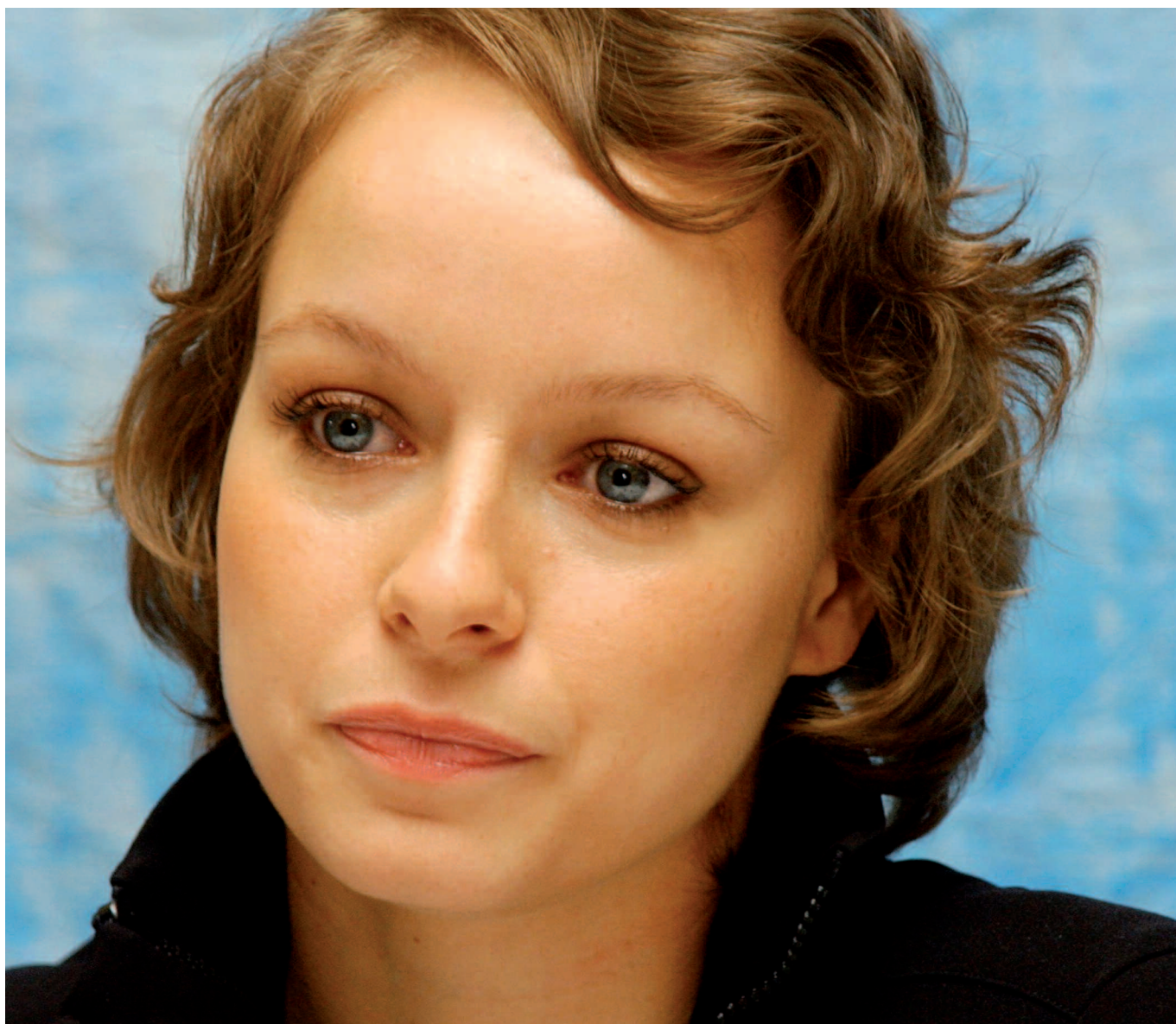


INSIDER'S POINT OF VIEW—ACTING FOR THE CAMERA



Samantha Morton Film Performing Phenom

If you ever have the privilege to interview Samantha Morton, here's a tip: do not bring a single expectation. None. Simply be prepared to be humbled.

By Colleen Patrick

“I don't look up to anyone,” replied UK acting whiz Samantha Morton to my ordinary question, “What actors do you look up to?”

She paused. “I don't have any idols. Does that sound egotistical?”

If you heard her say those words with their pure, thoughtful intent, her softly forthright Nottingham accent honest to the point of vulnerability, you'd say exactly what I did: “Not at all.”

“You see,” she reflected, “I don't look up to anyone. But I don't look down on anyone, either. I believe we're all equals and that is the way I look at people, no matter what they do, no matter who they are. I think it comes from being British and being raised in a monarchy, realising that even though they are born into certain roles, they are still our equals.”

She added that there are, however, many actors she admires, appreciates and studies. “Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd. “

What? You were expecting Dame Judi Dench? Sir Laurence Olivier? Someone who speaks?

Actually, this was music to my ears. Silent film actors understood the need to tell their characters' stories on film with the use of their eyes and physicality for the camera—both skills that Samantha brings to her roles in terrifically subtle, notable ways.

And just one more instance of Samantha Morton being her own person, of learning from the best who are not necessarily in keeping with “modern” acting classes, but whom she recognises as splendid mentors.

In case you're just now catching up with the international fervour of those who already consider her one of the most remarkable, talented and skilled actors of her generation, Samantha Morton started her acting career at the ripe old age of 11. Like another child actor who has gone on to great success, Jodie Foster, Samantha never attended drama school (actually she was rejected by those to

Samantha Morton at the *In America* Press Conference. Photo by Avik Gilboa. *In America* © 2002 20th Century Fox. All Rights Reserved.

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which she applied. You'll recognise them—they are the schools with the new admissions directors). But from the get-go she's had a burning, yearning desire to learn everything she can to do her greatest work, no matter the project, no matter the role.

While I ordinarily don't include the age of actors I interview because normally it's irrelevant, Samantha emphasised to me that she's 30 to show she's been studying and pursuing her art and craft for a most respectable 19 years. No tyro, she; no one can say Samantha Morton doesn't know her onions!

She's worked with directors Woody Allen and Steven Spielberg (with Tom Cruise in *Minority Report*), twice nominated for an Academy Award® (*In America* - Best Actress, 2004; *Sweet And Lowdown* - Best Supporting Actress, 2000), she was recently Emmy® and BAFTA-nominated for her role as infamous child killer Myra Hindley in the TV film, *Longford*, with Jim Broadbent. She has won much acclaim over the years as well as many other nominations and awards, including the 2002 British Independent Film Award for Best Actress in *Morvern Callar*.

Among her many accolades is the Half-Life Achievement Award from Dennis Hopper's CineVegas Film Festival.

My best mate, an astute TV critic in Manchester, tells me he would stop whatever he is doing and rush to catch Ms. Morton in action—on the small or large screen.

Still, she states firmly that she's neither a "celebrity nor star," and has no ambition to be either. "I don't show up to premieres, get dressed up in free clothes and all that."

I could tell media interviews were also not on her "favourite things to do" list. But that's the price of being an under-the-radar luminary and I think you'll find her ideas, insights and comments enlightening.

Here is a list Samantha's films scheduled for release this year: *Expired*; *Control* (*Editor's note*: see page 36 for our interview with *Control* producer Orian Williams); *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (she plays Mary Queen of Scots), and *Mister Lonely* (portraying Marilyn Monroe). She's already working on *Synecdoche, New York*, which is in pre-production.

I've interviewed hundreds of people over the years, and something that immediately defines a fine artist to me is his or her passion and generosity. By this I mean real artists give so freely from their heart or soul or intelligence or vision without consideration of themselves in the moment of performing or painting or singing or writing. In some cases they forget even the consequences of their actions because they allow themselves to be so honest they are shockingly vulnerable. They literally lose themselves in their process of giving us everything they've got. And what they give us of themselves they can never retrieve. It's given to us freely, despite the potential of being judged, the target of derision or admiration. Being judged doesn't matter to the true artist, for they have given us every corpuscle they have to bleed, and can bleed no more. They are left only to be satisfied with the work they've done, learn from it and move on.

Such an artist is Samantha Morton. She is a striking woman of purpose, substance and integrity. There's not a stitch of "Hollywood"



Samantha Morton took home an Oscar®-nomination for Best Actress in Jim Sheridan's *In America*.

"The size of the role doesn't even matter to me. It's how all the pieces fit to create that harmony."

about her; the profound passion and conscientious approach she takes to create her massively divergent performances, living a healthy life with family and friends, and a willingness to touch on subjects that we might otherwise want to overlook are all part of the Samantha Morton "package."

It's little wonder the best and brightest all over the world want to work with her.

How do you prepare for a role?

It depends on the vision of the director and the role. The first thing I do is interview the director and find out what he has in mind for the whole film and my character, to make sure I can give him what he needs. And to understand his vision so I can plan where and how my character fits into that visualisation, so there's a harmony within the whole package. Some directors need me to come extremely well

prepared, like when I played Myra Hindley, who was a real person. I perfected her voice, its sound and how she spoke, as best I could. I read extensively about her, listened to tapes—I did a lot of homework to portray her realistically. For *Jane Eyre*, I read how the character walked, how she moved. I do a lot of research to understand how the character came to be who she is. Prior to the role. So I can understand how she would react to any situation or person. What she did when she was young, how she lived, any misbehaviour, friends, did she break a limb, how she related to parents, that sort of thing. I create a vast imaginary history for the character so I come full of her, prepared to behave as she would normally. Other directors want us to show up fresh—they like us to improvise as much as possible, so my research is not as extensive, but I'm still prepared to react as the character and let the

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Morton as Mary Queen of Scots in Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*.

“The most important thing is that good films are made, no matter where and by whom. Films that pander to audiences only hurt the industry as a whole.”

moments be what they are going to be. It's all told through the eyes and physicality of the character. How she moves. How she relates to everyone and everything around her. That's why I appreciate the work of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. Yes, they are silent film actors, but they knew the importance of portraying their characters through their eyes and physicality in such a way that we understood and believed them. There are many other actors I learn from, but these stand out for me.

How do you select your roles—each is so different from the other?

There are two things I consider. First, the director, and a very close second is the role. It's important to me that the director has a strong vision and a strong idea of what he wants from me and how my character fits into the story. I look for the whole package, the harmony in the whole package. The size of the role doesn't even matter to me. It's how all the pieces fit to create that harmony. I don't consider things like the last film I did was a drama so I want to do a comedy or the reverse—anything like that. It's what the character represents, how she is part of the whole package. Although at one point, after portraying women who had been beaten, raped, traumatised or abused in some awful way for more than two years, I decided I was through acting on my knees. Do you know what I mean? I had to take a break. So I took six months off to take care of myself. I had to get away, have a proper life, and regain my balance. That's so important, taking care of ourselves, keeping

ourselves healthy. Because I didn't go to drama school, I had to teach myself to take care of myself. Taking care of yourself, respecting yourself, is as important as doing your best work.

I don't understand. Drama schools?

Drama schools teach you how to take care of yourself, don't they?

Um, no, they don't, I wish they did. I work with people who have graduated from drama schools who don't understand how to take care of themselves personally or professionally. You do and that's so smart and wonderful; it's a big reason I wanted to interview you.

Well, it's crucial, taking care of yourself. Family. It took me awhile to understand how much I needed to do it, but I'm fortunate in that I'm neither a celebrity nor a star so I don't have certain pressures from agents and all that to get myself into that maze. But I see so many people around me succumb to things that hurt them and their careers because they don't seem to know how to take care of themselves. It's sad. I wish they would learn to take care of themselves properly and not give in to the lure of money and fame. Real life is about so much more than that. I love what I do. But there's a difference between being a good actor, getting good roles and good work and being corrupted by all those things that are not actually related to the work.

It's what makes them who they really are,

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Samantha Morton in her BAFTA/Emmy nominated performance opposite Jim Broadbent in the HBO/Channel 4 TV film *Longford*.

isn't it—being true to themselves, taking care of themselves. What other advice do you have for actors who haven't achieved your level of performance?

Make sure you work really, really hard. Study. Learn. Be aware of everything you can discover about acting. About yourself. Read. Watch. Discover. So many people don't want to learn, don't want to do what it takes to become a really fine actor or artist. They're in it for the fame and fortune, which are pretty false goals. And they want it all now instead of taking the time they need to do the work well, to develop their talent, build their skills. They can get an unrealistic picture of who they are.

Their egos can get out of hand.

There is no place for ego in acting. It's a shame because there are truly brilliant, fascinating actors all over the world who will never get a TV series or be in major films, or make it to the West End or Hollywood, who may never even make a living at it, but they are devoted to their art and are amazing performers. They have their own sort of success.

Speaking of the world, please explain the differences of working in all the nations you have.

(Pause) Thinking about it, the film community is international now. I've been privileged to work in other countries like Israel, and every director is different, no matter where a film is shot. But they all want the same thing. The best performance you can give them to create their vision. It's exciting because many films

are now made in more than one nation, and frequently casts are international because of the collaboration thing (production companies from several nations participating financially). A film can come with an executive producer from one place, the director from another, an American star, actors from other nations. We're all changing. We're all growing. We're changing—who we are, what we do and how we do it. And an international film industry is one way to reflect that. The most important thing is that good films are made, no matter where and by whom. Films that pander to audiences only hurt the industry as a whole. Those types of films make audiences feel burned because it's so expensive to go to the cinema in the first place, and audiences are constantly disappointed in those films. That only ends up making people more reluctant to try anything different, something that could be a genuinely great film, for fear they'll not like what they've paid all that money to see. It's unfortunate to see that.

By pander you mean?

Making films only intended to make money. There are bad films and good films just like there are bad and good people in the industry all over the world. I've worked with both.

How did you decide this is what you wanted to do—especially at such a young age?

There were a number of reasons and influences, but one I remember clearly is seeing Crissy Rock play Maggie Conlan in *Lady Bird*,

Lady Bird. I thought, "If I can do that ... it would be the best thing ever." There were other films I saw that excited me, of course, but I wanted to be really really good at that. And tell stories that might be considered hard to tell, but that deserve to be seen. Stories that should be told. That need to be told.

Whom would you love to work with that you haven't?

Everyone I haven't worked with yet. There are so many great artists out there. I look forward to working with all of them.

What do you like most about working for the camera?

I actually don't work "for" the camera. I just perform as honestly as I can in the situation. There are some technical considerations, such as lighting, but I try to be true to the character in the moment and let the camera take care of itself. I almost try to forget the camera is looking at me. If the director asks me to do it over again because I need to do something different to capture the performance the way he needs it, I just do it over again.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

Just to be true to yourself and your work.

Congratulations on all your fine work and achievements. Thank you for taking time to speak with me.

Honestly, I'm just sorry I'm so short of time; I'd love to continue this. ■