



Great Scott

Kristin Scott Thomas is a happy woman. Her personal life and her acting career are both in the ascendancy.

Ann Hornaday reports.

You recognise it as soon as she walks into the room: a woman, late 40s, thin, stylish, her unplasticised face aglow. Having long since passed proving herself, she radiates a kind of joy, propelled by a benevolent second wind.

This is what a woman looks like when she's comfortable in her own skin, at once in charge and in bloom. This is Kristin Scott Thomas.

Or at least that's the persona she conveyed within moments of meeting her at the Toronto International Film Festival, where she'd come to promote the movie *I've Loved You So Long*, written and directed by Philippe Claudel.

The film was rapturously received in Toronto and has gone on to rave reviews, most notably for the performance of Scott Thomas as a woman who tries to readjust to life on the outside after spending 15 years in jail.

There's no doubt Scott Thomas, 48, seems finally to have found a role perfectly suited to talents that, in recent years, looked destined to be squandered on supporting parts.

Just days after Toronto, she made her triumphant Broadway debut in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. New York critics used words such as "glorious" and "perfect" to praise her portrayal of the vain actress Arkadina (a performance that already earned Scott Thomas raves — and an Olivier Award — in London).

And she has contentedly plunged into life as a singleton, having ended her 18-year marriage to a Paris physician three years ago. (She has three children, aged 20, 17 and eight.) So often typecast as the stereotypical Englishwoman at her most brittle and humourless, Scott Thomas seems, above all else, happy.

"I love where I am right now," she said. "I'm independent. I'm

able to do the things that I choose to do, because I've crossed that barrier where I don't feel the fear of never working again.

"I've become more confident as an actress. And thanks to Philippe, who gave me this role in this film and cast me against type, really, he has opened doors for me in all sorts of places."

So untypecast is Scott Thomas in *I've Loved You So Long* that some audiences haven't recognised her at first. As the film opens, she appears in close-up, her face a tight, expressionless mask, devoid of the barest traces of warmth.

It's a shock to see her — so often cast because of her soft, delicate beauty — looking so utterly blank and desiccated. It turns out that her character, Juliette, has been in prison for several years and is reuniting with her little sister, played by Elsa Zylberstein, who is virtually unknown to her.

As the film unfolds, the sisters' relationship deepens, Juliette warily makes her way back into society, and the mystery of her crime is revealed.

When Claudel told her she wouldn't be wearing any make-up for her role, Scott Thomas recalled, "I said, 'Great, I'll do it!' It's very exciting to do something where no artifice is required. The only artifice is going to be your pretending to be that person. You're not going to have any other physical props, nothing to make you more attractive. Because attractive isn't the issue here."

And for Scott Thomas, "attractive" has been the issue for most of her career. She made her feature film debut as a topless socialite in the Prince vehicle (and bomb) *Under the Cherry Moon*.

But it took nearly 10 years for her to become famous, first in the 1994 romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, then in the 1996 World War II epic *The* →



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Kristin Scott Thomas



→ English Patient, for which she received an Oscar nomination.

It was her luminous portrayal of The English Patient's doomed adulteress, Katharine Clifton, a performance redolent of the ripe, slightly tragic glamour of Ingrid Bergman, that set her up as a go-to actress for romantic roles calling for a classically beautiful leading lady.

Roles like Annie MacLean in The Horse Whisperer, which Scott Thomas jumped at as a chance to work with her co-star and director, Robert Redford.

"I learned so much from Redford," she recalled. "He taught me how to be more generous with my character, to show a generosity of spirit. And to show the nice sides of the character as well as the grim side, because I'd always kind of gone for mean. I'd always tried to find the fault lines."

The offers began flowing in from Hollywood, but she resisted the pressure to move to Los Angeles. With a busy practice in Paris, her husband was "unmovable", she had two young children she wanted to raise in Europe. By the time she made Random Hearts with Harrison Ford, released in 1999, "I'd spent longer in America than I had at home, which felt completely insane. So I went home."

Scott Thomas moved to France

at 19, after drama teachers in London told her that she'd never become an actress. She did some plays in Paris in the early 1980s, but when she began acting in movies, she says, they took on "their own momentum".

In 2001, having said no more often than yes to Hollywood scripts, she did a play in France ("I didn't just flit in and out, I toured").

Two years later, Scott Thomas made her London stage debut in a West End production of Chekhov's Three Sisters. After 20 years, her return to the stage, not to mention its rapturous critical and popular reception, renewed her confidence.

"It's amazing how quickly they evaporate," she said of the Hollywood offers she spurned.

As far as mainstream moviegoers were concerned, Scott Thomas virtually disappeared, a Gosford Park here or an Other Boleyn Girl there notwithstanding.

It was only in the 2007 northern summer, when the little French thriller Tell No One became a sleeper hit, that she re-emerged — in one of the small supporting turns that have defined her steady but largely unseen career in France.

Claudel said he cast Scott Thomas as Juliette precisely to give her the leading role she deserved. "She's a paradox in France," he said,

"because she's lived in France for 28 years but, in my opinion, she's always been underemployed in French movies."

For Claudel's part, he thought Scott Thomas played Juliette with an intensity unusual even for her. "I think there was a strange connection between the part of Juliette and the life of Kristin. . . . I don't know exactly why, but I think it was the right part at the right moment."

And not just to him. Scott Thomas is already on short lists of likely Oscar nominees. If it happens, it will be her first nod since being nominated 12 years ago for The English Patient.

She found the idea "thrilling" because she was in a better position to enjoy it. "My life's changed a lot in the past 12 years, and I've grown up," she said.

With the attention she's received for I've Loved You So Long, the offers have begun to pile up again. "Hopefully I'll be working for quite a while. I'm not going to go off and get tons of Botox and a facelift in the near future. I think I'll just be one of those old ladies that you wheel out. That's what I want to be."

I've Loved You So Long is showing at the Somerville Auditorium from Monday, January 19. It then moves to the Joondalup Pines for one week.

