

# Tilda SWINTON

A spotlight on one of the most mesmerising actresses around.

WORDS BY RACHAEL SCOTT

One journalist described her as posh, pale and scarily clever. Another flatteringly called her “the Greta Garbo of the avant garde”. Many things have been said of Tilda Swinton, but most agree she is a unique actress with unquestionable talent who’s impossible to pigeonhole.

Ever since her first role as a prostitute in Derek Jarman’s *Caravaggio* to her latest in Lynne Ramsey’s adaptation of Lionel Shriver’s best-selling novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, where she plays a mother whose seventeen-year-old son commits an appalling crime, she has taken risks with her career, exploring the boards other actors fear to tread. You could argue she was a late bloomer – Jarman first cast Swinton in her mid-twenties – but that would be naïve because she has said that she deliberately wanted to be out of the limelight until she was forty – that way no one would become tired of seeing her face on screen. Fourteen years later, that porcelain-skinned face landed the chameleon-like actress a supporting role as a commune leader opposite Leonardo DiCaprio in Danny Boyle’s much hyped, but critically panned, *The Beach*. It was her first foray into

big budget films, but by no means her last. When she won a Best Supporting Oscar for *Michael Clayton* at forty-seven, an age when most actresses complain

of dwindling roles, she was still bucking convention. She has maintained the iconic status she achieved during her early work because her acting is founded in artistic expression and she has always sought out projects that stretch her as a person, rather than ones that will make her famous.

Swinton made seven films in eight years with Jarman before he died of an AIDS-related illness in 1994. After the loss of her “godfather figure” she continued to take challenging parts, collaborating with directors intrigued by her singular attractiveness and compelling style, who cast her in roles that toyed with conventional ideas about gender and sexuality. In John Maybury’s *Man To Man* she assumed her dead husband’s identity to live as a man in Nazi Germany. In Sally Potter’s *Orlando*, based on the novel by Virginia Woolf, she begins the film as a seventeenth century English nobleman who, over the course of four hundred years, becomes a noblewoman.

**She has said that she wanted to be out of the limelight until she was forty – that way no one would become tired of seeing her face.**

“Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex,” declares Lady Orlando as she endures her first taste of sexism when her lands and status are stripped away.

Katherine Mathilda Swinton was born in 1960 in East Lothian, Scotland into an aristocratic lineage that can be traced back thirty-five generations. One great-uncle, Sir Ernest Swinton, invented the tank and her Major General father was the head of the Queen’s Household Division. Because of her father’s position the family – Swinton had three brothers – they lived all over the world. “It was very clear”, she told Scotland On Sunday “that the boys in the family had a life laid out for them that was pretty well worn, set up, established and honoured. It felt like it would have been more convenient for me to be a boy, and it did definitely look like they were having more fun.” When she was ten, she was sent to West Heath Girls boarding school in Kent where she shared a class with Lady Diana Spencer, and it was during this time she realised she could be a performer. After studying Social and Political Sciences and English Literature at Cambridge, she joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1983, but abruptly left stating that she felt as if she’d joined the ICI. She then found a kindred spirit in Jarman and became the poster girl for avant-garde filmmaking.

When Swinton entered the big league, there were no signs of vanity or diva-like behaviour. Four weeks after

giving birth to twins she appeared nude in *The War Zone*. During an explicit sex scene with Ewan McGregor in *Young Adam* she was more concerned about getting a shot of a fly landing on her nipple rubbing its legs together as in Alexander Trocchi’s source novel, than being naked in front of a technical crew. In *Julia* she embodies the titular alcoholic tart with unscrupulous morals who kidnaps a small boy with passionate frenzy.

For an actress who had spent the best part of her career in films only seen by film students and arthouse aficionados, winning an Academy Award was an incredible achievement. More trophies will undoubtedly adorn her home for her mesmerising portrayal of Eva Khatchadourian in *Kevin*. **S**

*We Need To Talk About Kevin* opens in cinemas October 21st



## 7 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DON'T KNOW ABOUT TILDA SWINTON

**1** She has said that the biggest risk she’s ever taken was having children.

**2** In 1993, unknown Italian film student Luca Guadagnino wrote to Swinton asking if she would work with him on an adaptation of a William Burroughs’s short story. Sixteen years later, their film *I Am Love* was nominated for an Oscar.

**3** In 1995 she collaborated with artist Cornelia Parker on a week-long exhibit called *The Maybe* at the Serpentine Gallery, that had the actress lying motionless in a glass box for eight hours a day.

**4** She starred in the video of Orbital’s 2002 single, *The Box*, and contributed vocals on four tracks of glam-goth-folk singer-songwriter Patrick Wolf’s album, *The Bachelor* in 2009.

**5** She was a gifted sprinter at school, but had no interest in winning prizes, so pretended to sprain an ankle when teachers tried to enter her into championships.

**6** She was a member of the now defunct Communist Party.

**7** She considers fireworks to be the greatest invention.