

FROM THE CROW TO INDIE ROYALTY

Vanessa Kirby was two days away from shooting *Mission: Impossible 7* in Venice — reprising her role as the glamorous gunrunner known as the White Widow — when Paramount halted production. It was late February, and Italy had just recorded Europe's then-worst outbreak of the novel coronavirus, at the time not officially labeled a pandemic. Tom Cruise's billion-dollar blockbuster franchise had become the first major Hollywood casualty.

Seven months on, and with the film industry appearing irreversibly changed, Kirby is preparing her return to Venice. But it's not for *Mission: Impossible* (she starts shooting that later in September). With *The World to Come* and *Pieces of a Woman*, filmed almost back-to-back in late 2019 and early 2020, the British star, 32, has the rare honor of having two films compete against each other in the Biennale, the first A-list film festival to physically take place since cinemas — and much beyond — shut their doors.

Appearing alongside Katherine Waterston and Casey Affleck in *The World to Come* — a frontier romance set against the rugged and patriarchal terrain of the mid-19th century American Northeast — Kirby plays flame-haired Tallie, who sparks an intense and liberating affair with a farmer's wife, played by Waterston.

But it's *Pieces of a Woman* — also heading to Toronto — and her quietly powerful and gut-wrenching turn as Martha, a woman dealing with towering loss after a home birth that goes wrong (shot in one hugely impressive yet frequently hard-to-watch half-hour take), that marks yet another new chapter for the actress, who already has condensed what many would consider a lifetime's worth of career milestones into just a few years. A critics' favorite on the British stage; Emmy-nominated

and BAFTA-winning for her global screen breakout as Princess Margaret in the opening seasons of Netflix's *The Crown*; part of two of the biggest action franchises around (she also appeared in *Fast & Furious* spinoff *Hobbs & Shaw* last year); and, for her next act, independent cinema's newest leading lady.

While there were few thespian genes in her family (her father is a prostrate surgeon and her mother once edited *Country Living*), an 11-year-old Kirby caught the bug after watching a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

"I suddenly realized the power of telling these stories is that they can make you feel differently about yourself when you leave," she says, speaking from the south London home she shares with her sister Juliet (a theatrical agent) and two close friends. "And I think that's always been a goal for me since."

Even before the reviews come in, *Pieces of a Woman* — also starring Shia LaBeouf, Ellen Burstyn and Sarah Snook — has found a fan in Martin Scorsese, who recently came aboard as executive producer. "I haven't stopped smiling," says Kirby. "It's such a mind-blowing thing."

The actress was shown the script in L.A. by filmmaking couple Sam and Ashley Levinson (Ashley is producing the film for Bron Studios); 24 hours later, she jumped on a plane to London, then Budapest, to meet director Kornél Mundruczó. "You know when you're supposed to do something ... it felt so right," she says. "I wanted to show up and tell Kornél face-to-face how much I loved it and how much it touched me."

Mundruczó, a Cannes regular who won the top prize in the 2014 Un Certain Regard sidebar for *White God*, also was taking something of a career leap, *Pieces of a Woman* marking his first English-language feature. But he found the right partner with whom to "take the big risk together," likening Kirby to his favorite screen siren, Catherine Deneuve. "She's someone who can express emotion for the unseen, and that's very difficult," he says.

Kirby, who cites Gena Rowlands as her cinematic idol (she has a photo from Rowlands' 1980 drama *Gloria* in her room), says she had been "biding



Left: Kirby (with Katherine Waterston, right) in *The World to Come*. Right: Alongside Shia LaBeouf in *Pieces of a Woman*, of which Kirby says, "it really feels like a new stage for me."

HAIR BY HALEY BRISQ AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY JOANNE FOR CHANEL; AT FERRARI; ARTISTS: MOND; IMAGE: OMBRE; FOTOFEST; PEGGS; COURTESY OF THE

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"I had the privilege to watch lots of people do their [lead roles] and really absorb everything and learn — and I just felt really ready," says Vanessa Kirby, photographed Aug. 22 at Shoreditch Studios in London.

her time" waiting for such an opportunity: "I felt ready to lead a movie for a long time, but to actually do it was such a gift. Now that I've done it, it feels like a new stage for me."

It's certainly a leap from what *The Crown* creator Peter Morgan recalls when he "went rogue" and cast Kirby, overruling the other show execs' preferred choice for Princess Margaret. Kirby had turned up to the audition looking like what he describes as a "catastrophic mess"; fake tan smeared haphazardly on her shins and hands stained orange (she'd forgotten to wash them after applying the tan). "But she had an electrifying presence. ... You realized you were in the company of a rare and special talent," he says, adding that her chaotic appearance plus visible nerves evoked the essential vulnerability he was looking for. "It was very *Annie Hall*."

Subsequent screen tests — and the public reaction — confirmed what Morgan first saw, that Kirby was a "high-impact booking," much like the royal she was taking on. "There was no room in which you were not conscious that Princess Margaret was there."

The Crown led to *Mission: Impossible* in the middle of season two. Kirby says she used the adrenaline-fueled blockbusters *Mission* and *Hobbs & Shaw* to creatively "subvert" the usual expectations for female characters in action films, particularly within the typically masculine *Fast & Furious* world. "I was like, 'I don't want to have to be saved ever, I don't want to have to wear anything compromising. I want her to have her own emotional journey.'"

As Kirby waits to begin shooting *Mission: Impossible 7*, and for audiences in Venice and Toronto to see her first lead roles, this philosophy is set to continue into what could be yet another career progression.

"I feel so excited by the thought that there's so many female stories that haven't been told. And so many that have examined the psychology of a man in a particular situation but not the woman," she says. "I feel like there's so much opportunity for that, and that we do actually have a responsibility. Changing that space is very important to me." **FFR**