



“I know who I am”

Hollywood – and Liev Schreiber – may have stolen her away,



Ask Naomi Watts what she misses most about Australia and the response is like quick fire. "Family, friends, the food, the wine, the humour, endless coastlines. I could go on," replies the Oscar-nominated actor, more than a little wistfully.

After many years away, the star still feels an indelible connection to the country she moved to from England as a 14-year-old and moved away from in her early 20s, searching, as her friend Nicole Kidman had done, for fame and fortune in Hollywood. Her sensibility remains very Aussie, her best friends are from here ("I'd say 95 per cent of them are Australian"), and she wants her sons, four-year-old Alexander (Sasha to his mum and dad) and Samuel (known as Kai), who turns three next month, to grow up aware of the country their mum considers home. Her family is still scattered around Sydney and the NSW South Coast. "Mum lives in Australia during summer and my grandmother is there, still kicking on, as sharp as a tack."

When we meet, we're a long way from the beaches of Australia. We're not looking out across the azure-blue of the South Pacific, but a rather murky East River in New York, where Watts has made her home with her partner of six years, fellow actor Liev Schreiber, and their two boys. The Australian wine, however, is in free-flow. Watts has spent the afternoon shooting a campaign for Jacob's Creek, in the vast garden of a beautifully renovated ice-creamery-cum-warehouse with picture-postcard views of the Manhattan skyline. Watts is the new ambassador of the label's upcoming Cool Harvest range, a project she's happy to lend her name to. "I was more than familiar with the label," she says with a grin. "It's nice to be connected to home and to support an Australian brand."

When she takes a break from shooting, we retreat inside the warehouse, which is owned by one of her friends. "It's like an oasis, isn't it?" she says, looking around. "This sort of space in New York is unheard of."

Watts is tiny in that whippet-thin Hollywood actor way, but she's open and gregarious, and looks much younger than her 43 years.

(Her face is refreshingly free of 'work' – these days, it's a shock to meet someone in the film industry whose forehead still moves.)

She's excited about the Jacob's Creek project ("It's nice to do something a little different"), as well as her upcoming film, *J. Edgar*, which opens in cinemas here in January. In the Clint Eastwood-directed biopic of the infamous FBI boss, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, Watts stars as Hoover's secretary of 50 years, Helen Gandy. "It's not a flashy role," she says. "She's a woman who's poised and strong. That appealed to me."

As we talk, Watts sips on an espresso, an antidote to a severe case of jet lag. She's just returned with the children from visiting Schreiber in Australia (where he's filming the PJ Hogan comedy *Mental* alongside Toni Collette, Anthony LaPaglia and Rebecca Gibney), after which she flew to Europe for a film festival, before heading to New York to be home in time for Sasha's first day of school.

Motherhood, she says, has changed her for the better. "I can't remember who I was before. It's consuming, to the point where I don't know who that person was. What did I do with my time? What did I think about?"

Today's shoot is something of a family affair with the actor's brother, acclaimed photographer Ben Watts, behind the camera. His partner, Jeanann (who's nearby with their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Ruby), is also part of the shoot, as are four of the actor's friends. Her mum, Myfanwy, is floating about barefoot nearby, cradling Kai in her arms (Sasha is at school). "Mum's my babysitter today," says Watts. The little boy seems nonplussed by the cameras and crew around him. "He's so used to it," adds Myfanwy, jiggling him on her hip. "He thinks his mum works in a trailer."

After their parents divorced, Watts and her brother, who's 19 months older, spent much of their childhood travelling around the UK with their mother. She was seven when their father, Peter, a sound engineer for Pink Floyd, died of an apparent heroin overdose. "He lived the rock 'n' roll lifestyle and died young," Watts recalled later. But the actor says his artistic legacy lives on in his kids. "Ben and I ended up being two creative people who love their work." >

but Naomi Watts is still our home-grown sweetheart, discovers Tiffany Bakker

Watts describes her mum as “a survivor”. “That’s the heart and spirit of who she is. She’s an adventurer as well – a gypsy. That rubbed off on me. She likes travel and inspirational things. She enjoys a challenge.”

Given her own itinerant upbringing, Watts says part of her wants Sasha and Kai to have a stable childhood, yet she doesn’t want to stop them experiencing the freedom she had.

“You think of your own parents and remember how things were for you and you either want to do the same or the complete

sweeping views of the Manhattan skyline), and for Watts, that’s the whole point. She explains that she surrounds herself with people who tell her the truth – “who tell me to ‘cut it out’ if I need to be told that”.

Aussie actor Isla Fisher, who’s been friends with Watts for 10 years, says the star’s refusal to play any sort of Hollywood game has kept her feet firmly on the ground.

“Naomi is down-to-earth, fun, endlessly supportive, a generous spirit,” says Fisher. “She still has her same buddies from school

On the day we meet, Watts tells me the pair ignores the tabloids (“Our life really isn’t scandalous”). A few weeks later, Schreiber releases a statement denying an unsubstantiated rumour made by an entertainment blog alleging he cheated on Watts with a model on the set of *Mental*. (A spokesperson for Schreiber says the matter is in the hands of the actor’s lawyers.)

Watts, who starred alongside Schreiber in *The Painted Veil* in 2006, says the couple will probably work together again. “It will have to be the right thing, though.”

She adds that Schreiber is encouraging her to try theatre, but there’s one problem – she suffers from stage fright. “It’s terrible,” she groans.

Maybe doing a play with him would alleviate that? “It could, or it could be bloody awful and make everything worse.”

If their boys choose to follow them into the family business one day, Watts says she’ll be supportive. “If that’s their dream, that’s fine with me. But I’d discourage it from happening too soon. I’m not into the child acting thing.”

It’s well documented that Watts’ own international career didn’t take off until quite late – in Hollywood terms. She was 33 when *Mulholland Drive* was released in 2001.

“That was a big moment for me, because it was a turning point,” she says of the role. “I’ll never forget that time – it was like a first love. It made such an impact on my career.

“I didn’t enter into the depths of this industry until much later, and by then I knew who I was. It’s filled with a lot of people who aren’t authentic, and I try to stay away from them. I know who I am. I have a good radar for bullsh*t. I have a good sense of myself.” ■

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opposite,” she explains. “My childhood was one big adventure, and that obviously had great upsides, but there were times when I wished I had the same bedroom. I don’t want to go, OK, that’s what my kids have to have because I didn’t. My childhood may have had its challenges, but it hasn’t destroyed me.”

As Ben pokes his head around the corner to tell us the photoshoot is about to kick off again, I suggest that one sibling directing another might have the propensity to end badly.

“Most times I do feel [like punching him],” Watts says with a laugh. “But on a shoot, it’s the opposite. He has this uncanny knack of loosening me up. People don’t believe it, but I’m really uncomfortable in front of a camera. Ben knows how to capture my spirit – the one he knows, the girlish quality, not the, ‘Oh, I’m trying to be sexy, and this is my good angle.’”

The shoot has something of an Aussie family barbecue feel to it (apart from the

and she hasn’t dabbled in plastic surgery, so she’s a natural beauty on the inside and out. And she’s a fantastic chef.”

Watts agrees that her Aussie girlfriends are her rock. “To me, the Australian woman is someone who enjoys life. She’s strong and she’s a girl’s girl. I’ve never understood women who don’t have female friendships; I don’t trust them. It can be hard for a man when you have close female friends,” she adds. “Liev will walk in when I’m with mine, and shake his head and walk off.”

Watts says she’s “in awe” of Schreiber’s talent. “I had a talent crush on him before I met him,” she recalls. “I saw him onstage and thought, oh, wow. And that was it, really.”

Watts says they’re each other’s “greatest admirers”. Recently, she’s helped him with his accent for *Mental*. “He’s phenomenal at accents – an Australian one is probably the hardest, but his is great.”



meet NAOMI WATTS

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