

The Wright time to shine again

The kids are grown up and the divorce from Sean Penn is history. Robin Wright is ready for her close-up, she tells Tim Teeman

She didn't stop making films, Robin Wright insists in an airless, windowless room in Sony's New York headquarters, "it was just that only three people saw them". The actress's career flashed bright in *The Princess Bride* and *Forrest Gump* (for which she gained a Golden Globe best supporting actress nomination), then for some time she became better known for her turbulent 21-year relationship and 14-year marriage to Sean Penn, which ended in divorce last July.

Now Wright, 45, is "back in the game": last year in a lead role in *The Conspirator*, about Abraham Lincoln's assassination, then alongside Brad Pitt in *Moneyball*, and now with Daniel Craig in David Fincher's adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, in which she plays the publisher of the magazine Craig works for and his sometime lover. Of the film's infamous anal-rape and torture scenes, Wright says: "Was it graphic? Absolutely. Did it make me squirm in my seat? You bet." But, she shrugs, scenes like this are common in European films such as *Irreversible*, "less so in Hollywood". Wright is a beguiling mix of candid and private, of sharp observations and scattered thoughts. She deploys brilliant, pitch-perfect British (posh and Cockney) accents; her stepfather is from Wilmslow.

Gone is the tumbling blonde hair that Wright sported in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; now it's feathery short. Tall and beautiful, she is dressed in black high heels, white Gap shirt and grey woollen flared trousers and a corset-like breastplate, both by Gucci. "I don't have any regrets," she says of her professionally subdued years. "I wasn't quiet in my creative world." Still, she concedes, the likes of *Moneyball* and *Tattoo*, as well as the forthcoming *Rampart*, opposite Woody Harrelson, "allows you more access to more projects, bringing you to the attention of directors and producers who wouldn't normally think of you. It'll open some doors after I closed the door to be a mother [to daughter Dylan Frances, 20, and son Hopper Jack, 18].

"It wasn't a premeditated thought — 'I'm going to stop my career in mainstream films' — it just wasn't a priority. The children were my world. Being a parent makes you look at your authentic self much faster than you would normally. Having children is like taking a truth serum. We all unintentionally screw up our children: it's a learning curve."

There were times in the school year or holidays when she'd try to make a



film, "but it was a f***ing nightmare. It was either, 'Mummy, I want to be with my friends', or 'Mummy, please don't go.'"

There was "no sense of competition" with Penn, whom she started seeing after he divorced Madonna in 1989 and whose film career went stellar during their relationship. "I was only frustrated when I was pregnant. There was no outlet for me, and we are energy fields — which I know [she puts on a Californian new-agey accent] sounds, like, soooo spiritual — but we are."

One regret is that she was offered the leading female role in Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient*, but was pregnant with Dylan and would have started showing as filming progressed, so she turned the role down. "That was devastating, but Kristin [Scott Thomas] was so much better for the part. I didn't feel envy, but an appreciation of another actor's work."

One of the best pieces of advice came from the "wonderful" Minghella. Making his film *Breaking and Entering*, she was struggling with a scene and he told her gently, to "play": a revelation. "What we do is heavy, intense and emotional and actors are heavy, intense and emotional beings — but he was right, we're literally 'playing.'"

Wright was born in Dallas: her mother Gayle was a sales director for a cosmetics company, her father Freddie a pharmaceutical executive. They

“Actors are heavy and emotional — but we’re literally ‘playing’

divorced when she was 3 and Wright remembers her father crying as his wife drove away with Wright and her older brother Richard "west until the ocean stopped us". Wright's mother has said that she has misremembered this scene. Wright remains close to her father but is recently estranged from her mother: "I would like to repair it. You can imagine the regret if she..."

Wright was a "stupid idiot" at school, "barely getting through," she says harshly. "I wasn't smart academically. I probably had some form of dyslexia." She was "very withdrawn, had only one friend. When you're the shy girl, the perception is, 'Who do you think you are?', that you're a bitch, when the reality was I painfully shy, in my shell. I had a tough exterior and soft inside."

She had "older boyfriends from the get-go": at 14, they were 18; "when I was 20, I went out with a thirtysomething; at 25, a 40-year-old. They were more sophisticated, mature, discerning, thoughtful." (Penn was only six years her senior.)

She wanted to be a Broadway dancer, but at 15 was spotted by a model scout in San Diego. "The most devastating thing is to be that age in an industry where you are just a specimen of beauty. You get lots of attention from men, but most of them just want to f*** you. There's no room for you to feel special, to find confidence, because of the constant objectification."

Wright joined the daytime

American soap opera *Santa Barbara* in 1984, but "there was always an endeavour to do film" and *The Princess Bride* provided her with the "amuse-bouche" she desired.

Her first marriage to Dane Witherspoon, a *Santa Barbara* co-star, proved short-lived: "I suddenly thought: 'Whoah, you have your whole life in front of you. I thought we would be together for ever. I believed in the fairytale: that's why I responded to *The Princess Bride* so completely. I wouldn't say to others don't believe in it. It's out there."

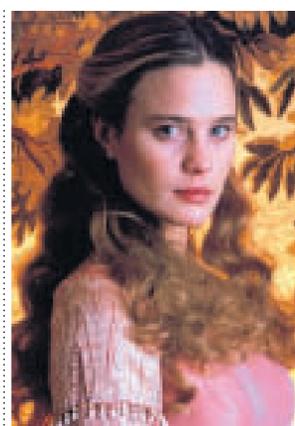
And with Penn? "I don't want to put that in the context of love. You're infused with a feeling. Is that love? It's what we title as love. It's a feeling you gravitate to, a magnet pulling you to the other person." Why was the relationship a rollercoaster of separations and reuniting? "I don't..." Wright looks stricken. "I'm hesitating because the words don't work for me any more. I don't want to fall into that cliché of 'I was in love then I wasn't'. You're infused with something, you grow apart, you're infused with another thing, you grow apart. I would use the words 'definitely never boring' to describe our marriage. It was exciting and difficult. I spent most of my life with this person."

Are they still friends? "Mm-hmm," she says cautiously. She is "connecting with" rather than "dating" someone new. Would she marry again? "Marry? No." She smiles. "But never say never. Why marry? It's a beautiful fortress, but I don't need it."

Wright thinks roles for older actresses are improving, thanks to Helen Mirren, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore, although "I hate this f***ing ageing thing. I wake up and think: 'I didn't have that wrinkle yesterday.' I'm sitting here and my face feels tired after a night drinking too much champagne, like I'm marinating."

Has she had work done? "I did Botox once and I couldn't move my forehead, it was like being in a vice. I said: 'Can you take it out?' It was too much. The trick is to have the most minuscule amount." Would she have plastic surgery? "No, the idea freaks me out. I look at those faces and they all look the same. Hmm, I sit here today and say no, but..."

She runs, does yoga and has intensive



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workouts two days a week and has been "in and out of therapy all my life", having a "propensity to emotional waves: deep crevices and high peaks. Why can't I just hover? I can spend hours, days in the crevices, never too long, never in bed slitting my wrists. For me, there are two emotions: one feels good and one doesn't. Choose the one that feels good."

Of the future, Wright "wants a lot": to direct "desperately", to play a rock-and-roll star "who's a drug addict type, like Janis Joplin", to do a "great comedy with someone hysterically funny". Like Penn, she is an activist, campaigning for the brutalised population of war-decimated eastern Congo. She "fluctuates back and forth" about her mortality, "only because I'm a social smoker. I don't want to give it up, but I think I'm going to have to. 'But I like it', she says to herself. 'Yeah, but you'll die of cancer'."

"But I could walk out of here and get hit by a bus." Wright laughs and shrugs gamely: she'll take her chances. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* opens nationwide on Boxing Day



The Wright stuff: top left, *The Princess Bride*; Wright's breakout role: above, *The Conspirator*; left, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*



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