





BRIGHT YOUNG THING

PHOTOGRAPHY ALAN CLARKE
STYLING LEITH CLARK

After a pair of sexually explicit performances, Emily Mortimer wants to keep her clothes on.

A delicate British belle gazes into the camera. With reed-thin arms and a pale, lightly freckled complexion, she's the very picture of sweetness and virtue. There's vulnerability—maybe a hint of fear—in her gaze. Raise your voice, utter an unkind word and she'll flinch, if not cry. You imagine hot tears spilling over her lashes to slide down her dewy, soft cheeks. Oh, but appearances are deceiving.

Emily Mortimer may look the part of the adorable blushing girl or detached society princess, but onscreen she's always doing something unexpected, taking that superficial image and tossing it right out the window. Whether she's climbing out of bed stark naked and demanding a head-to-toe critique of her body in *Lovely & Amazing* or crouching on the floor in her garter belt, covered in custard, as Ewan McGregor violates her in *Young Adam*, Mortimer makes our jaws drop. Who knew the darling girl could do such things?

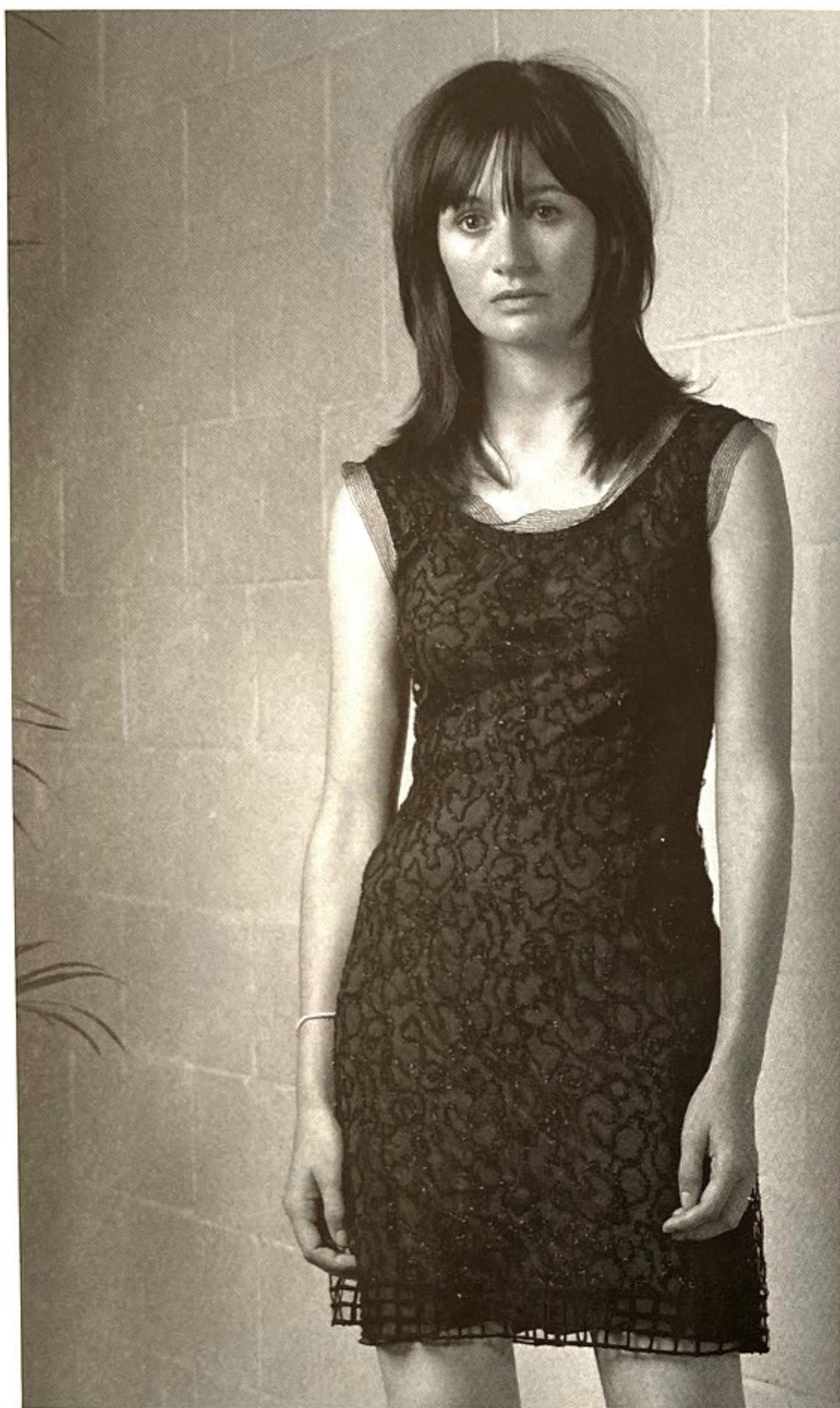
"I am attracted to people who are surprising," Mortimer says, while being chauffeured from the London set of Woody Allen's upcoming film. "There's something very depressing about people, where you know one thing about them, so you know everything about them. You find out some people are vegetarians and you know everything about them. But then there are some very surprising vegetarians."

Mortimer credits her father, screenwriter and former lawyer John Mortimer, with this fascination. "He defended criminals, and as a result, he's incredibly open-minded," she explains. "He says things like generally murderers are the nicest people he's ever met."

And yet the 32-year-old actress makes it clear that she didn't simply agree to portray these surprising young women because she liked them. Early in a career, she says, an actor takes what is offered. "But you probably fight a little harder for the parts that you want, so maybe there is a connection between them," she concedes, before excusing herself. "I'm doing an interview on the telephone. Would you warn the driver that I'll be talking rubbish about myself?"

The role that brought widespread attention to the London-born, Oxford-educated Mortimer was a neurotic actress in Nicole Holofcener's 2002 film, *Lovely & Amazing*. In a movie with countless moments to make women laugh—or cringe—at their insecurities, everyone talked about the scene in which Mortimer's character stands naked before cocky TV star Dermot Mulroney and asks for his frank appraisal. "It plays brilliantly on how nudity normally works in movies," Mortimer says, recalling what she still considers her best work. "You're sort of jolted out of the reality of a movie by nude scenes. It's very distracting and embarrassing, and this played on that."

"It was meant to be embarrassing, because you were meant to be looking at the size of the girl's tits and the size of her bush, all the things you do in an unconscious way when someone takes their clothes off," she continues. "I loved how agonizing it was and pathetic and yet somehow strong at the same time. It was a brilliantly complex moment. It really summed up a lot of how we feel about ourselves and our bodies."



"SWEET, INNOCENT GIRLS
OFTEN DO THINGS
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THIS PAGE DRESS BY **ROCHAS**, OPENING SPREAD DRESS BY **MOSCHINO**

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Laying herself quite literally bare brought a breakthrough for Mortimer. Since winning awards for the performance, she's begun to land bigger-budget Hollywood fare. But she continues to take on roles that astound, namely *Young Adam*, in which she plays a woman accidentally killed by her former boyfriend. Before he does her in, though, there's a scene in which he pours condiments all over her scantily clad body and rapes her. It's another case of the innocent girl stealing a movie with a scene so shocking it changes the whole tenor of the audience's experience—and suggesting that something perverse lies behind all that cuteness. "Sweet, innocent girls often do things that are shocking," Mortimer says. "The vicar's daughter was always the one who was getting screwed under a bush at a very young age."

While Mortimer is proud of these performances, she doesn't want to be typecast. "I thought, I've got to be careful now, because it's going to look like an obsession of mine: humiliating myself on screen," she admits. "I'm going to keep my clothes firmly on for awhile." Unfortunately, even with her knickers in place, Hollywood wants to mess with Ms. Mortimer and the sweet vicars' daughters she portrays.

She recently wrapped production on *The Pink Panther*, starring Steve Martin, in which she plays Inspector Clouseau's secretary. "This is a big studio comedy. There's nothing shocking or disgusting about this, and then I realized my character is basically the studio-sanitized comic version of the same character," she says. "She's as physically inept as he is, so whenever they're together in a room, they always wind up in the most physically compromising positions that look, to people who walk in on them, like terrible acts are going on."

While Mortimer might believe there's a conspiracy to make her look silly on screen, the bulk of her recent work departs from that trend. As the 1930s British It girl Nina Blount, "the Paris Hilton of her day," in *Bright Young Things*—an adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*—Mortimer plays a socialite in love with a writer too poor for her to marry. The role required her to dig into her own background as "a middle-class, privileged English girl from a very safe, very nice background," she admits—a type she had been trying to avoid.

"In England, we like to define people," she says. "It goes back to our class thing: We like to put people in their places, to know where they're from. And once you've got them defined, it's hard to undo that. And I think I was trying to get away from that and had to make a few bold, dangerous, insane moves to shake it up a bit. If I hadn't done *Lovely & Amazing* and *Young Adam*, I would have found it really frightening being that girl."

In other words, because she's played a few women with dirty little secrets, she's now able to play an heiress with an eccentric, rich dad and no real concern for anything beyond her next lunch date. Amusingly—considering the overt sexuality of Mortimer's earlier roles—Nina says of sex, "For physical pleasure, I'd sooner visit my dentist. It gives me a pain." Nina's blasé attitude is one of the most entertaining elements of a film that skewers a society that worships youth, beauty, and celebrity so skillfully it might be a portrait of Los Angeles, 2004. "The youth culture was almost making a religion out of triviality," she says. "They were very serious about their frivolity."

But Mortimer found much to adore in the aloof Nina Blount. "There was something quite heartbreaking about that tension of someone who felt love, but didn't have a vocabulary to articulate it, and could only talk about her hairdressing appointment and the color of her nails."

The next round of magazine articles about Mortimer might be about a posh English girl who plays posh English girls—or, more likely, an actress you just can't pin down. "In this Woody Allen film, I'm playing an upper middle class English girl with all the privileges and trappings," she says. "It does make me feel nervous," she adds, with a sexy yet sweet laugh. "It makes me feel much more nervous than taking all my clothes off."

Andrea Meyer