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LAURA LINNEY is one of Hollywood’s most enduring stars and – with a hotly awaited Netflix series on the way – her stellar career shows no sign of abating. She tells *Elaine Lipworth* why her refusal to go under the knife is working to her advantage

PHOTOGRAPHS *Trent McGinn*

I’ve just barged into Laura Linney’s dressing room at the Samuel J Friedman Theatre in New York to find the award-winning actress lying on the sofa, fast asleep. At least she was – until I woke her from the nap she was enjoying before going on stage in the Broadway hit *The Little Foxes*, alongside her friend, *Sex and the City*’s Cynthia Nixon. Startled, Laura leaps up, as I explain in a flurry of embarrassment how the doorman, unaware that she had already arrived, had suggested I wait in her room. Luckily, she sees the funny side: ‘Let me get you a drink!’ says Laura, who is known for powerful dramas, including Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River* (with Sean Penn) and his recent hit *Sully* (with Tom Hanks), as well as the 2003 classic *Love Actually*.

She gives me a 60-second tour of her cramped but cosy sanctuary, which is filled with books (she’s reading Graham Swift’s *Mothering Sunday*). On the floor is a pair of striped Manolos and on the wall are research pictures of costumes for the play, a melodrama by Lillian Hellman set in America’s Deep South at the turn of the 20th century. Unusually, Laura and Cynthia are alternating parts at each performance, as the Machiavellian Regina and her timid, alcoholic sister-in-law Birdie. ‘*The Little Foxes* is demanding enough on its own,’ laughs Laura. ‘Then I decided to make it a little more difficult by suggesting that we swap roles.’

Her latest project, which we are meeting to discuss, is the ‘suspenseful’ new Netflix drama series *Ozark*, about another dysfunctional family. Laura’s character – Chicago mother-of-two Wendy Byrde – is trapped in a bad marriage to Marty (Jason Bateman), who is in turn caught up in a money-laundering scam. They and their children flee ►



◀ from the city to the Ozarks, a mountainous lakeside region in Missouri known as the Redneck Riviera. ‘They are forced to relocate to the sticks and they are not a happy bunch,’ says Laura. ‘There are a lot of secrets between them. This is a family in turmoil, having to assimilate into a culture that is foreign to them.’

Laura herself is happily married to drug and alcohol counsellor Marc Schauer (she split from her first husband, actor David Adkins, in 2000), with whom she has a three-year-old son. Their romance started at the 2004 Telluride Film Festival in Colorado, which Laura happened to be attending with her mother Ann. ‘I had been painfully single for a long time,’ says Laura, 53. ‘We got off the plane and up came this very good-looking man.’ A volunteer at the festival, Marc told Laura he would be showing her around. ‘I didn’t think anything of it, but I can remember turning and looking at him and thinking, “Am I attracted to my handler?” I thought, “Well, this is a good sign. You’re waking up a little bit. Hooray!” But I was there with my mother, for God’s sake!’

By the end of the festivities, sparks were flying. Marc took Laura and Ann on a walk ‘to look at the stars at night. There I was with this great-looking guy on a mountain top with diamonds in the sky. I remember thinking, “I bet if my mother wasn’t here, I’d be being kissed right now!”’ The next day, Marc handed Laura a note that she opened on the flight home. ‘It said, “I’ll stargaze with you any time,” which I thought was pretty gutsy and very romantic. We started emailing each other and getting to know each other slowly.’

Laura credits a lot of the success of the relationship to her husband. ‘It’s not easy to be married to someone in “the business” because your hours are crazy and you have to travel all the time. You need someone who feels secure and Marc is terrific that way.’

Looking around the actress’s dressing room, I remark that there are no family photos on display. ‘Oh, I have thousands,’ she exclaims, grabbing her phone and proudly showing me snaps of the couple’s toddler Bennett Armistead. ‘I’m a much older parent; I didn’t know if motherhood was going to happen for me,’ says Laura, who was 49 when she gave birth. She says there are distinct advantages to late motherhood. ‘For me, there’s no anxiety that I’m missing out, that I didn’t get to do this or that... I did all that.’

She says that ‘like every woman who works’, she finds juggling motherhood with a full-time career challenging. ‘He’ll wake up at three in the morning and want to have a party! I feel the tug of wishing I was home more; there’s tremendous guilt. Thank God for FaceTime. But it’s magical. There’s a deep happiness, a sense of family, a sense of home.’

The theatre is also ‘home’ for Laura. Her late father Romulus Linney was a highly regarded playwright. Another strong influence was Laura’s impressively named paternal grandmother Maitland Lagrange Thompson Clabaugh, who never fulfilled her own dreams of performing professionally, but studied drama and elocution ‘in the 20s, at a time when being an actress was considered a tawdry profession. She



**From top:** Laura with Jason Bateman in new Netflix series *Ozark*; with Alan Rickman in *Love Actually*; with Philip Seymour Hoffman in *The Savages*, and her Emmy-winning turn as Cathy in *The Big C*

won a gold medal for drama and elocution in 1921 and gave it to me,’ says Laura. ‘I lived in a house in Connecticut that burned down and the thing I obsessed about the most was this gold medallion, which they found in the ashes.’

Laura’s parents split up when she was a baby and she grew up in a New York apartment with her mother, a nurse in a cancer hospital. ‘I watched her work long, hard hours and struggle to raise a child on her own. It had a big impact on me – so did the depth to which she dedicated herself to her patients.’ A latchkey kid, Laura became independent early on. ‘I would get myself to school and I remember taking great pride in being self-sufficient.’ She also learned to appreciate solitude. ‘I need alone time,’ she says.

That must be difficult with a three-year-old? ‘Absolutely, you have to be organised; so I will come to the theatre early,’ says Laura, who practises Transcendental Meditation regularly. ‘It’s a priority. It gives me a little extra space in my brain and knocks down the

panic factor and anxiety levels, so that getting through a big day feels much easier.’

Laura’s childhood ‘was not without its struggles’, she says. ‘Being the only child in a divorced family certainly wasn’t idyllic, but it was more privileged than most. I loved my friends and I loved going to school.’ There were regular visits to her maternal grandparents at their seaside home in Georgia. ‘I remember picnics, digging for sand dollars, seeing cousins, being in houses when hurricanes were coming through.’

Acting wasn’t an obvious career choice for an introvert: ‘I wasn’t the type of kid who would bound up to someone and say, “I’m going to be an actress.”’ Added to which, though her father’s work was well received, he wasn’t financially successful. ‘I watched my father struggle and I knew how difficult it was for him.’ But with a natural talent, she read theatre studies at Brown University, going on to win a place at the revered Juilliard School in New York. Finding early success on the stage, Laura landed one of her first screen roles in the 1993 miniseries *Tales of the City* based on the novels by Armistead Maupin (her son is named in honour of the American writer). Soon afterwards, Richard Gere picked Laura as his co-star in the thriller *Primal Fear*. ‘Richard had casting approval and he said “yes” to this person he had never heard of. I owe him a great deal.’

With four Emmys – including one in 2004 for her role ▶

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◀ as Kelsey Grammer's love interest in *Frasier* and another in 2013 for her performance in *The Big C*, about a woman dealing with incurable cancer – a fifth is practically a given for her role in *Ozark*, which deals with ethics and fidelity. 'It asks the big questions: Who are you? What's at the core of your character?'

The series also tackles greed and how money can have a corrosive effect. 'The person who makes the most money is viewed as the most successful. That's twisted logic,' says Laura. 'And people look to money as a substitute for love, but it isn't. It's wonderful to have money – it has certainly changed the contents of my wardrobe! And it allows me to be pickier about the work I do. But it can be very damaging. What scares me is how money can influence behaviour; how money is equated with power.' She is referring to the US President – like most of Hollywood, Laura is not a fan. 'I barely have words to describe what I'm witnessing and what has suddenly been deemed acceptable. It's deeply troubling and terribly disheartening,' she says about the Trump administration's policies towards immigrants and women, and the alleged ties to Russia. 'It just makes me mad.'

It's hard to imagine Laura in a temper; she seems calm and measured. I've heard stories about her good nature and kindness. A true nurse's daughter, Laura has a reputation for administering first aid to crew members on film sets, bandaging injured limbs. 'Oh God, that makes me sound terrible,' she shouts, 'like I'm Florence Nightingale.' But she will admit, 'When you like people, you help them when they're in need.'

No wonder Laura has forged close friendships among her esteemed co-stars and directors. Any favourites? 'I learned a lot from Clint [Eastwood] – he taught me how to relax. Richard Gere has become a great friend. We've been through marriages and divorces, children, all of it. It's nice to have someone who's known you for a long time.'

Looking at Laura's CV, it's clear she has a penchant for British and Irish leading men: Ian McKellen in *Mr Holmes*; Gabriel Byrne in *PS* and then *Jindabyne*; Steve Coogan in recent film *The Dinner*. 'There's a slew of them,' she says, mentioning Liam Neeson, 'a great friend and a great human being'. She starred with Liam on Broadway in *The Crucible*, as well as in the films *Kinsey* and *Love Actually*, which boasted an ensemble cast of Britain's best-loved talents, including the late Alan Rickman, 'a dear, dear friend'. Recently voted the nation's favourite Christmas film, 'it's a



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she was the glue and it's still hard...we all miss her.'

While death is often a taboo subject, it is, says Laura, 'a big topic for me. I've lost so many people who were way too young to go.' Philip Seymour Hoffman, her co-star in *The Savages*, died of a drug overdose in 2014 and her friend Stanley DeSantis, the character actor, died of a heart attack aged 52 in 2005. 'I lost a cousin to brain cancer last year. Their absence is going to be with you for the rest of your life. It can be absolutely devastating – your entire geography is all of a sudden gone, and you have no map,' says Laura.

She has discovered a helpful coping mechanism. 'I have found that my relationship with these people who are no longer here is not over,' she says. 'I hear their voices. I try to take the best of them and incorporate them into my own life – by honouring them and following their example. Natasha [Richardson] and Alan [Rickman] were amazing dinner-party throwers, so I make dinner for people occasionally.' When Laura is studying a script, 'I'll think about Phil, because he was the greatest. My friend Stanley was a big gardener, so I have flowers around. I take what they taught me and I find that keeps them alive for me in a comforting way.'

Specifically because of the people she has lost, Laura doesn't worry about getting older. 'I believe it's a complete privilege to age,' she says. 'It's not easy; my knees hurt. You can feel you are not on the pulse of things. However, I have very little patience for people

sweet, wonderful movie about human connection', says Laura, explaining the comedy's enduring popularity.

With her affinity for all things British – as well as her lovely, velvety voice – it's perhaps no surprise that Laura introduced *Downton Abbey* to viewers in the US as a 'host' for *Masterpiece*, a long-running series airing many British TV classics. 'I think they thought I'd be a good fit.' Her fondness for the UK dates back to a college exchange programme in Moscow, organised by the actor Brian Cox, when she bonded with a Manchester drama student, Sally Rogers (Jo Masters in *The Bill*): 'We've been fast friends ever since.'

Over the years, Laura also became close to Natasha Richardson, Liam Neeson's wife and the mother of their two sons. Tragically, the actress died in 2009, aged 45, in a skiing accident. 'It was traumatic for everybody – and still is,' says Laura. 'Natasha had such a remarkable spirit; she was the one who made everything happen, who got us all together. She made amazing meals,

## LAURA LOVES

**FIRST THING IN THE MORNING** My three-year-old son comes in and wakes us up. My husband is very sweet and makes me a latte every day.

**BREAKFAST** I always have coffee. I love making my own granola when I have the time, and my husband makes terrific pancakes.

**BOOK THAT CHANGED YOUR LIFE** *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It was the first time I came into contact with poetry and dramatic narrative in a significant way.

**WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?** *Monty Python*, *Little Britain*, *Blackadder*, John Cleese, Eric Idle and Steve Coogan.

**GUILTY PLEASURE** I'm a big junk-food eater. Not just pizza and hamburgers – I love doughnuts, ice cream and sweets!

**WHAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE ABOUT YOU?** I'm very much an introvert. I need to be alone, to let my mind float and to consider things, and I don't like big parties.

**ADVICE TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF?** Eat better; learn to cook; go to the gym every once in a while, relax and enjoy life.

**MOTTO** No way through it but through it.





**Left: Laura with Richard Gere in *Primal Fear*. Below: with Steve Coogan and Rebecca Hall in *The Dinner***



who gripe about ageing. I want to slap some sense into them. I've become very offended on behalf of my friends who did not get to age.'

Laura's positive approach to the passage of time extends to her appearance; she has no intention of going under the knife: 'I don't like what I see in the mirror sometimes. Of course you look at yourself and you're, like, "Good Lord, what's happening?" But it's just against my nature to put plastic in my face.' And it's clear from the fine lines on her forehead that she hasn't succumbed to fillers. 'My face moves – it's natural, there's nothing in it but time. I don't blame anybody [for having surgery]. They all look a lot better than I do,' she laughs, touching her face. 'But I've noticed with a lot of people [who have facelifts], there's something about the essence of who you are that evaporates. And all of a sudden that alien quality starts. It's the wrong face on the wrong person! At the moment, I'm letting gravity do what it does.'

Her own antidote to worry is volunteering. Laura mentors acting students and says the experience is 'so rewarding, it's almost selfish'. It also helps, she says, to retreat to the countryside with her family (they have homes in Connecticut and Colorado). 'You cook, you put on the sprinkler; you run in and out of the water; you make mud cakes, you get chalk and draw on the ground – it's the fun, sweet stuff.'

Before I leave and Laura gets ready for her evening performance, I ask her whether she still has any goals or dreams. 'I just want to grow up a little bit,' she says with a sigh, then bursts into peals of laughter, sounding remarkably childlike...in the best possible way. ■

■ *Ozark* will be available exclusively on Netflix from 21 July