

Katherine Waterston Is Finally Not The One Going Through Hell

[Morgan Baila](#)



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Katherine Waterston might be one of [Hollywood's most humble performers](#). Usually a fan of darker roles, audiences might be surprised to hear just how casual and approachable the actor is in real life. As someone who has demonstrated every facet of a woman's experience both on film and on stage, the real Waterston is genuinely chill. Maybe it's because her 2015 big break in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* had her gamely talking about her nude scenes for months, or maybe it's because she finds strenuous projects to be a "treat," but, in keeping with the character she

plays, nothing really fazes Waterston during a recent phone call about her role in HBO's psychological thriller, *The Third Day*, premiering September 14.

The show, set on the [real-life Osea Island off the coast of Essex](#), is a dark and disturbing limited series which explores grief in all its iterations. It's a heavy watch at times, especially for Waterston's co-star, Jude Law, who plays Sam, a grieving and panic-stricken father. Waterston plays Jess, an academic with a PhD in the Essex witch trials studying the cultures of the fictionalized Osea Island. The land is inhabited by a mysterious cult-like group of locals who adhere to centuries old traditions and participate in an annual bacchanal-inspired weekend of debauchery. Although she doesn't permanently live on the island, Jess finds herself immersed in their traditions, led to embrace the island inhabitants' ways by her insatiable curiosity for its folklore and history. Sam and Jess see the island through totally different lenses. Where Sam sees danger, Jess sees opportunity. Jess' lust for life is palpable, made clear by Waterston's vibrant performance.

"Jess is able to truly appreciate people who have different sorts of spiritual and social practices — one can either reject and be frightened of [them], or embrace them," Waterston explains from her current home in London ahead of the show's premiere. "Just because it's different from you or where you're from doesn't mean that it's necessarily threatening."

But I do like being the person going through hell because I like to be pushed and I like to explore the human condition.

Waterston's own fascination with the unknown and unpredictable has been a guiding light in her career and personal life. Never one to expect anything

of the universe, she's taken the approach to let life surprise her upon arrival.

A child of the industry (her father is *Law & Order* franchise-jumper Sam Waterston), Waterston has been spending her quarantine in England. She describes her life as split between England and New York, "both literally and emotionally," but she still considers New York City home. Her career was born there after she left her Connecticut upbringing to pursue theater. A graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, [Waterston cut her teeth in off-Broadway shows](#) before charming [critics and movie-goers in 2015's *Inherent Vice*](#). Throughout her career, the 40-year-old has been praised for her work across all genres; her natural talent, [humility](#), and chameleon-like ability to [fully transform into every character](#). Her IMDb page skates from protective mother (*Steve Jobs*), to resourceful wizard ([Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them](#)), to cunning survivor ([Sleep Like State](#)), to passionate lover (*A World to Come*).

In the HBO drama, Jess and Sam feel inexplicably drawn to Osea, and can't seem to leave the island when bad things start happening. It's a feeling — a stirring connection to a new place — that Waterston's experienced herself. She'd been lucky enough to travel a lot prior to quarantine and says she's felt strong connections to certain places for inexplicable reasons. "Why would you feel connected to one place and not another?" she muses. "You just feel *something*. I can't explain it."

[Waterston's interviews](#) are always candid and complex conversations about her craft — one in [particular with friend Natasha Lyonne comes to mind](#). She's an actor's actor, but in a cool way. She's worked with every kind of director, on every kind of budget, including her upcoming feature [The World to Come](#), which premiered at the Venice Film Festival last week to rave reviews. Starring alongside Vanessa Kirby, Christopher Abbot, and Casey Affleck, Waterston once again slips into a character and completely

disappears.

Like *Third Day*, *The World To Come*, based on Jim Shepard's book by the same name and directed by Mona Fastvold, is about isolation and loneliness. The movie follows two neighboring couples as a romance blossoms between Abigail (Waterston) and Tallie (Kirby). [Fastvold told Indiewire after the film's premiere](#) that she immediately thought of Waterston for the lead because of her subtle and nuanced performances. "As an actress she makes me lean in," Fastvold said. "That's what I want from Abigail." Waterston explains that Paul Hansen's script was one of the most beautiful she's ever read, and deems her character "one of the best characters I've ever had a chance to play."

"Suffering characters," she says, give her more to explore as an actor. She's a natural explorer in her career, similar in many ways to Jess.

"[Jess is] the kind of person who will reach across the table in a foreign country and slam a fork into something, have no idea what it is, and have a bite of it," she says. "She's thrown into contact with someone who is completely shut down and is not experiencing the world because he's isolated in his grief."

Waterston and Law, who both worked on the *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* franchise but appeared in only one scene together, share more screen time in *The Third Day*. Yes, maybe they kiss and take psychedelics, but for the most part, Law goes through the wringer while Waterston bears witness. She describes a massive heat wave followed by a scene filmed in freezing cold water. There was sprinting, getting beaten up, falling down — rigorous and demanding stuff.

But Waterston confirms Law maintained the cheeriest of demeanors, which she cheekily attributes to his handsome face. "I feel like people that are that

good-looking should have a good attitude," she laughs.

Going through grueling elements also led to a greater friendship between them. This camaraderie blossomed further during quarantine when Waterston started a charity platform app called [Spare Hand](#), which she describes as "Tinder for charities." [Waterston says Law came out numerous times to volunteer](#) and support the community.

The two will be reunited for the third and final installment of *The Third Day*, "Fall," which is debuting as a live performance in between parts one and two of the limited series, titled "Summer" and "Winter," respectively. The event was originally pitched as an interactive play, where the main cast would give a theater performance for a live audience in London, and was one of the reasons Waterston signed on for the role. But, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the cast is instead performing a 12-hour play, which will be broadcast live. Waterston calls the event "incredibly exciting" and "a little bit scary," but thinking of all the challenges that come with such a physically demanding and unprecedented theater event — one of the [show's creators, Felix Barrett](#), is the founder of Punchdrunk, an interactive theater company — thrills her.

"It's always a little bit difficult for me to identify the challenges [of a project], because obviously there are dark places [actors] go to in our work," she says.

And after being in the industry for most of her life, Waterston deserves to treat herself, even if for her that means taking on a grueling role. "I have played a lot of [dark characters]," she acknowledges. "One of the pleasures with *Third Day* was just not being the person going through hell, you know? But I do like being the person going through hell because I like to be pushed and I like to explore the human condition."