

Jodie Foster/Harper's Bazaar

And then here she is, walking purposefully towards our table at the back of the café. It's a Sunday morning in West London, the place is crowded with people eating avocado toast, and outside the rain is pouring down, so Jodie Foster's ash-blond bob is dripping, her sweater's wet and her sneakers, too. She's grinning, pushing her hair back from her forehead, her bright blue gaze intent and open and so strangely familiar -- although of course we have never met before. Later I will marvel at the intimacy she conjures within a moment of meeting me: and I will reflect that of course, she's incredibly good at this too, the performance of our interview, this brilliant woman who approaches everything she does with the keen intelligence which has distinguished her whole remarkable career.

I'm thrilled she been named as Harper's Bazaar Inspiration of the Year [**Helena: you said "the equivalent of IOTY, so I wasn't quite sure how to put it"**]: when we talk about it, she laughs and sounds not a little embarrassed. "Gosh!" she exclaims. "But well -- I've been around long enough," she concedes. "A friend of mine just said: if you manage to stay alive long enough, and manage to grow consistently, even just little by little, you actually reach a place where you have to go: I guess that means I'm wise? Really?" her voice swings up into a jokey question; she's clearly not quite ready to accept the accolade of wisdom. But she goes on to talk about the work she's done -- both acting and directing -- as being part of a "her mission", and I ask what she means by that. She pauses before answering.

"I wanted to be meaningful," she says. "That's to do with my Mom, and the way I was raised. It's a mission I've been on since I was a child. I wanted to be meaningful for her, in some ways. She didn't feel meaningful, and in a way I wanted to be a conduit for her." Foster's mother, Evelyn, was the driving force behind her career: putting her into the spotlight, choosing scripts for her, designing her daughter's life. It was a relationship which, by all accounts, was not wholly easy in the past; but now Foster speaks very warmly of her mother, who suffers from dementia, while also acknowledging how difficult her own upbringing could be. "I had to be good," she says plainly of that "mission". "If you asked me to do 120 takes, I would do 120 takes and never lose focus. Somebody drew a line for me: I have to do it absolutely perfectly. That's not all that acting is, of course -- if it was, then every OCD person would be great at it!" she laughs. "But if I was good -- she wouldn't leave me, or I wouldn't be cast aside. I had to prove it over and over and over again."

Read those last sentences over to yourself, and imagine saying them. Maybe you'd sound angry. But Foster doesn't sound angry. She sounds understanding, and like someone who's finally grown comfortable in her skin -- and like someone who's at last able to cut herself a little slack. "Then you get to a certain age, and you think -- hey, I'm good! I don't have to be doing this over and over again! So maybe there's a way of being less hard on myself, and more flexible about what the rules are." And she wants to pass whatever she's learned on to others. "I've learned how much joy comes from passing on what you know, even in the smallest of ways. After 50 years, you have an obligation to give your knowledge away -- that's the next level of pleasure."

We're here too to talk about "Arkangel", an episode in the fourth season of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* that Foster has directed. She's in London for post-production because -- despite being taken over by Netflix -- *Black Mirror* "is still very much a British production," Foster says, and clearly she heartily approves of that fact. "They get to do it the way they've always done it," she says, speaking of producers Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones. "So each episode is like a little indie movie. It doesn't feel like television at all. Each episode has one director's vision, which means it's kind of extravagant -- a new editor, a new composer, a new everything every time. So yeah, it's my baby," she says cheerfully. "Of course, Charlie has a very specific writing style, that's 100 per cent him -- but in the production process they were just incredibly supportive."

Speaking to Jodie Foster seems so natural, I have to remind myself that this is a woman who's been a star since she was a kid, nominated for an Oscar when she was still in her teens. Her

performance in *The Accused* -- a courageous portrayal of the consequences of sexual violence -- won her the award itself, as did her acclaimed performance as Clarice Starling in Jonathan Demme's now-classic film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. But she turned to directing in 1991 with *Little Man Tate*; if the results have sometimes been mixed, it's because she's never afraid to try something new. *The Beaver*, which starred her friend Mel Gibson, generally puzzled the critics; 2016's *Money Monster*, starring George Clooney and Julia Roberts, wasn't quite the smash many expected. But there's no doubting the intelligence behind those projects, and it's clear she enjoys the process enormously.

Directing, she says, give her "the ability to structure [a story] the way you structure a novel or a ballet piece -- to set the train in motion." And, she says, she feels much more in control of the process. "The thing with directing is that it's hard, it's difficult and taxing -- but once you've had a good sleep for about five days, I'm really to get on the boat again. As an actor? I have to go on vacation for a year, a year minimum! before I'm ready to come back," she says.

What can I tell you about *Arkangel*? Hardly anything -- I'm sure you wouldn't want me to spoil the eerie sense of revelation that's always at the heart of *Black Mirror*. But Foster gets to the heart of the matter -- and one that let's me know, right away, that Foster is more than just aware of the gender imbalance Hollywood, and in film and television generally: "This is a mother/daughter story," she says. "It's really about women. You don't very often, and I'm not sure why..." she trails off a little and laughs ruefully. "Well, I *am* sure why. Even with the number of movies I've made, I've never made a movie that was about women, made by women, that was seen through women's eyes." The unconscious bias of Hollywood is so strong, she says, "I didn't notice it, really." As women, she says, "we're trained to see the world through everyone's eyes. I don't think men have that same ease; they never have." But then, she adds: "they've never been asked to."

It's true that Foster has said in the past that she doesn't believe there's some conspiracy to "keep women down"; but speaking to her it's clear that the structural imbalance in her professional life is something she's long thought about. She is a ground-breaking female filmmaker in Hollywood, only 26 when she directed *Little Man Tate*. She was nominated for an Emmy for her work as a director on *Orange Is The New Black*. Of the male directors she's worked with, she says, "I think it's very hard for them to imagine women's lives, and when they do, I think they have this..." she searches for the right way to put it. "...Either idealized idea or this victim idea. And there can be a lack of sophistication about how they approach women in the text. I was saying recently that there was a time in my life, for 15 or 20 years, where every single script I read, the motivation for the female character was that they had been raped or abused as a child. I don't think it's an on purpose thing, but I think it was like: 'What can I give that woman that will feel meaningful? Oh, I know -- she's been raped as a child.' So, is that the only think they can think about us that feels deep, or something?"

Again: there isn't anger in her voice when she says this; she takes another thoughtful bite of coconut yogurt and berries. She seems so open when she speaks, and yet it is absolutely clear that there is a perimeter fence beyond which anyone sitting next to her with a tape recorder will never be permitted to go. She has been in the public eye since she was a toddler -- more than five decades, now. She raised two boys with her former partner, Cydney Bernard; she is now married to photographer Alexandra Hedison. She supposedly "came out" in a 2013 speech at the Golden Globes, but really her tongue-in-cheek address was a claim to privacy: she already did her coming out, she said, "in those very quaint days when a fragile young girl would open up to trusted friends and family and co-workers and then gradually, proudly to everyone who knew her."

She makes a clear distinction between her public life and her "real life" -- note that she doesn't say "private life". "I have childhood celebrity trauma," she says plainly. "It's almost impossible for me to use my face or my celebrity to sell anything. It makes me break out in hives. I appreciate other people that do it, and I see the benefit of it, and I see that they really get stuff done -- but I just can't do it." It's why she's reluctant to say too much about America's current political situation, though it's awfully clear she's no fan of Donald Trump. But she believes in personal activism rather than speechmaking: she likes to be, she says, "the person making the baloney

sandwiches.” But “we’ve all been woken a bit,” she says of Trump’s election. “We’ve all been in bubbles.” Her older son, she says, is very political; this past summer he worked as an intern at a progressive online news organization. “It’s such fun seeing him be woken up,” she says. “I mean, we didn’t have to! We had Obama. We were like, we’ve got Obama, we’re *fiiiine*,” she stretches out the word mockingly. “So it’s been a good time to learn something, to be self-evaluating. What your place is in the world, what your part is in it, and what you’ve been ignorant of. It’s an interesting time in history.”

Jodie Foster is one of the least starry people I’ve ever met. It’s easy to imagine her not as a movie star, but maybe as your favourite professor in college: the one who urged you to do the very best you could. Her loyalty to her friends is widely recognized; in a recent issue of *Bazaar*, Kristen Stewart mentioned how much Foster’s support has meant to her, and Foster returns the compliment warmly. She’s cared about Stewart since they first worked together on *The Panic Room* (2002), when Stewart was 11; just last year Stewart gave the speech when Foster received her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In Stewart, she says, she recognized something of her younger self: “She wanted to be an actor because she wanted to be *good*. To be as deep as possible. Not to please the director -- but to be virtuous. And life has been hard on her. We all have missions that we’re meant to follow; and I saw that hers was very similar to mine. And some people, you know, don’t make it.”

She’s built her life around the idea of ensuring the people she loves have her support when they need it. It’s another kind of mission -- one that takes time and care. And finally -- to my mind -- it’s what means she really is an inspiration. Not because of her fame, not because of her success. “Sometimes people say, gosh, you only act once every three years, what have you been doing? I scratch my head, and say: What have I been doing? Have I been waterskiing? No. Have I been learning to use the computer? No. There’s a lot of time that goes into being a good mother, a good daughter, a good friend. Listening to other people, and what they’re going through, and saying, I can take care of that. I want to have that time open. If I fill it up with a bunch of trivial things -- even things I could make money for -- I feel like I won’t have the time to be the person that I hope all this is for. That’s what I try to do.”

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