lycée Française in Los Angeles, from which she graduated at the top of her class, despite movie-making interruptions.

Always a successful student, Jodie enrolled at Yale when she was 18. 'It changed me as a person,' Jodie says. 'Anything you do between the ages of 18 to 22 is pretty fundamental, but Yale definitely shaped my ideas about things and human contact. Yale was a place where I got to figure out things that I wouldn't have been able to... that would have been skewed by all sorts of different experiences. It was a pure place; the Ivory Tower. It

was a funny thing. I needed to be removed from the world in order to get at how I felt about things, at what moved me. And what didn't.'

The awful irony of Jodie's needing to be removed from the world was underscored by the Hinckley horror. Not only did every tabloid round the world jump on the story (often hiring fellow students to spy on her), but another crazy fan found out where she was performing in an off-campus play — sensible Jodie was determined to get on with

Jodie Foster's brief but eventful career (28 films in her 28 years) has had its share of traumatic roles:



(left to right) as a teenage prostitute in *Taxi Driver*, in the kids' musical *Bugsy Malone*, winning her Oscar for *The Accused* and as Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*.

her life — and threatened to kill her.

'In general, I felt it was my God-given responsibility to endure this torture, and it's a good thing I went through it, because someone else couldn't take it,' Jodie has said. 'It was like everything else. I got applause for being professional and not complaining and being straightforward and strong—I didn't get any attention for not crying.'

Whatever Jodie's private agony about this invasion of her privacy and the implications of enduring a national security crisis at the age when most American teenagers are graduating from high school, she is still in one of the few professions where personal dilemmas can be channelled into professional (and ultimately often very therapeutic) service. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Jodie's greatest successes as an actress, and soon, she hopes, as director of the upcoming *Little Man Tate*, came with roles as self-effacing, pragmatic, no-nonsense women. After starring in four films that went nowhere, Jodie took a leap into the unexplored with *The Accused*. The film's pivotal rape scene took five days to film, leaving most of the cast and crew in tears. Jodie endured endless retakes; blood vessels in her eyes broke from immeasurable tears; still she worried more about everyone other than herself. 'One of the ways she dealt with her own trauma was by taking care of other people,' said director Kaplan. 'It's what she does in life.'

Winning the Oscar may have changed her career prospects, but >



'I love acting. That's my job. And I love dire situations. With a difficult scene like the rape in *The Accused* people ask me, "At the end of the day don't you just hate it?" And I have to say, no, because that's what I do. That's what fuels me.'

it hardly made a dent in Jodie's 'normal' demeanour. 'It's the funniest thing to possess,' she says. 'Actually I keep moving it into different places. Right now it's in the bathroom. I can sit in the bathtub and look at it and laugh hysterically.'

'But in a business way it is an achievement and has to be looked at that way,' she adds. 'Hollywood is a giant corporation. I've had phases in my life where my name has meant nothing, when I got paid less and was offered fewer roles. Now I get paid more and am offered more roles. It's not very complicated.'

What was especially appealing about *Silence of the Lambs*' Clarice Starling was the opportunity to play a woman with a very real heroic quality. 'The great thing about Clarice is that it's the first time I've come across a female hero that's not a steroid version of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but also isn't a woman running around in her underwear shouting 'Stop!' She's very complicated, and she's very human. Her strength comes from what she is; she uses her emotionality, her intuition, even her frailty, vulnerability and the negative aspects of her past. She uses everything that is female about her to combat the villain.' Clearly, Jodie could just as easily be talking about herself.

'This is the first part Jodie's ever played where she hasn't had to mask her intelligence,' says *Silence* director Jonathan Demme. 'She's been allowed to be every bit as smart as the exceptionally bright person she actually is. She manages to make that kind of erotic, although that's not pertinent to the movie. Just watching her use that mind of hers is really very intoxicating.'

'And working with Jodie, you're sitting around and shooting the breeze about current events or hairstyles and then the shot's ready and she goes in front of the camera and there's Clarice. When the camera rolled there was this metamorphosis that was so exciting. I kept falling in love with Clarice all over again.'

Jodie has always done more than simply sit around on the many sets she's spent most of her life on: she's been watching, learning, absorbing for her very seamless transition to director.

It's always the director's movie. It's his party. But if somebody has an idea and man, it's good — I'm stealing it,' she says, laughing. 'I liked directing. I've worked for so long that I'm in an exquisite position to know technically what it's all about. I thought it would be a lot harder, although it was absolutely exhausting. You're constantly trying to block things out, to concentrate. Acting is a very freeing kind of thing because you don't

have to think about structure—you just have to be open in a certain way. Directing is so much the opposite.'

Directing is a vocation Jodie would like to try again; she also wouldn't mind a repeat performance as Clarice, a character she understood intuitively. 'I love acting,' she says simply. 'That's my job. And I love dire situations — getting to that place and



PHOTOGRAPHY: KEN REGAN (LONDON FEATURES)

seeing things that people don't ever get to see. With a difficult scene like the rape in *The Accused* people ask me, "At the end of the day don't you just hate it?" And I have to say, no — because that's what I do. That's what fuels me.'

The little girl who acted because it was effortless, because it was fun, but mainly because she knew herself to be responsible from the tender age of eight for her family's survival has found her equilibrium. Acting for her has become the 'ordinary' she craves.

'Everyday that I came home from making *The Accused* I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. But I had a smile on my face,' she explains. 'It was as if I was making something pure, something big, not just politically big or for 'humanity', but bringing out something true. Ultimately my job is truth, and if I can get to it then I have done my job well, and that makes me happy. It doesn't mean it's fun. Fun and truth are two different things.'

And on *Little Man Tate*, she made an even larger leap of faith. She decided that she was no longer to be called the BLT. 'I insisted that they use an appropriate phrase,' she says with a laugh. 'They called me Boss Woman.'

