



High on

# LIFE

TWO-TIME OSCAR WINNER HILARY SWANK MAY BE HITTING THE BIG SCREEN PLAYING A FAMOUS HIGH-FLYER, BUT SHE STILL REMAINS TINSELTOWN'S MOST DOWN-TO-EARTH STAR

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER

**H**ilary Swank is sitting in her backyard in LA, feeling the sun on her face. Her dogs, Karoo and Rumi, are playing at her feet. These days, she can afford to relax, but it wasn't always so. In the past, she thought she should keep working, keep striving, looking for the next thing. But times have changed.

As a plane flies overhead, the actor looks skywards, wondering where it's headed. She says she's been doing this since she was a kid and was always keen to visit new places – even when growing up poor in a trailer park in Bellingham, a small town in Washington, meant travel options were limited at best.

"It's exciting, the idea of travel and the unknown," the 35-year-old says. "What are you going to learn? What are you going to see? Travel is one of the most exciting things I have the opportunity to experience in my life."

Apt then, that Swank's latest film, *Amelia* (in which she stars alongside Ewan McGregor and Richard Gere), is based on the life of pioneering aviator Amelia Earhart. In 1932 Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. For Swank, taking the role was a no-brainer. "Her tenacity, her drive, her empathy and her desire to stay true to herself connected with me," she says. "She's inspiring and a reminder to live your life as fully and richly as you can."

Living life to the full is Swank's mantra. She's not your usual moviestar. She doesn't seem affected by stardom at all, which is almost miraculous given she's a two-time Best Actress Academy Award winner. (Of her two Oscar wins, she says: "I don't think that has truly sunk in yet.")

Rather, she's by turns down-to-earth and serious about what she does, probably because she still can't believe the path her life has taken. When you talk to her, she thinks long and hard before answering a question, as if she's worried about sounding trite or insincere. She seems disinterested in fame and craves normalcy in an industry that is anything but.

Perhaps that's why she's made an art form out of portraying real people onscreen. Most notably in *Boys Don't Cry*, where her career-defining turn as a troubled transgender teenager earned her her first Oscar (her role as doomed boxer Maggie in *Million Dollar Baby* scored her the second), and in *Freedom Writers*, where she played a teacher who inspires her students to greater heights. After *Amelia*, she stars in *Betty Ann Waters*, the true story of a woman who puts herself through law school to represent her brother, who's been jailed for a crime she believes he didn't commit.

**"I made \$3000 that year, from *Boys Don't Cry*, and to have health insurance you need to make \$5000. I didn't have health insurance, but I had an Academy Award"**



"There's more responsibility in playing someone who's really lived, especially if that person is still alive," she says of her film choices. "A lot of the characters who inspire me are those who try to forge on through all the adversity placed in front of them."

Swank relates to being an outsider rising to the occasion because she's been one herself. She says she was never shy ("I was always driven, and I loved sports"), but was aware that people in her town judged her family's shaky economic circumstances.

"Growing up poor, I experienced classism," she says. "Not from my friends, but from my friends' parents and how they viewed me. That was a difficult challenge to overcome and helped shape who I am today."

Much has been written about Swank and her mother leaving their home and driving to LA so the teenager could pursue her acting dream. "My mum is truly special – she believed in me," she says. "The gift of belief is one of the most important things you can give a child."

For a while, the pair lived in their car. At other times, they slept in vacant houses that were up for sale, leaving in the mornings before real estate agents arrived to show people through.

"I wouldn't change my humble beginnings for anything," Swank says. "It gave me a great appreciation for the life I have now and taught

me not to take anything for granted. It gave me a better understanding of what I'm capable of through hard work and determination."

Over the years, her feelings of exclusion have evaporated. Success will do that, she says. "I feel I have a place where I belong now – through the things I've achieved in my career. I used to be like, 'What do I wear to this thing? Am I going to be underdressed? What do I say to these people?' I think we all have that insecurity. As you get older, you feel less like an outsider because you have an awareness of life. Of course, there are moments when we all still feel insecure. You know," she laughs, "Maybe I should just stay in tonight."

On the night she won her first Academy Award, in 1999, she was so overwhelmed by the occasion that she could barely string a sentence together. "I kept thinking a siren would go off and someone would say, 'You! It's a mistake. You're out of here!'"

But she soon learnt that things can quickly move from one extreme to the other. Days after the win, she went to a pharmacy to pick up a prescription and found she couldn't afford to pay.

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Of course, her bank balance is considerably healthier now, yet the more famous she's become, the more her private life has come under scrutiny. In 2006, she broke up with actor Chad Lowe, her husband of almost 10 years and her partner since the age of 18. "Going through a divorce is horrible," she said recently. "It's dreams crumbling; it's your family, your whole life, all of your security dissolving."

Now linked to her agent, John Campisi, she says there's pressure in having a relationship in the public eye. "[We] try to have a normal life," she says. "I didn't get into the business to have everyone know everything about me. I just go about my life and make movies when I can."

A self-confessed homebody, she says the party lifestyle doesn't interest her. "I've never understood going into a room with loud music and screaming at someone near me," she groans. "Part of what I love about hanging out with friends is talking and listening to each other."

Indeed, Swank loves to hear people's stories. She says she's been "fascinated by people" from a young age and that's what drew her to acting. "Understanding people and what makes them similar – or different – is intriguing and life-enriching," she muses.

When she first moved to LA, she struggled to find work, scoring small parts in various sitcoms and TV movies. She finally landed a role

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(above, from left) In *Amelia*, Swank portrays pioneering aviator Amelia Earhart; Swank with co-star Richard Gere, who plays her husband.

in the original *Beverly Hills, 90210*, only to be, in her words, sacked. This only strengthened her resolve.

"I'm not a worrier by nature," she says. "I try not to let other people's thoughts dictate what's going to happen for me. In this business, that's particularly difficult, because most of the time people are dictating what you are or are not going to do by putting you in a movie or not."

That's not to say she's not critical of herself. "I'm very hard on myself. I don't know if it's my upbringing – the drive I needed to get out from under my circumstances – but it's who I am and who I was born to be."

Ask her if she has any regrets, and she pauses. "There are things that I've done that make me sad," she says slowly. "But I don't know if I'd say regret – our mistakes are part of our process. If you're not making mistakes, you're not living your life."

These days, Swank has found balance in her life. She loves to cook and has taken up ocean paddleboarding. "I'm happiest when I'm honouring myself – when I know what's best for me," she says.

She still has a few work irons in the fire and talks excitedly of her upcoming film *The Resident*, a psychological thriller she had a ball making. "I loved it. It's a completely different genre and totally fictional," Swank cackles. "Let me say: I do not play a real person." And with that, she breathes a sigh of relief and goes back to her real life. **SM**

*Amelia is in cinemas November 12.*

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