



Jaya long dress, \$6,200, at Dior.
Vintage jewelry.

English Rose

Back from a two-and-a-half-year hiatus, Kate Beckinsale stars in this month's *Underworld Awakening*—and her own unwritten tale. | By Andrew Myers | Photography by John Russo | Styling by Taylor Jacobson

Reader, Kate Beckinsale is living the undiscovered Jane Austen novel. Never mind that the renowned novelist was born in the last quarter of the 18th century, hit her literary stride in the early 19th, and that her subject, Miss Beckinsale, was born in 1973. It's not because both the author and the actress are English, nor because Beckinsale will be corseted (albeit in 21st-century rubber rather than antique whalebone) as Selene, the protagonist in this month's *Underworld Awakening*, the fourth film in the vampire-werewolf-hybrid saga.

Contemplate, instead, the most common hallmarks of Austen's protagonists: witty, pretty, sensitive, whip-smart, but beset with a character flaw that propels the story, one that must be grappled with and overcome, and which, through its resolution, provides the insight and emotional dexterity that allows the protagonists to advance toward happiness and self-realization. But Reader, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Kathryn "Kate" Beckinsale is the only child of actors Richard Beckinsale and Judy Loe, the former having been a stratospherically popular sitcom television actor in the 1970s who, at age 31, died suddenly of a heart attack. His daughter was 5-and-a-half years old. "I remember distinctly seeing people crying in the streets, at bus stops, really everywhere," says Beckinsale of what was a national outpouring of grief. "I remember many people, many strangers, telling me what he meant to them, how he had cheered them and made them laugh, and I did appreciate that every time. I really did."

But while a little girl might find some comfort in mass demonstrations and heartfelt professions, they're also scary; a melding of the public and the intensely private, where fresh waves of uninvited chaos compound a traumatic loss. A kid's most proprietary possession—a parent—seems somewhat appropriated, not so much stolen as forcibly shared at a time when loss is most keenly felt. "I could identify, and I mean to a very small extent, with Princess Diana's boys when their mother died," Beckinsale says.

This being an Austen tale, Beckinsale was blessed with a strong support system. When she was 9, her loving mum moved in with noted TV director Roy Battersby, who was, by all reports, a paragon of stepfatherdom, and Beckinsale was raised alongside

his four sons and daughter in what might be deemed a lopsided British Brady Bunch.

But, in keeping with the Austen narrative, a second major trial ensued, albeit one common to us all. Reader, I speak of adolescence. And while these years are impossible for any lass—Regency or otherwise—an Austenian heroine would approach the crucible with sense and logic, and employ her sensibilities with both rigor and creativity. And so did the introverted Beckinsale, primarily through her academic studies.

She won the prestigious (and highly competitive) W.H. Smith Young Writers' Competition not once but twice—for poetry and short stories respectively. "It was incredibly meaningful for me that Ted Hughes [the British poet laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998, not to mention the husband of famed American poet Sylvia Plath] sat on the judging panel and, apparently, didn't laugh outright at what I'd written," says Beckinsale. At the all-girl Godolphin and Latymer School in West London, she also excelled at a triumvirate of languages: French, Russian and German. "I also can manage Italian passably, so I'm an ideal European backpack companion," she quips. Joking aside, Beckinsale's academic achievement earned her a place at Oxford, where she read French and Russian literature, further honing her analytical and interpretive skills.

Here again, Beckinsale executed a perfect Austenian plot point. She expanded her propensity for analysis and interpretation—her "love of getting to the bottom of things"—and applied it to the likes of *Madame Bovary* and *Eugene Onegin*, thereby building a bridge to her future, toward the realization of her goal to be an actor. She did this by using her hard-learned skills to overcome a propensity for what Beckinsale calls "brooding"; to, in effect, turn a flaw into something fine. "Certainly in the beginning I found it extremely helpful to analyze a role in the same way I would analyze a literary character," she says.

First came her big-screen debut as Hero in Kenneth Branagh's 1993 adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which Beckinsale filmed during a summer break. That was followed by a series of smaller pictures, such as *Prince of Judland*, in which she played opposite Christian Bale, and *Marie-Louise Ou La* CONTINUED...



Black georgette satin one-strap gown with black and gold flower embroidery, \$3,900, at Gucci. Black satin pumps, \$790, at Salvatore Ferragamo. Earrings, price upon request, at Alexis Bittar. Opposite page: Dress with feathers, price upon request, by Issa London and available by special order at Beyond 7 and issalondon.com. 18K white gold, green quartz and diamond earrings, \$15,840, by Carla Amorim at brokenenglishjewelry.com.





Ball gown, \$9,000, by Zuhair Murad at Bergdorf Goodman. Star stud earrings in 18K gold and black rhodium with black diamonds, \$2,126, by Colette at brokenenglishjewelry.com.

Hair by Adir Abergel for Frédéric Fekkai at starworksartists.com
Makeup by Mai Quynh for mark.cosmetics at starworksartists.com

SHOT ON LOCATION AT THE BEVERLY WILSHIRE, FOUR SEASONS HOTEL; MANICURE: MICHELLE SAUNDERS FOR CELESTINE AGENCY USING SPATIAL

...CONTINUED *Permission*, a French film she shot during a year spent in Paris—part of Oxford’s study-abroad program.

Then came her first major lead, 1930s socialite Flora Poste in *Cold Comfort Farm*. The adaptation of Stella Gibbons’ 1932 comic novel was directed by the late, great John Schlesinger and co-starred Eileen Atkins and Ian McKellen. The story line is decidedly Austenian, which Flora makes explicit in the opening scenes, confessing her plan to write a novel “as good as *Persuasion*” when she’s 53, and, later adding (while standing in a chic drawing room), “I have such a lot in common with Jane Austen. Neither of us could endure mess.”

Beckinsale secured the role through particularly ingenious means. “My audition went very well; I heard I was the favorite,” she recounts. “But then my agent called and said they were looking for somebody older.” Undaunted, she did what she says you’re never supposed to do. “I went through the book, found all the points supporting that I was the correct age, wrote what was essentially a research paper in the form of a ‘Dear John, You’re

“I’m not attracted to characters who are instantly likable, nor am I that interested in making them likable.”

Making a Terrible Mistake and I’m Going to Save You From It’ letter, and delivered it to his door. Luckily he found it very amusing, phoned and told me the part was mine.”

Beckinsale’s Flora won rave reviews from both American and British critics. But it was *The New York Times’* Janet Maslin, writing that Beckinsale played the part “with the perfect snippy aplomb,” who hit upon what draws Beckinsale to a role most succinctly. “I’m not attracted to characters who are instantly likable, nor am I that interested in making them likable,” she explains, noting this view is not in line with Hollywood conventional wisdom. “My goal is to make them real, to find what makes them human and empathetic, to trace a certain logic that explains why a character is how she is.”

This approach is consistent throughout her other starring roles, including her turn as Emma in, yes, Austen’s *Emma*, and later the lead in the romantic comedy *Serendipity*; as well as her ensemble work in Whit Stillman’s *The Last Days of Disco*, Merchant-Ivory’s *The Golden Bowl*, Lisa Cholodenko’s *Laurel Canyon* and even her role as Nurse Lieutenant Evelyn Johnson in the otherwise forgettable blockbuster *Pearl Harbor*. And, at the end of the day (er, night), while Selene in *Underworld Awakening* is decidedly not human, her version of an icy bloodsucker is just an outnumbered immortal trying to keep herself, her kind and her kid alive.

Perhaps counterintuitively, it was her role in the first installment of the *Underworld* franchise, in 2003, that really drew Beckinsale out of her comfort zone. “*Underworld* forced me out of my head, and I really needed that done,” she says. “Now I can put myself through things I find horrifying and emotional and know I will survive.” She credits the film with helping—even forcing—her to build skills that have allowed her to connect with subsequent roles more profoundly, such as in her very well-received performance as a single, working-class mother in *Snow Angels* in 2007. That was followed by 2008’s *Nothing But the Truth*, a movie inspired by the case of journalist Judith Miller, and for which Beckinsale received a Critic’s Choice Award nomination alongside other award buzz—all of which fizzled when its distributor filed for bankruptcy, preventing a full theatrical release. “The gods are determined, it seems, not to let me get too big for my britches,” she says.

Beckinsale considers *Underworld* a professional watershed, and it was most certainly a personal one. Prior to production, she was involved with Welsh actor Michael Sheen—with whom she

had an eight-year relationship and a daughter named Lily Mo—who also acted in the movie. During the production, she fell in love with the film’s director, Len Wiseman, who returned the favor. Post production, breakups and divorces ensued. But through it all, or at least for the vast majority, civility reigned. There was sadness but never slander, let alone scandal. “We all realized we were shaped; but our daughter was not,” Beckinsale says, “and that we had a communal goal to keep her well, to help her to flourish, and I think it’s very elegant that nobody lost sight of that, ever.”

And what of Wiseman, who not only was *Underworld’s* director but its co-creator, and who has either directed or produced the other films in the series? Reader, she married him. She, Len and Lily Mo now live in a serene neighborhood in West Los Angeles—perhaps not Kent or Sussex, but as close to bucolic as L.A. gets.

While our tale comes to a close, it also, like the conclusions of Austen’s novels, marks a beginning—one with new prospects made possible through the heroine’s journey. After taking a two-and-a-half-year sabbatical, largely to be with Lily Mo before her teens, Beckinsale’s back, refreshed, re-energized and with two additional films—*Contraband* with Mark Wahlberg and the remake of *Total Recall* (directed by Wiseman and starring Colin Farrell and Bryan Cranston)—scheduled for release this year. And beyond that? “Really, I’m a late bloomer,” Beckinsale promises. “My best work is to come.” **M**