




N

aomie
arris

by Sylvia Karcz photography by Alison Dyer



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Something seems oddly appropriate about the image of a young Naomie Harris standing in her living room and preaching stories from her children's Bible. Maybe it's that certain comforting, cough-drop quality she exudes while speaking, or maybe it's simply the subtle live-by-my-own-rules attitude she makes so effortlessly appealing and inspiring. Either way it's pretty clear that in the near future, plenty of people will be listening to what this actress has to say.

To many, Naomie is the person behind unique characters like voodoo priestess Tia Dalma from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and post-apocalyptic survivor Selenia in the thriller, *28 Days Later*. Since she began acting at age nine, she has amassed an impressive range of script choices – including roles in *Miami Vice* with Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx, *Street Kings* with Keanu Reeves, and *August* with Josh Hartnett – proving that she has the talent and drive of which acting greats are made. But what makes Naomie stand apart most of all are the brains that she displays off the screen.

And although her film choices up to this point may label her, to some, as the go-to for the perfect strong and assertive female-type, Naomie is quick to note that she prefers not to be boxed into such a category. "I'm drawn to women who are multi-layered and complex, as we as women are," she says. "We're not one-dimensional, we're not just the sex object. No woman is ever as simple as that...] and no one's just a hero."

"Everybody has their dark side," Harris continues. "Everybody also has their light side. Even the worst human being that you can think of, at some moment in time, has shown immense kindness and generosity. We're just all so complex, and that's what fascinating to portray."

Raised by her mother in North London, Harris has known acting was in the stars for her from the start, it seems. She has also, however, had to overcome her share in order to see her name written in those same stars. "My mum had to be the mother and the father to me, the nurturer and the provider," she says about her single-parent upbringing. "But it did give me an immense amount of respect for women, and I don't feel like – I still don't feel like – you need a man for, really, anything. You can do pretty much everything on your own."

It's that very same independence, it seems, that allowed Naomie to rise above the neglect and bullying she was subjected to as a young teenager. "I created an imaginary world to which I retreated. And that's where I go when I create characters, so it actually helped my acting a little," she says as she recalls how she dealt with her earlier school years. "I just thought, I'm going to think my own way, I'm going to act my own way, and I'm going to live by my own rules. [But] it also gives you a great deal of empathy for others because you feel you know what it's like to be ostracized. Your heart opens up [and] you want to make everyone feel included."

Although these are the kinds of things that may have propelled Naomie to consider dropping out of school at 16, her mother, a writer and scholar, stressed education as an essential part of life. And so it happened that Naomie was accepted into a little school known as Cambridge University, where she studied social and political sciences, of all things, thanks to an inspirational sociology teacher she had in school. "It

he same kinds of questions that I asked myself during my degree, what makes an individual an individual and group behavior. [...] those are the same kinds of questions that you apply when you're creating a character as an actor."

Listening to her speak, it's clear that those questions resonate for Naomie, personally and in her worldview. Her social understanding is metered and compassionate, and she understands the separation between superficial qualities and individualities. "People are so much more than their color," she says about what she once referred to as "the black thing," especially when it comes to casting. "It's really about cultural and life experiences, the way you're brought up – all these different factors make an individual unique. And a person who is black and brought up in Idaho in some remote community has a completely different experience of being black to someone who is brought up in West L.A. in a black community. And so to just have an all-encompassing role is not representative at all, it's backwards thinking. We should think more in terms of individuals rather than trying to categorize and stereotype people. Getting the right person for the role is far more important than getting the right color for the role."

And it's this very notion of moving past race which left Naomie so inspired by the most recent U.S. election. "Having a leader like Obama definitely affects the rest of the world." [since] America is still the place that everyone looks to for direction," she says. "[The 2008 presidential election] showed a mark of the times, and how things have changed, and how truly anything is possible in this era. It wasn't that long ago when it just wouldn't be possible to have a black president of the United States. So just having someone like Obama, irrespective of his color – actually, just having someone who's as forward thinking as he is and concerned about the environment, his efforts with the health care system...] He's really quite radical in that sense, in terms of promoting change [and] really actively seeking to bring about change. And that's important not just for America but for the rest of the world to see." It seems that America has expressed itself by electing an executive office that is so radically different than its predecessor. Naomie recognizes the strides made in that national voicing of opinion, and boldly supports the interaction between government and society. "Having an opportunity to speak your mind is hugely important, and hugely beneficial to whoever is in government as well. You've got to hear the people. There should be a two-way flow between the people you govern and the government. That's how it works best."

It's clear that Naomie admires the qualities of honest advancement, both in government and in her personal life. "It's really important to speak your truth, even if that means upsetting someone else. It liberates you. Truth is a hard thing for many people to deal with, but I think it can make you quite unhealthy, actually, if you're constantly swallowing your truth and not expressing who you are." Naomie has an enlightened view of a world lit by opportunity and possibility. She recognizes that few things come easily, but that the benefits of perseverance are worth the challenge. "I had a vision for my life. And though many people said 'You can't do that,' and 'You can't have that,' I never listened. I think it's a great way to live, to keep following your heart. Because then, your mistakes are your own, not anybody else's. And you can say that you've lived your life. There's no point in living anyone else's." Absolutely, Naomie.