I'm living with a consistent, subtle homesickness'

The ex-Doctor Who star, now making her directorial debut, talks about her love of the Highlands—and how she was 'delusional' about her acting ability

Words: Emma Brookes

Karen Gillan enters the restaurant in downtown Manhattan, tall and slightly ungainly, with the high colour of one still young enough to be easily embarrassed. The 30-year-old recently moved to New York from LA, after five years spent appearing mainly in blockbusters, and is promoting a much more modest film today. The Party's just Beginning, written by and starring Gillan, is also her directorial debut and is set in her native Inverness, although "it's not the postcard version", she says, laughing. Nonetheless, it is infused with affection. "All the time," she says, when I ask if she misses Scotland. "I'm living with a consistent, subtle homesickness all the time."

In the movie, which had a budget of £3m—"not the smallest in the world," says Gillan, "but in the grand scheme of things very low"—she plays Lucy, a woman in her early 20s still living at home and struggling to find a life beyond the cheese counter in the supermarket where she works and the emotionally deadened life of her parents. It is a film about youth, alienation and, above all, friendship, in which the strongest dialogue is that between Lucy and her married friend Donna, and strongly suggests that, while the movie is a drama, and at times a high drama, Gillan's writing talent may be more persuasively in comedy.

The actor herself is immensely cheerful. Gillan grew up the only child of parents who still live in Inverness and on whom, she says, the inadequate parents in her movie are emphatically not based. She started out acting as a teenager, with a small part in the TV detective show Rebus, and went on to play three seasons of Doctor Who, as Amy Pond, the Doctor's sidekick.

"To appear on television seemed completely absurd to me," she says of those early jobs, although it is something she had been striving towards for so long that her dad used to tease her that "as a kid, I would point at the television and say, 'How do I get in there?'." By 13 or 14, when I was able to use the internet, I could look up auditions, and then I was writing so man different letters to people and sending stuff to agents.

She was, she says, very much a 14-year-old with "a plan", an unusual drive that she puts down in part to having grown up without siblings. Gillan was always off in her own head, making up stories or shooting amateur horror movies in which her dad gamely allowed her to cover him in ketchup. And if there was no acting background in the family—Gillan's mum worked in Tesco and her dad in a centre for people with learning disabilities—both parents were highly encouraging of their daughter's odd interests. "They never really expressed any doubt in me, which is the most valuable thing," she says. "No one said: 'Do you really think you should be doing this?'"

As a result, says Gillan, she started out with what, in retrospect, strikes her as a helpfully high dose of self-delusion. After school, she studied acting briefly in Edinburgh, and after an abortive few weeks at the Italia Conti stage school in London, returned to Scotland to make the film Rebus. The experience of Doctor Who was gratifying and boosting, and, as Gillan realised afterwards, completely unrepresentative. "I was really spoilt by going into something that people really gave a shit about."

The film that brought her out to the US was Oculus, a sci-fi movie made by the producers of Paranormal Activity, and that set Gillan on the path of appearing in titles heavily reliant on green screen. She doesn't drive and LA was initially difficult, a question of taking cabs to auditions and afterwards, begging the receptionist for the wifi password to get online and find a local cab company to take her home again. It could have been horribly depressing, but Gillan is inclined not to see things this way. Every year, hundreds of young actors with decent credits to their name arrive in LA trying to break through to the big time, and although Gillan's success in Doctor Who "didn't seem to catapult me anywhere," she says, neither was she put off by the competition. "I didn't have any fear...
of that all. I had suffered so many rejections, but it’s like it has never phased me.”

It did, however, suddenly occur to her one day that she might need to work on her acting. It’s an odd thing, says Gillan; in contexts other than performing, she has always been “quiet and introverted”. She was unambiguously and largely disengaged at school. But in this one area, “I was delusional about my own abilities. When I was acting, I was really confident that I was good at it. Then I had an awakening when I realised I wasn’t as good as I thought I was – I watched myself in something and thought, ‘Oh my God, this is terrible, I need to get back to work on this and figure out how this is done.’

After Oculus came roles in movie franchises such as Guardians of the Galaxy, in which she plays Nebula, and as Martha in Jumanji. Slowly, Gillan felt herself improving, until, she says laughing, “there was a moment recently when Tom Banks’ name dropped – and I did this film called The Circle and he came up to me and told me I was good. And it was one of those life moments. Maybe I’ve achieved some of what I wanted to, after realising how shit I was.”

This is not the kind of line you will readily hear from an American actor. Gillan’s strength is, as an actor – and, as it turns out, as a director – is in a force and humour that is particularly Scottish. She is not easily cowed into toeing a particular line, agreeing with those who pointed out the absurdity of her character’s costume in Jumanji (skimpy hot-pants and crop top – a supposedly ironic gesture towards the sexism of the period it portrayed – while the guys, of course, were in regular hiking gear). And she has been vocal that Tupperware appearing at the Baftas in black last week and elsewhere, saying of the movement: “I’m so pleased that everyone’s speaking up. The worst thing is to keep this under the radar.”

When necessary, she is vocal in her own defence, too. Getting the funding together for The Party’s Just Beginning took years, and producers originally pushed for it to be filmed in Glasgow, rather than Inverness, since so many of the crew were based there. Gillan pushed back. “It was important to me to shoot the exteriors in Inverness,” she says. “Any Scottish person watching the movie will know that it’s wrong if it’s Glasgow.” Somewhat to her surprise, she discovered she liked being in charge. “Not the boss element; more about making all these decisions about this story I’d come up with. There was a second where you realise that you usually have someone to turn to and ask what to do, and that people are looking to me for that. I was like, oh, right! You should do that! But it felt really natural.”

Apart from the location – the chip shop in the movie is the one Gillan used to go to as a teenager and some of her old friends served as extras – the story, which hinges on the death of Lucy’s friend, a gay man in an unhappy relationship with a devout and closeted Christian, is not autobiographical. It came to Gillan after reading a statistic that “the suicide rate in the Highlands of Scotland was higher among young men than anywhere else in Scotland.” And then the director’s like, why, when it’s such an idyllic place to live? It’s beautiful and we get tourists all the time, so the role. Acting is all well and good, she says, but “I just know that I want to direct. That’s what I want to do with my life,” not just as a question of control, but of being able to “tell your own story, rather than helping someone else tell theirs – which is what acting feels like.”

It feels like an auspicious time to be harbouring these ambitions. “More female film-makers!” says Gillan. “The percentage is so low; everything is from the male perspective, although it’s changing a little bit now.” She smiles and says it again, exuberantly enough for people in the restaurant to turn. “More female film-makers!”

The Party’s Just Beginning will premiere at the Glasgow Film festival and open in cinemas later this year.

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