

mental, isn't it?" she says. "I can't really get my head around the fact that people like Elton John and Helen Mirren actually know who I am because of my acting."

An unlikely pairing, Elton John and Helen Mirren, and one that makes Foy laugh – as she does frequently and uproariously throughout our interview. But that's just the madness of it. One minute she was a quietly jobbing actress, the next she was getting letters of admiration from Mirren – "incredible stuff that she really didn't need to say" – and accepting Golden Globes in a shimmering pale pink sequined Erdem gown. "Genuinely the weirdest experience of my life," Foy remembers. "There I was, standing in a sandwich between Stevie Wonder and John Travolta, having a completely out-of-body experience." For a moment, at the after-party, Foy started to feel utterly overwhelmed. "All I kept thinking was, 'Um, I don't know what to do with this. I don't know what to do with this thing that's happening to me.' But then I had an espresso martini and WhatsApped my family and friends with all the gossip, and then I felt fine."

If there's a certain guilt that comes with Foy's new-found fame – "I really cannot see why this has happened to me and not to someone else" – there is also a healthy cynicism: "I'm under no illusions as to how fickle success can be. I've been on the outside of it enough to see it come and then see it go. If this had happened to me when I was 23, I think I would probably have spun into a vortex but I genuinely have enjoyed the past year for what it is. It's great that people like the show. Really amazing. But I have never, at any point, thought, 'Yes. This is where I should be,' because, dear me, if you do think that then you're going to have some serious problems further down the line."

The world that Foy grew up in was a world away from the one she now inhabits – "I didn't even know these people existed. I'd never met an actor." The youngest of three, she was born in Stockport but moved to Buckinghamshire when her father, a salesman for Rank Xerox, got a job there. Foy endlessly forced her older brother and sister to stage plays in which she usually cast herself as the star. Aged 11, she joined her siblings at the local grammar school, where she gravitated more towards sport than drama. But at 13 she was diagnosed with juvenile arthritis and taken off games indefinitely. "I didn't really register that I

was ill," Foy recalls. "I was simply annoyed that I had to be on crutches while the other girls were running around, and that my knees were swollen while theirs were being shown off in miniskirts."

If it was at this point that Foy's interest turned towards drama, her ambition crystallised five years later when she was struck down by another auto-immune condition, this time the tumour behind her eye. "It was horrible and debilitating, but it made me realise that I needed to grab the life I wanted," she says, matter-of-factly. "If that hadn't happened, I don't know if I would have been brave enough to throw my cards on the table and say I wanted to study drama."

After gaining a degree in drama and screen studies at John Moores University in Liverpool, Foy studied acting at the Oxford



"Everything – everything – pivoted on her performance, which was faultless," says *The Crown's* writer, Peter Morgan, of Claire Foy

School of Drama. Success was by no means a given and Foy worked hard – "for a film catering company, in a hat-making factory, you name it" – to support herself between bit-part acting jobs. Her big break came in 2008 when she was chosen to star in *Little Dorrit*, a BBC adaptation of the Dickens novel. "What stood out was her fragility and her extraordinary eyes," remembers director Dearbhla Walsh. "Big saucer eyes that were like a window into her soul."

By the time Foy went to audition for *The Crown* some seven years later, she had built up an impressive CV made up of mainly television roles – Peter Kosminsky's *The Promise*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *White Heat* and *Wolf Hall* – and was six months pregnant with her first child. "I'm sure that's why I got the part," Foy remembers. "Because by that point in my pregnancy, I was so distracted." Peter Morgan remembers it differently: "She was electric, even in composure and silence."

Several months before our interview, Foy filmed a banquet scene at Wilton House near Salisbury, set during John F Kennedy's presidential visit to England in 1961. In it, she and 60 other actors, including Matt

Smith, Michael C Hall (JFK) and Jodi Balfour (Jackie Kennedy) are in their full finery, but it is Foy who stands out – not for anything she says or does, but for all the things she *doesn't* say or do. As she walks through a majestic backdrop, head high, saying nothing, it is, above all, her stillness that resonates. "Claire has a very powerful ability to do very little and speak volumes," says director Stephen Daldry. "It's an incredibly powerful combination which serves the role perfectly. On the one hand we, the audience, feel that we know her Queen, but on the other hand we don't feel that we know her at all. When in doubt, I just put the camera on Claire. Even in silence, she can say a million things."

When Foy acts, she does so with her gut. "She instinctively knew things about my mother that even I, the person who arguably knows her best in the world, didn't know," says Jonathan Cavendish, the producer of *Breathe*, the tear-jerking true story of his father's refusal to be cowed by a paralysing bout of polio and his mother's unbreakable love for him, in which Foy stars opposite Andrew Garfield. "Claire didn't mimic my mum. She felt her way into her. It was extraordinary to watch."

Despite her self-deprecating insistence that "it could all be over in five years", Claire Foy is indisputably here to stay. Yet she puts her chameleon powers to good use, as a means of disappearing into normality. She lives a grounded, consciously unstarry life in a small house in Wood Green; her greatest extravagance is a second-hand Bechstein piano on which she can hardly ever play because the only space for it is directly underneath her daughter's bedroom. But this is the way she likes it – keeping life simple, maintaining her integrity, and staying invisible when she needs to.

"I'm telling you, nobody recognises me at all, ever," she insists, when I question whether she can really travel by public transport unnoticed. "I think it's because I look normal, like someone's sister or cousin." As she says this a woman approaches – a polite, middle-class, middle-aged woman who will surely have watched *The Crown* – and asks the way to Baker Street. "Oh, crikey, now you've got me," says Foy, getting out her phone to help. I watch, delighted, waiting for the passer-by to register that she's talking to the Queen and watch, deflated, as she walks away. "You see?" Foy smirks triumphantly, amusement dancing in those majestic clear blue eyes, as she puts her phone back in her bag and walks purposefully on. ■

ALEX BAILEY/NETFLIX