



GOODBYE ENGLISH ROSE. In her new film *Underworld*, Kate Beckinsale plays a sexy vampire who battles to save humanity.

If history is any guide, Kate Beckinsale should be spending her entire acting career clad in corsets and petticoats — because, as she well knows, somewhere it is written that any British actress with a peaches-and-cream complexion, doe eyes and impeccable diction must labour in costume dramas for all eternity. So it's interesting to note how fast Beckinsale ripped off her Empire gown and Edwardian jewels once she fulfilled the requirement for entry into the profession, and never looked back. "I've been really lucky that way," she says, acknowledging that after just three period pieces — Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing*, and the BBC productions of *Emma* and *Cold Comfort Farm* — she deftly broke away from becoming the next professional English rose. "I really went after different things, because I didn't want to get stuck in a niche. I feel now, with *The Last Days Of Disco*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Serendipity* and *Laurel Canyon* under my belt, each very different films, people won't pigeonhole me."

The English-rose label will peel off for good with Beckinsale's latest film, the gothic vampires-versus-werewolves action thriller, *Underworld*. Beckinsale plays a vampire warrior who uncovers a werewolf plot to kidnap a (human) doctor and fights to protect him from capture. And you can put the emphasis on fighting. Kitted out in a black catsuit, toting guns and a smouldering stare, Beckinsale bites, kicks and jumps her way through the screen with uncharacteristic ferocity. So, *vampires*, Kate? She laughs. "I was never into the genre, and when I first heard it was going to be a vampire movie, I immediately imagined a hairy-hands monster. I mean, who wouldn't?" She changed her mind after reading the script and seeing director (and now fiancé) Len Wiseman's drawings for each of the characters. "Suddenly, I said, 'This is not what I thought, let's do it.' I saw



Scenes from *Underworld*.

it as more of an action movie, and my guilty secret is that I love action movies. I could watch *Die Hard* over anything."

Curiously, to prepare her for the part of a vampire warrior, Wiseman instructed Beckinsale to watch Russell Crowe in *L.A. Confidential*. While drawing comparisons between some of Crowe's bad-boy behaviour and marauding werewolves is tempting, this was not what he meant. "Russell's character in that film has this internal rage that is always there. And so does mine. I found watching Russell very helpful." Yet while Crowe bored into her brain, it was Wiseman who stole her heart. While making *Underworld*, the couple fell in love, and the English tabloids had a field day. The pairing saw the breakup of Beckinsale's seven-year relationship with actor Michael Sheen, father to their daughter, Lily. But the actress seems blissfully happy — every mention of

Wiseman elicits a blush. "We can't wait to get married, we just don't have the time right now. I had no idea planning a wedding was so much work," she says, playing with her engagement ring. In the meantime, she has settled in LA with Wiseman, and unlike many who dismiss the place as LaLaland, she loves the city. "I still love London, but I do like living where it's sunny. I find the greyness of London starts to get me down."

California has also given Beckinsale, 30, the freedom to be herself — not simply the daughter of actress Judy Loe and actor Richard Beckinsale, the star of *Porridge* who died when Kate was five. "In London in the beginning of my career, people would say, 'Do you think you have got where you are because of your parents?' And there is a tiny part of you that says, 'I hope not', but how will I know?" Beckinsale doesn't remember when she first decided she wanted to act — she says the memory often gets blurred for children in a family of actors. "I see this with Lily all the time. People started asking her when she was two, 'Do you want to be an actress?'" But acting is Beckinsale's grand passion — that is, after Lily. "Every movie I make, it's all about Lily. I take her everywhere, to every set. So, for me, I have to really want to do a film, because it's quite a production getting us all there."

Speaking of productions, how does Beckinsale enjoy the red-carpet walk at film premieres? Her answer is surprising. "The thing is, I did not grow up an attractive kid," she says. "I was weird-looking for a long time and didn't grow into my features until I was an adult...So with the red carpet, it all depends on how I am feeling about myself. I can be very self-conscious and hate it. Sometimes it's okay. My favourite premiere was *Pearl Harbor*, because all the attention was on Ben [Affleck] and Josh [Hartnett] and nobody cared about me. That was ideal."

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