The Stunning Transformation Of Vanessa Kirby



BY **MEG WALTERS** / DEC. 1, 2020 11:52 AM EST

Vanessa Kirby's rise to fame has been pretty astounding to watch. After breaking onto the British theater scene in a triple bill at the Octagon Theatre in 2009 (via *What's On Stage*), she swiftly climbed through the ranks of the British film and TV industry, with starring roles in a series of appearances in *The Hour*, *About Time, Everest,* and *Me Before You*. However, it wasn't until 2016 that she really became a household name with her career-changing turn as Princess Margaret on Netflix's smash hit about the royal family, *The Crown*. Her role in *The Crown* was rapidly followed by a starring role alongside Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout.*

It's hard to imagine this glamorous, BAFTA award-winning actress ever struggling to win a role or to succeed at school. But like most actors, Kirby has been through quite a lot to get to where she is today. Here is the stunning transformation of Vanessa Kirby.



Vanessa Kirby grew up in a well-off home in Wimbledon, a picturesque suburb of London. She is the middle of three children born to Jane Kirby, who was the editor of *Country Living*, and Roger, a leading prostate surgeon and urology professor. By the sounds of things, her childhood was a happy and creative one.

From an early age, Kirby was exposed to plenty of films, thanks to her father. He "always watched loads of films with me," she told *The Guardian*. "Totally inappropriate ones like *Midnight Express* when I was about six." She and her siblings were also frequently taken to the theater. "[My father] is totally obsessed with Shakespeare," she explained to *Esquire*. "His glory moment was playing Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* at uni," she went on, revealing that her father still thinks of himself "as a bit of an actor." It's easy to see where Kirby gets her passion and talent from!

Vanessa Kirby had an insufferable few years in her childhood



Even though Vanessa Kirby admitted she had a lovely childhood, the experience was tainted by giardia, a intestinal parasite, which wasn't diagnosed for a while. It made her feel constantly nauseous. As she put it to *The Guardian*, two years of her childhood were taken by "all these nightmare injections, pills up the bum, all of it." She summed it up as being "prodded around from age nine to 11." In addition to her long-term treatment, as she said to *Marie Claire UK*, she was also severely bullied at around the same time. "That was one of my darkest times," she recalled.

Apparently, it led to her becoming extremely self-conscious and sensitive as a child. However, while the bullying was horrible while it lasted, it left her with a few crucial acting skills. As she said to *Marie Claire UK,* "Now when I look back on it, I feel like those three years gave me a kind of empathy or emotional understanding." Sounds like Kirby is certainly able to see the silver lining!

Vanessa Kirby discovered the acting world was a place she could be accepted

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Despite the bullying and constant trips to the hospital, there was one place where the young Vanessa Kirby felt she could relax. She joined after-school drama clubs and became fascinated by the world of acting. She explained to *Esquire*, "It was an area where I was totally accepted. Somewhere I could truly be myself."

While drama clubs gave Kirby a sense of community, seeing live theater became another passion. Although Kirby has been exposed to theater for years, she was 11 years old when "suddenly it clicked," as she told *The Guardian*.

She explained the moment in more detail to *Esquire*, recalling a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* starring Vanessa and Corin Redgrave at the National Theatre in London. "It was in the round," she said, "and I was right there in that garden with them. Whatever that magic is, I started to absorb it." It's clear that from an early age the world of acting has been both a refuge and a passion for Kirby.

Vanessa Kirby learned how to act while in a school play

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Vanessa Kirby's passion for acting began at the young age of 11. However, as she recalled to *Esquire*, it wasn't until secondary school that she learned how to act well. She was in a school production of *Hamlet*, playing Gertrude. "There was maybe five or 10 minutes, when I was off stage, when I was thinking as her," she recalled. "I couldn't stop the thoughts coming. In the back of mind there was me, going, 'Huh?' And the next scene was so amazing to play," she went on. It was in this moment that Kirby learned an essential lesson about acting: It's not about pretending, but rather it's about "literally thinking someone else's thoughts," as she put it.

This early discovery has seen Kirby through most of her career. In an interview with *The Talks*, the actress explained that in the 2020 film *The World to Come*, she used the same technique she learned in that school production of *Hamlet* — she imagined what the character would think. "If you think the character's thoughts, the camera can read it," she explained.

Vanessa Kirby went to university to study English after failing to get into drama school



Like most young aspiring actresses in England, Vanessa Kirby auditioned for drama schools after graduating high school. She was just 17 at the time — and, as she described to *Esquire*, "horribly unprepared and completely clueless." At all of her auditions, she was told she needed more experience. She took their advice and set off traveling for nine months before applying to universities. "I thought, 'I have to go to uni. I have to meet tons of people who aren't actors,'" she said. She ended up attending the University of Exeter where she studied English and soaked up everything she could from university life, partying, studying, and appearing in student plays.

She told *The Last Magazine* that the university experience was just what she needed. "I had the most transformative, amazing experience," she recalled. When she left, she was more sure than ever that she was determined to become an actor. "I realized that somehow I needed to make my life about [acting] even if it was doing it for free on Sundays, or whatever," she said.

Vanessa Kirby gave up a place at drama school to start acting professionally



Vanessa Kirby auditioned for drama schools again after completing her degree at Exeter. This time she was more successful, and she was offered a place at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, or LAMDA, as noted by *Esquire*. However, at the same time, she was discovered by the director David Thacker, who offered her three roles at the Octagon Theatre Bolton. She turned down the drama school and jumped into the world of professional acting.

When she first turned down her spot at LAMDA in order to work professionally, she wasn't sure she'd made the right decision. As the actress told *Fabric Magazine*, "I felt like it was a rite of passage — RADA or LAMDA... So at the beginning I was this wide-eyed, naive, self-critical, nervous, neurotic thing." She went on to describe how her lack of training made her question, "Do I have a right to be here?" However, she did more than prove herself. She even ended up winning the BIZA Rising Star Award for her roles in Thacker's productions (via *The Last Magazine*). It seemed as though her career was off to a fantastic start.

Vanessa Kirby began her career as a theater actress

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After her acclaimed performances in the three Octagon Theatre Bolton plays, Vanessa Kirby seemed like she would work primarily in theater. Her early stage credits are impressive, to say the least. By 2012, she had played Isabella in *Women Beware Women* at the National Theatre, Dana in *The Acid Test* at London's Royal Court Theatre, Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, and Masha in *Three Sisters* at the Young Vic in London. In role after role, Kirby blew both audiences and critics away, leading *Variety* to call her "the outstanding stage actress of her generation" — incredibly high praise (via *Esquire*).

It's evident that, for Kirby, theater is her first love. As she told *Culture Whisper* in 2016, she read all of Chekhov's plays as a teenager. She also explained that her dream roles include Hedda Gabler, Lady Macbeth, and, of course, "all of the Chekhovs." At the time, screen work wasn't a priority. "I would be quite happy being on stage forever," she shared, adding, "I miss stage as soon as I am on set so it will always be something that I hope that will be the center of my identity."



In 2011, Vanessa Kirby starred in the first series of *The Hour*. As the actress explained to *The Guardian*, it was one of her first professional jobs — and was a dream come true for a few reasons. Not only was she getting paid to do what she loved, but she was also working alongside her childhood hero, Ben Whishaw.

Back in high school, Kirby had stolen a picture of Whishaw in *Hamlet* from her school notice board to stick on her wall. She ended up seeing his performance three times and even spotting him on a London bus.

Years later, when Kirby was filming *The Hour* with Whishaw, she found herself struggling to concentrate. "In my head it was just alarm bells going, 'Oh my God that's Ben Whishaw,'" she recalled. After filming the scene, she confessed her childhood "infatuation" to her co-star. She laughed, remembering the moment: "Of course, he was with his boyfriend."

For Vanessa Kirby, playing Princess Margaret in The Crown was "a gift"

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In spite of her passion for the stage, it seemed that a film career was inevitable for the young actress. After a series of decent roles, Vanessa Kirby was cast in *The Crown*, a series that would transform her career, turning her from a well-respected stage actress into a star of the screen. She played Queen Elizabeth II's younger sister, Princess Margaret, as a young woman in the first two seasons of the Netflix show. As she described to *Esquire*, Margaret, who was involved in one of the royal family's most scandalous romances, was a "gift" to play.

In order to prepare for the role, Kirby "read every book [she] could find and watched a lot of archive footage," as she told *Stylist*. Soon enough, she was obsessed. "I'm fully immersed in her life," she confessed. "We've even got a picture of Margaret in our loo."

When her time on *The Crown* came to an end, Kirby confessed to *Marie Claire UK*, "It's changed my life; it's everything I've wanted." Not only did the role catapult her to stardom, it also became a personal passion — "It's more exciting and fulfilling than any acting job I could ever get," she gushed.



After Vanessa Kirby became better known thanks to *The Crown*, Hollywood came calling with one of the biggest movie franchises of all time — *Mission: Impossible.* In 2018, she starred alongside Tom Cruise as "The White Widow" in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*. The experience couldn't have been further from the upper class, 1950s world of *The Crown*. Her first big Hollywood role saw her taking on a whole new genre. As she explained to *The Talks*, it was a big step out of her comfort zone. "I come from stage acting, so I had no idea even how to even do that world. It was really scary and challenging," she said. She went on to explain that the film really changed her as an actor. "It taught me about discipline and stamina, it taught me the physicality of what is required for different roles." While the change of pace was tough, for Kirby, it was a welcome challenge.

Luckily, she had a very experienced action hero by her side. According to Kirby, Cruise was "such a pro" and was "absolutely disciplined; super enthusiastic." As she told *The Guardian*, it was thanks to Cruise that she pushed herself extra hard for the role.

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As Vanessa Kirby's fame continued to rise, her opportunities and independence as an artist rose, too. She explained to *The Guardian* how she became interested in creating her own projects that would give her and other women better material. "I feel like now, more than ever, it's all of our responsibility to have other things represented on screen," she explained. "There have been *so* many male stories on screen, or stories of women written by men, so she's the wife of someone, the girlfriend of someone..." One of Kirby's projects was developed with the New York director Adam Leon. As she explained, her role was inspired by a real-life article about a woman who "entered a fugue state and went missing."

By the sounds of things, we can expect to see Kirby developing more female-driven projects in the future. As she told *Esquire*, "I want to see those really raw, big journeys that [female characters] used to have. I really feel that's my mission, to play a part in bringing that back."

Vanessa Kirby is still learning about self-care as an actress



The life of a movie star is notoriously chaotic and over-busy. For Vanessa Kirby, learning to find balance has been an important learning curve as her fame has grown. In 2020, she spoke to *Glamour UK* about self-care. When asked about how she took care of herself, she replied, "Not very well." Her method of self-care generally consists of seeing good friends and her sister. "That's the best form of wellbeing you can ever have, really," she explained.

In 2018, she spoke to *BAFTA Guru* about learning to take care of herself as an actress. One of the biggest things is "making sure that you have a life outside of acting." As Kirby explained, many actors have mental health issues linked to their success. So for Kirby, she's learned to detach her self-worth from her success, so that rejections no longer affect her so deeply. Of course, these days, Kirby probably isn't receiving too many rejections!

Over the years in the industry, Vanessa Kirby has learned to treat herself with respect



Another important lesson that Vanessa Kirby has learned over the years is to respect herself as an actress. As she told *Glamour UK*, "It's so hard to not have self-doubt." She went on to explain that she has had to learn how to be less self-critical. "It's my main aim to quieten [the self-critical voice]," she said.

It's clear that Kirby has come a long way in her journey to self-acceptance — especially after spending years of her childhood being bullied. As she told *Glamour*, after being bullied, the self-critic was ever-present in her life. "I used to really struggle with it, and like really doubt myself at work and just generally," she explained. Apparently, she's learned to notice her self-critical voice and change the way she speaks to herself in order to feel more confident and empowered both at work at in her personal life.

During the 2020 lockdown, Vanessa Kirby finally had some time off

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The 2020 coronavirus pandemic forced many of us to put our lives on hold. For Vanessa Kirby, the lockdown forced her to pause her busy schedule and take some time off work. While she was naturally worried about the pandemic's effect on the film and theater industries, she ended up relishing the relaxation and the slower pace of life. She recounted her lockdown experience to *Esquire*, saying, "I slept loads, which I haven't done properly for years." She ended up enjoying the new sense of routine and structure. As she put it, "It's soothing, isn't it? I think it's what human beings actually need."

Perhaps Kirby will try to incorporate some sense of structure into her life when things eventually return to normal and she's back to globetrotting between film sets and festivals. After all, she's all set to star in not one but two more *Mission: Impossible* films, as well as a film called *The Brutalist,* alongside the likes of Marion Cotillard and Mark Rylance (via *Deadline*). One thing's for sure — Kirby is sure to keep astounding us on stage and screen for years to come.

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