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THE VELL

**THE HANDMAID'S TALE
STAR ANN DOWD
REVEALS WHAT'S
NEXT FOR AUNT LYDIA**


**MATT
GLASBY**


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ECCLES**


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POLLOCK**

Some years ago, a series of jokes did the rounds relating to the 1980s action star Chuck Norris and his enviable toughness. You remember: Chuck Norris is so tough guns carry him for protection. Chuck Norris is so tough when he falls in water, he doesn't get wet, water gets Chuck Norris. Chuck Norris is so tough he doesn't turn on the shower, he just stares at it until it cries. You get the general idea.

After chatting to Ann Dowd for a cosy hour from her home in Chelsea, New York, we propose a new one: Ann Dowd is so nice. How nice? Well, throughout the interview, which takes place a few days after the shoot, she compliments the questions (actors rarely do this), apologises for rambling (actors very rarely do this) and asks for our opinion (actors never do this). Later, when the call cuts out, she phones back because, "I don't want the conversation to end, so I'm dragging it out." How's that for nice?

When she's not "dragging out" phone conversations with put-upon profile writers, the Massachusetts-born 62-year-old is, hands down, one of America's greatest character actors, recognisable from the >

likes of (deep breath now) *Philadelphia*, *Apt Pupil*, *Garden State*, *Marley & Me*, *Side Effects* and *True Detective*, among others.

She may have been acting since the mid-1980s, but she's still not used to having her photo taken. "Normally mortification is the word that comes to mind," she confesses in maternal, slightly schoolma'am-y tones. "And when I saw the dresses I thought, 'Who's wearing those?' But then I guess – and I think this is due to age – I just started to laugh. I mean, you look the way you look, girl, so just enjoy it."

Truth is, we tell her, it's refreshing to celebrate an actor because of what they've achieved rather than how they photograph. "Well I'm going to remember that," says Dowd, delighted, "and I'm going to remember this conversation, because you are really very kind, so I thank you." Don't say we didn't warn you.

All kindness aside, Dowd has starred in three of the year's best dramas: TV's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the horror film *Hereditary* (dubbed "this generation's *The Exorcist*") and fiendish heist flick *American Animals*, all available to watch onboard this flight. Since season one

came out in 2017, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become not just water-cooler TV but tidal-wave TV, sweeping across an audience still reeling from the revelations of #MeToo and #TimesUp.

For the uninitiated – and where have you been? – it's a finely made, furiously angry adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel. The setting is Gilead, a totalitarian America where handmaids (fertile women) such as star Elizabeth Moss are forced to become sex slaves for the ruling classes. For the initiated, the horrors it details – from institutionalised rape to FGM – are enough to make grown men weep. If not actually stop.

"I remember someone saying to us early on in season one, 'Do you think we're going to see a shift?'" says Dowd. "And I said, 'No, I don't think we're going to see a shift, until

"WHAT IS IT IN MEN? WHAT IS GOING ON THERE?"

we understand at the core what's going on. What is it in men, because it's primarily men, what is going on there? How do we come to understand at the core how they can hurt someone in that way?"

We don't have the answers, and there follows a painful – and painfully necessary – conversation about sexual assault and the abuse of power. But what complicates an already complicated issue is how

Dowd's character, Aunt Lydia, is complicit in the violence, training the handmaids in the art of obedience with bursts of Biblical punishment. You'll find no spoilers here, but season two offers Lydia a taste of her own medicine. So what will she become in the inevitable season three?

"That's a great question," says Dowd. "Well, the options would be that she would clamp down even harder and up the severity of her 'teachings', which I think would be dull. Or she would become a changed person, because everything she's known – every protection, psychological or otherwise, that she's held on to – it just shatters because it's lead to this somehow. In other words, it could be a new beginning for her where she begins to ask herself the question, 'What am I doing?'"



Whatever happens, *The Handmaid's Tale* has caught the zeitgeist. "It's something that has really grabbed the attention of many, and in a very positive way," says Dowd. "I'll be in the middle of nowhere in Australia and someone will say, 'Are you Aunt Lydia?'" >



Aunt Lydia (Dowd) steers wayward handmaid Janine (Madeline Brewer)



Previous page:
dress by Anna Scholz.
Cape by Kikisihi.
This page: dress by
Madeline Gardner for
Morilee. Earrings by
Alexis Bittar. Necklaces
by Erickson Beamon.
Rings by Vintage Rio
Studio. Gloves by
Wing + Weft





Jacket by Haute Hippie.
Dress by Kenar.
Shoes by Gucci.
Earrings by Erickson Beamon.
Rings by Alexis Bittar

"I REMEMBER READING HEREDITARY, THINKING, YEAH, IT'S INTERESTING BUT IT'S TERRIFYING. I DON'T WANT TO BE POSSESSED!"

Despite winning a Best Supporting Actress Emmy for her performance in 2017, and being nominated again this year, Dowd, true to form, refuses to take any credit. "Think of the luck involved," she counters. "There are so many wonderful actresses of my age who would be so good as Lydia, and somehow for whatever reason I have that role. And to be part of that show, with those actresses, the writers and crew, Margaret Atwood, the list goes on. I mean honestly how often does that happen in your life, where everything comes together and there you are? It's been extraordinary, it really has." On reflection, perhaps "nice" doesn't cover it.



Such protestations might hold a little bit more water if Dowd wasn't so damn good in everything else she's in. "What did you think of *Hereditary*?" she asks, genuinely interested. "Did it scare you?" Scared isn't quite the word, we confess. When we stumbled out of the film - which charts the slow, pulverising destruction of Annie (Toni Collette) and her family - we felt like we'd been hit by a bus. "Oh my god!" she laughs. "I'll have to tell [writer/director] Ari Aster."

"When I first read the script, I thought: 'I can't do this, it's too horrifying,'" she admits. "I was raised Catholic, and I went to see *The Exorcist* when I was young and - I'm not kidding - it scared the wits out of me,

and the notion that one could be possessed has never left me entirely. I remember reading *Hereditary* with one eye closed, thinking, 'Yeah, it's interesting but it's terrifying and I don't want to be possessed!'"

To persuade Dowd to play Joan - a kindly woman who comes to Collette's aid - Aster relied on old-school courtesy. "He wrote a nice letter and that's so flattering, and relatively new for me," says Dowd. "I was auditioning like any actor for years so when someone asks, 'Would you do this?' Part of you thinks, 'Well yes of course I'll do it, thank you for asking me.'"

Potential directors take note: if you want to hire Dowd, just ask nicely. The same tactic worked for Bart Layton on *American Animals*. Based on real events, and featuring interviews with the actual people involved, Layton's daring docu-thriller tells the sorry story of four students who decide to rob their university library, where Dowd is head librarian. Things, it's fair to say, do not go to plan, but the big question the film asks is how four young, privileged men who are neither bad nor stupid could end up committing a crime that was both?

This time it's Dowd who doesn't have the answers. "The absurdity of it!" she marvels. "What planet are they on? How can they be

so far from reality in their protected, closed-off lives?" What would she say to them? Nothing. Instead, she says, she'd take them to "soup kitchens, communities where people's lives have been derailed, where there are children with disabilities, and have them sit and watch".

The latter proves especially poignant for Dowd and her husband, Lawrence. Of their three children, Liam, 26, is on the autistic spectrum >



Dowd consoles Toni Collette in *Hereditary*

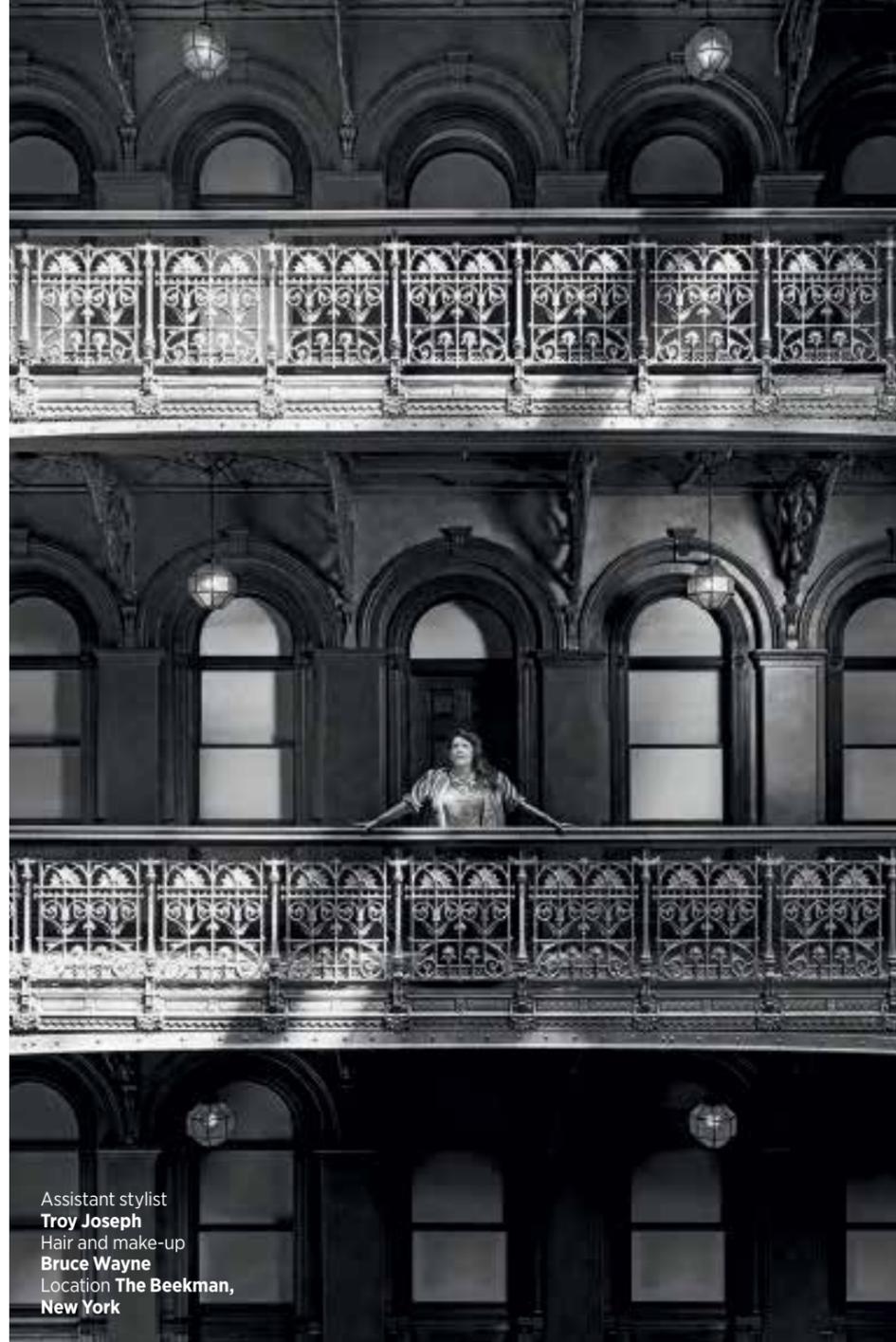
Aunt Lydia threatens June (Elizabeth Moss) in *The Handmaid's Tale*



and “lives in a wonderful community on a farm for adults with disabilities: a place of magic”. Emily, 20, attends the same college as Dowd, her father and her grandfather did. Their youngest, Trust, is 13. They fostered him, briefly, at nine months old – saw him farmed out to seven homes in six years – then managed to get him back and adopt him at nine. “You can’t do that to a human being and expect them to develop typically,” she says. “There’s too many wounds. But he’s a remarkable human being because he loves and allows himself to be loved.” Which might be the nicest thing she’s said all day.

We’re nearing the end, something we’re both keen to postpone. Has she, we wonder, ever given a bad performance? “Yeah, there’s plenty of them. I just look at some of the early stuff and think, “What were you doing there, honey?”” At least she doesn’t have to audition anymore, right? “I surely would audition! I’d audition in a flash if someone asked,” she says. “I’m still pinching myself, I tell you. You get an offer to do something and you think, did I just hear ‘offer’? That still goes to my head. I try and stay humble. I’m working just fine with that.” Yeah, that nice. ■

Watch *The Handmaid's Tale* onboard now



Assistant stylist **Troy Joseph**
Hair and make-up **Bruce Wayne**
Location **The Beekman, New York**

RELATIVE HARMONY

Like Aunt Lydia, these fictional family members may sound friendly, but don't be fooled



BIG BROTHER 1984
George Orwell's fascist poster boy has a lot to answer for – not least the TV show.



U.N.C.L.E. The Man From U.N.C.L.E.
A global spy network used to combat THRUSH. No really.



THE GODFATHER The Godfather
This cuddly old-timer would do *anything* for his family. So keep the stable door locked.



MOTHER Alien
Crew safety is not a priority for this ship's computer. Maybe turn it off and on again?



CHILDREN OF THE CORN Children of the Corn
These ruddy-cheeked rug-rats love to harvest – blood.