

Rosamund Pike

She lays claim to an OSCAR NOMINATION and has WOODED the world, but don't let appearances fool you – this English rose is buoyed by an INTERMINABLE STRENGTH.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

Rosamund Pike's second son was barely two months old when the 2015 awards season hit, so there was the Best Leading Actress nominee, at the BAFTAs, sitting butt-naked in the Royal Opera House's chairman's office with a double breast-milking pump.

"He won't remember that, but he'll have an amusing photo diary for when he's older," laughs Rosamund of her now-two-year-old son Atom, the beneficiary of her rogue lactation efforts. Accessing her reserves in a high-necked halter dress had proven impossible, thus the necessity to strip off. "Now, afterwards, I think, 'I was crazy!'" she says.

She had also been in the running for the coveted thespian gong at the 2015 Oscars and Golden Globes for her role

as Amy in *Gone Girl*, rounding out quite a season – especially for an actor who, 10 years before, had prematurely pigeonholed herself as the blushing English rose.

"I think it's okay to play to your strengths, and if I have a quality of Englishness that people like, I won't hide that," the alabaster-fair Londoner said soon after her prim turn in the 2005 film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*. "I'm probably not going to play a junkie and that's okay, because there are other people who will do it better."

These gracious words would be swallowed, violently swilled and spat out by the venomous (and American) character she conjured in *Gone Girl* – a role portrayed with such psychopathic perfection that it hurled her onto a top-billing trajectory which today

finds Rosamund between takes on *Entebbe*, a film based around a 1976 hijacking incident in the skies above Central Uganda. "And I play one of the terrorists," she says, her clipped elocution crisp on the line from Malta.

It's one of her five soon-to-be released films (another, *HHhH*, has Rosamund as the wife of a German Nazi official), while predicted Oscars contender *A United Kingdom* sees her currently on our screens bringing to life the true story of Ruth Williams, the British insurance clerk whose unshakeable resolve to marry Botswana's future president in the face of racial prejudice revolutionised two countries. A junkie might well pale, in comparison.

The film, based on the novel *Colour Bar* by Susan Williams, follows the romance of Ruth and Seretse Khama, who met in 1947 at a London dance. >

IMAGE: TRUNKARCHIVE.COM / SNAPPER MEDIA

Weeks later, while sashaying their way around the jazz scene, Seretse revealed to Ruth that he was the king in waiting to the African colony of Bechuanaland. Soon engaged, their relationship posed a serious problem to national governments particularly in Serowe, Bechuanaland's then-largest village, which had recently introduced a policy of apartheid. Despite years of forced separation and suffering, the unlikely pair's love endured and, in 1966, Seretse became the first president of the newly independent Republic of Botswana.

Here, while filming on location almost 70 years later for *A United Kingdom*, Rosamund would find the atmosphere fierce.

"The heat was intense – it was the kind of heat that knocks you out. I mean, you can drink water all day and never need the bathroom... It's so hot. But the sense of place was just mind-blowing, because we were there in the same town that [Ruth and Seretse] came to. We filmed in the house that they first lived in," says Rosamund, adding that a local had been squatting there and was rehomed by the production company while the house was restored to its original glory. "Now I think it's part of the national museum."

Ruth passed away in May 2002, six months before Rosamund's break-out role in the 20th James Bond film *Die Another Day*. Having been knocked back by elite British drama schools RADA, LAMDA and the Young Vic, Rosamund came straight from reading literature at Oxford (where she specialised in works from the early 1900s, taking a particular liking to Virginia Woolf) to land the role in *Die Another Day* at age 21.

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"As you get older and you know you're approaching a character, you know who to go to. I know who can help me with this and that, and I know what I need to get inside these characters now."

In preparation for *A United Kingdom*, Rosamund asked the British Library to dig up and dust off original newspapers from post-war Britain. "[Ruth] wrote some pieces for this paper called the *Sunday Dispatch* when she was in Botswana and she talks about her early life and

this business of driving an ambulance during the war comes up a lot, and clearly gave her a glimpse of what women could do after the war. It gave her new opportunities for women – women stepping into men's shoes."

This film had a commanding female presence behind the camera, too, in British director Amma Asante.

"I've worked with very few – I mean, there are very few female directors, that's just a fact, particularly in film. For whatever reason, it's still rare for a woman to helm a production. And it definitely gives a different viewpoint," says Rosamund, noting that Ruth's relationship to Seretse's sister in Africa, and her own sister in London, are portrayed throughout the film.

"I think Amma particularly – and perhaps it's a female point of view – feels that you understand a character much better if you get to know their family."

The sole child of opera singers Caroline and Julian Pike, Rosamund grew up in a "strangely silent" household. "It's not the kind of jolly, you know, people standing around the piano singing [scenario]," says Rosamund (who nevertheless, personally wrote to the director of the upcoming *Mary Poppins Returns* with her eye on the title role – although she was unsuccessful this time), explaining about her family, "when they really listened to things, they listened to it in private."

But her parents did take her along to rehearsals and shows. "I think more than a love of music, it gave me the love of the backstage life. I was always in the backstage world, rather than in the audience. That's where I felt where I belonged," she says, remembering how, soon after her Bond outing, she did a play at London's Royal Court Theatre.

"I'd been in five-star hotels and first-class air travel, you know, [this] complete transformative episode of my life, and I went back into the sort of dusty rehearsal room and I just thought, 'Oh, this is what I understand, this is what I know, this is what makes sense to me.' It's funny. You know when you're home, don't you?"

Rosamund has since hit the boards for a further four plays, but realises her job isn't quite the norm: "I'm lucky in not being in an industry where my job can actually be done by a man, right? Your job can be done by a man. Mine can't." Touché.

But from a screenwriter's perspective, she makes the point that, "It's worth



Rosamund as Ruth in *A United Kingdom*, with David Oyelowo as Seretse Khama

IMAGES ARE COURTESY OF TRANSMISSION FILMS. A UNITED KINGDOM IS NOW SHOWING IN CINEMAS.

"It takes a lot of work, but if I was starting out again I'd make sure that was nailed, which it certainly wasn't for me, when I was in my early twenties, it wasn't nailed. You [need to] treat it like another language, and learn it."

It was this role that would lead to that crazy 2015 awards season. "It was insane, that period," Rosamund says, thinking back to her breast-milk-pumping escapades. "I wasn't trying to woo voters; I was just sort of turning up when I was invited and enjoying it and going home again to this baby world. It was very surreal."

As is the conundrum of many a working parent, Rosamund manages a mish-mash of career and time with her

sons, Atom and Solo, four. "It's hard because you want to be more present. Sometimes, when you're around, you're really around, and then when you're working the hours are very, very long.

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always thinking, could any of these male characters be played by a woman? I mean, [James Bond producer] Barbara Broccoli cast Judi Dench as M. It's thinking, 'How do we think outside the box?'"

Barbara, the daughter of the original Bond franchise producer, Albert R Broccoli, was "very nurturing" of young Rosamund. "She really looks out for the women in those films. You've got a lot of fame, because everyone sees those films, but

not a lot of respect, because everyone assumes you've just been picked because you look right, not because you're any good."

These assumptions, were they had, would surely have dissipated in the wake of Rosamund's performance as Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* – Gillian Flynn's page-turner-turned-box office hit, that came care of producers Reese Witherspoon and Bruna Papandrea (who formerly worked together under the Pacific Standard banner) that allowed her to "explore every part – demonic and angelic – of being a woman," and required her mastering an American accent.

At the moment I'm working back-to-back because [Solo] will start school in January, so I'm going to take some time off just to be there... but I also believe that it's great for boys to grow up seeing their mother working and seeing their mother pursuing her dream, and feeling like they get a concept of how the world works. It's a positive image that one's delivering to little boys."

And outside of her acting work, Rosamund recently put her face to a video campaign for Stand Up to Cancer,

which featured her pointedly flipping a coin to demonstrate the harrowing statistic that 50 per cent of people will suffer from cancer at some point in our lives. In 2015, she signed an open letter with the ONE campaign, joining the likes of Meryl Streep, Beyoncé and Sheryl Sandberg in urging world leaders to act in support of women in poverty.

But aside from hitting up the occasional morning rave – as she did in New York while eight months pregnant – Rosamund keeps a low profile. "I don't do any social media," says the actor, who has been partnered with mathematical researcher Robie Uniacke, father to her sons, for seven years. "I don't think it has to be a total invasion of your privacy, but you're expected to respond and be very present. I think it could become another pressure – a pressure rather than a pleasure."

Although this boycott, she admits, renders her out of touch ("I'm not at all current or up-to-date, that's why I'm doing all these films [set] in the past," she laughs), it keeps her public and private personas clean-cut. "It's very important, for me, that I keep the reality of my real life and just keep moving forward as a person."

So let's just wait and see what other thorns this rose has in store. ■