



# ELLE *the* GREAT

The *former* child star is now taking on a variety of hefty roles—from *Empress* to alleged murderer-by-text.

Even un-made-up, on Zoom, at some ungodly hour in the morning on her one day off that week, Elle Fanning appears to actually be glowing. A steadily-working actor since before she was three years old, at 23 Fanning should, by all accounts, be an absolute menace. And yet, there's nothing arch or knowing in her manner, no thunderous ego or terrifying riptide of emotional damage to contend with when I meet her virtually in early October. She is among the brightest stars of her generation of performers, and she is kind, loose, funny—in other words, utterly charming. And yes, she has the delicate bone structure of a Disney princess, which she has, in fact, played twice (in *Maleficent* and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*); truly, it should be very easy to hate her. The only problem? She's so *nice*.

Part of this preternatural ease within the Hollywood firmament may be attributed to her upbringing, which was amidst a family of professional athletes. The Fannings prized practice, she says; they understood performance. And her older sister, Dakota—also a child star, whom Elle began her acting career playing a younger version of in scenes for films like *I Am Sam*, and with whom Elle recently founded a production company—of course went first. Maybe it's because she grew up on movie sets, says Tony McNamara, the celebrated writer

who helms Hulu's *The Great*, in which Fanning reprises her role this November as Catherine the Great, a fictionalized version of Russia's 18th-century Empress. She has a good eye and great instincts, he says, and that's not always the case. "She makes it look pretty effortless, but it's a difficult pitch to get to as an actor," McNamara says of the role, which requires everything from comic pratfalls and raunchy love scenes to handling various disembodied heads. McNamara calls her range "astounding" and says, "There isn't much I couldn't imagine her doing in her career if she wants to. She's the full package."

For Fanning, part of the appeal in playing an iconic female leader was getting real. Catherine the Great is not "always the bravest or the strongest, and I think that's why I was drawn to [her] in the first place," Fanning says. "You see these feminist stories, and it's like 'We're gonna show a *girl* on screen and she's just *brave all the time!*' That's not real life; that's not showing what a woman is. We can be annoying, and we can be wrong. And yes, she's powerful, and she's great, and she's all those other things, but she has to learn how to contain it in a way that's going to be productive." In other words, she has to grow up, which is something Elle Fanning knows a thing or two about doing gracefully in public. "When you're a child actor you're

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