

From robot to nurse to spy, Swedish actress Alicia Vikander appears in no fewer than seven films this year. *Violet Henderson* meets a tenacious new star. Photographs by Scott Trindle

The young PRETENDER

FOR "AROYAL AFFAIR", HER BIG BREAK, VIKANDER FAKED DANISH. WHEN THE DIRECTOR OFFERED HER THE PART, IT WAS CLEAR FROM THE WAY SHE TOOK THE NEWS THAT SHE DIDN'T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE AT ALL

Opposite: wool and leather dress, £4,250. Silk and leather heels, £840. Both Louis Vuitton.

This page: cotton jacket with patches, £1,050, Fendi. Hair: Chi Wong. Make-up: Val Garland. Nails: Pebbles Aikens. Digital artwork: Studio RM. Sitings editor: Nura Khan



It's not quite midday in a whitewashed studio in north London, and photographer Scott Trindle is about to take his last shot of Swedish actress Alicia Vikander. A Rihanna remix booms through the studio's speakers; someone is telling the catering to cancel lunch; someone else is on the phone asking the taxis to come early while everyone else is looking incredulously at their watches, because no *Vogue* story has ever been shot this quickly. "It's a record!" is the exclamation that accompanies the collective fist-pump, and then, right on cue, in Vikander marches, wearing white snakeskin brogues and a Chanel patchwork pastel dress that lingers a little in her wake. The actress positions herself in front of the waiting camera, and in the time it takes for Scott to scamper behind it, she has rolled her hips, shaken her hair and snapped her fingers to the beat. Ten minutes later, it's a wrap.

This shoot began at 7am. Everyone involved crawled out of bed considerably earlier, fought sleep on the journey to the studio and silently gathered around its coffee dispenser until the caffeine kicked in. Everyone, that is, except Vikander. She rose at 4.30am and went for a 40-minute run before arriving on set, on time, her honey-coloured limbs all warmed up, her cheeks dewy.

In the past two years Vikander has had just two weeks' holiday, and the 26-year-old has lived out of a large suitcase, moving between sets. This year the fruits of her extensive labours will show on the big screen when she appears in seven films. In fact, Alicia Vikander season has already begun: this month she plays Vera Brittain, idealistic and intelligent, in *Testament of Youth*, directed by James Kent, and will then appear as a robot in Alex Garland's uneasy science-fiction offering, *Ex Machina*. She's particularly good as the robot, welling with a gentle, lonely awareness that she isn't human, spending most of the film isolated in an empty glass room. Later in 2015, further cinematic highlights will surely be her turns in the long-awaited *Tulip Fever* (also starring Cara Delevingne, with a screenplay by Tom Stoppard) and Guy Ritchie's spy thriller *The Man from UNCLE*.

What makes this all the more impressive is that English isn't Vikander's first language. Until 2011, the actress was living in her native Sweden. And while her first acting job might have been in a musical when she was six (she begged her mother,

a stage actress, to let her audition), her first English-speaking film role was Kitty in Joe Wright's *Anna Karenina*, just three years ago. "On set I freaked out every day about getting the accent right," she recalls, when we talk after the shoot. "At the beginning I practised really hard. I don't know how many hours and hours I spent talking to myself and recording myself." Vikander has a beautiful, hypnotic voice that oozes words like treacle. Off-screen, she doesn't quite sound English; some vowels come out too hard, others almost American (the legacy, perhaps, of spending the past few years learning everything from Twenties Australian to prewar English to Danish). When Vikander auditioned in 2011 for *A Royal Affair*, the (very brilliant) film that was her big break, she faked Danish. So good was she that when screenwriter-director Nikolaj Arcel offered her the part of the eighteenth-century Danish queen Caroline Mathilde, it was clear from the way she took the news that she didn't speak the language at all. Vikander accepted the role nevertheless, and learned Danish.

Everything about Vikander is disciplined. From the way she sits, upright and poised on a hard wooden chair, to the way her hair – the colour of Cadbury's chocolate – falls pristinely below her shoulders. When I ask if she misses her friends and family when she's away for weeks and months in faraway destinations, she gives a short, impatient shake of her head – "Of course!" – dismissing the question as entirely beside the point. Actor Oscar Isaac (*Inside Llewyn Davis*, *A Most Violent Year*), who plays Vikander's character's troubled creator in *Ex Machina*, is mesmerised by the actress's drive. "Talk about focused!" he cried over the phone from New York. "She is so supremely focused she seems almost ageless. She's an old soul and incredible talent, who I'd really like to work with again."

Vikander "knows" she discovered her willpower at ballet school, where she went from the age of nine to 16. "It was really tough," she says. "I had to complete my proper school education and dance seven hours a day, six days a week. It was hard, physical work and now when I see dancers I think, 'How can you do that?' I didn't want to live that life, it requires so many hours from you, and so much of you – you have to really love it." And Vikander was beginning to realise she loved acting. In

her final few years of ballet school she began making short films in her holidays. Then one day she came across an advertisement in a national newspaper for an open casting for a television series directed by Tomas Alfredson (*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*). She went along, and got a call-back. After that, she quit dancing.

Vikander always knew that pursuing a path in acting would be tough; she'd seen it first-hand with her mother's career. And with the rare recent exception of Noomi Rapace, the original *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Swedish actresses didn't tend to break into the English-speaking film world. Released from ballet school, Vikander auditioned at Sweden's top acting academy, the Royal Academy of Stockholm, twice, and each time she was unsuccessful. Her television castings weren't going well either, so she applied to law school and resolved to get into the film industry by becoming a producer. "I had my books all ready, but two weeks before university started I got a part in a feature film so I thought, I'll do that and go to university in six months' time, and then I got another part and..." She trails off as she reaches the point that her career travels beyond Sweden. It's worth mentioning how that first film, *Pure*, is no nice Disney Club-esque introduction to the big screen: it's hard watching, troubling and

truly Scandinavian in its blanced lighting and serious subject matter, which includes a fair amount of graphic sex involving Vikander. She'd set herself a benchmark.

The actress moved to north London three years ago and she's thought of the capital

as home ever since. It has helped that London is now Sweden's fourth biggest city and that "there were already 40 people living here that I knew from home". Her new friends, though, are "mainly musicians and some actors".

In those rare moments when the camera isn't rolling, Vikander is happy to be in her flat "cooking for 10 hours before hosting a dinner party" or reading a book or listening to music (jazz, classic, electro: "I find music without words very powerful"). Sometimes, she admits, "I even long to be bored." I get the impression that acting consumes such a large part of Vikander that when the jobs go on brief hiatus there isn't very much left of her. "What I try to be, at that time, is as normal as possible," she says. ■

"Testament of Youth" is released on January 16

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Embellished sweatshirt,
£1,400. Broderie anglaise
miniskirt, £800. Both
Christopher Kane





Cotton-voile dress, £2,300,
Chanel. Python lace-ups,
£875, Christian Louboutin

SCOTT TRINDLE

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like treacle*



Floral sweater, £845.
Lace-trim skirt, £600.
Canvas skate shoes,
£300. All Christopher
Kane. With thanks
to Spring Studios.
For stockists, all pages,
see *Vogue Information*