Jessie Buckley’s Monster Talent

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By Jordan Kisner
According to the teachings of the paduan theater artist Giovanni Fusetti, one of the great clowning masters in the world, the Italian word *folle*, as in *il Folle*, “the Fool,” comes from the Latin word *follis*, which means the bellows, that implement that gathers and directs air toward flame to feed it. The Fool, he says, is like the bellows: full of air, full of breath, full of spirits and full of feeling. Fools talk of everything and nothing, the silly and the profound, and their ability to talk freely without much culpability makes them fonts of truth. Their words propel plots and topple kingdoms. Conduits of air, of inspiration, are implements of ignition.

Fusetti is known as the midwife of clowns. The theory goes that everyone has a clown inside, and instead of inventing it or imposing it, you simply coax it forth. The process of learning to clown is in fact the process of finding your inner clown, the part of the self that is full of inspiration and raw emotion, the part most in touch with the fact that “we understand nothing and we feel everything,” as Fusetti said in a 2019 interview. “The clown feels that life is beautiful and tragic.”

The Irish actor Jessie Buckley — best known for roles that have placed her variously at the mercy of horrid vicars, mythological monsters, serial-killer boyfriends, ghost rapists, abusive husbands, nuclear disasters, warring dynasties and unseemly hungers — is currently fascinated with clowning and is an admirer of Fusetti’s, with whom she trained in Padua this year. This doesn’t quite track with her résumé, but it makes sense to the people who know her, or the people who understand clowning to be about, as Fusetti describes it, “the extreme sport of being alive.”

“The first thing he has you do is carve your nose,” Buckley said. We were walking around a residential neighborhood of Toronto on an unseasonably warm day in October, kicking leaves. Buckley was on a break from the set of “Fingernails,” a new film she was shooting with the director Christos Nikou. “You have a red ball, like a play ball, and how you carve your clown nose is very important because it has to fit your nose perfectly.” Once you carve your nose and mount it on your face, you do an exercise in which you come into the world as a clown, as if seeing everything for the very first time — with the nose on.

She found the exercise extraordinary in the way it surfaced people’s clowns. She is curious, however, about clowns’ relegation to a marginal art form. “They used to be in the core of society. They used to be, like in the Fool in ‘King Lear,’ you know, they were the ones kind of exposing the wounds in society.”

I asked if her clown spoke. “Mine didn’t yet. Some clowns do. My clown was a very — well, I had kind of two clowns, but — she was a child. She was a very young clown.” She smiled. “And she was in utter awe of the world. And wants to get so close to it — but was terrified of getting that close as well.” Buckley rummaged in her pocket.

“Here,” she said, holding out her phone. “That’s her.”
There was Buckley, swallowed in a black oversize men’s coat and loose black pants. Her feet were bare, and her hands were lost somewhere in her coat sleeves. She looked hapless, amazed, delighted.

“OK,” I said. “What was your other clown?”

She smiled again lopsidedly. “Just mischievous.”

Wonder and mischief, as twin temperamental undercurrents, form the complex charisma that Buckley brings to her work. She has an affinity for harrowing roles, which she then infuses with fierce vibrancy, wit and unexpected lightness. This year she has starred in two films that she has come to think of as a diptych: the folk horror film “Men,” directed by Alex Garland, and “Women Talking,” directed by Sarah Polley. In each film, Buckley portrays women who navigate the commingling of desire, pain, fear and awe. Her performances force us to consider how we can live with respect for the fact of human life’s murkiness. “In a way they were for me in dialogue with each other,” Buckley said about the two films, “Men,” with its male cast and a male director, and “Women Talking,” with its female cast and a female director. Each in its own way tried to get at the heart of a seemingly ancient monstrosity that can exist between men and women, one that necessarily exists alongside love. She wanted to put herself at the center. “Where is the wound?” she said. “I feel like I need, I want to understand the monster.”

“...”

“I just don’t think since Marlon Brando or Robert De Niro that there’s been this kind of pure power coupled with this fierce intelligence,” Polley told me. “She’s just got this, like, atomic power that comes out of her.” On the set for “Women Talking,” Polley explained, they erected a large screen outside the main set — a hayloft — that functioned as a monitor. One day Polley found a group of people clustered around it. “It was a bunch of locations people and a few drivers, and a lot of the Covid team and P.A.s were all around the screen.” She asked what they were doing, and someone answered, “Whenever we hear you’ve turned around on Jessie, we all run in.” Polley was startled — she had never seen anything like that before.
These were seasoned crew members who do several blockbuster movies a year, and who had no particular interest in “Women Talking” or its subject. But Buckley was like a magnet, she said. “They just didn’t want to miss a second of watching that pure explosion of power that happens when she’s onscreen or where the surprise is, what the hell she’s going to do next.”

What did she feel couldn’t be said? ‘Female … desire. Female hunger, female bodies, female intellect — yeah, a female hunger.’

“Women Talking,” adapted from the novel by Miriam Toews, is based on a true story. A community of Mennonite women spend years living with a gruesome mystery: They wake up in the mornings brutalized, apparently raped in the night, but with no memory of the violation. Their religious leaders insist that the phenomenon must be caused by ghosts or demons, but then the women discover that it was their own men, their husbands, fathers and sons, attacking them with the help of cow tranquilizers. The movie centers on a small group of the women gathering in a hayloft to debate how they will respond to this discovery. Buckley plays Mariche, a woman with a husband so violent that the mere mention of his name pales the faces of everyone in the room. Both Mariche and her young daughter have been attacked in the night; still, she is initially pessimistic that there’s anything to be done about it. Buckley plays Mariche in a way that highlights her deep fear, her biting honesty, her self-sacrificing courage, all of which are wrapped in a rage that’s practically radioactive.

Polley was considering Buckley for a few of the characters in the film; it was Buckley who chose Mariche. This surprised Polley: Mariche is the hardest part. She’s meanspirited, funny, caustic. She mocks others’ vulnerabilities; in one scene, she berates another woman who is having a panic attack, complaining that none of the other women’s traumas have manifested in a way that demands so much attention. She laughs at the idea that women so sheltered as they are could possibly make their way in the world. Polley described Mariche as an obstacle to progress for much of the story. She has internalized much of the violence to which she has been subjected, and she finds herself spitting it back at others. Polley asked Buckley why she chose Mariche; Buckley told her it was because Mariche frightened her.

In Mariche, Buckley told me, she saw “the kind of internalized monster,” the way that Mariche’s cruelty had been planted in her “from a legacy and archetype that goes way back, that has been given to her by her mother, and given to her by her husband, and given to her probably by her own children.” Reflecting on this dynamic during another conversation, she elaborated. “But I think the more interesting thing than that is about how, within violence — how people try to emancipate themselves from it or move out of it.”

Maggie Gyllenhaal described to me something her husband, Peter Sarsgaard, said about Buckley after acting with her in “The Lost Daughter”: “She’s buoyant.” Gyllenhaal agreed. “She’s full of life, and it floats her back up to, like, where the light is,” Gyllenhaal said. “Even
though she’s totally interested and curious and powerful enough to swim down in the depths of the darkest places, she’s going to emerge full of life in one way or another, including all the darkness and the pain and the perversity.” The clown goes down to the depths and then floats back up to the clouds.

**Buckley was born** in a small town, Killarney, the oldest of four sisters and one brother. Her parents encouraged Buckley’s creativity, and she wound up in the school plays at her all-girls Catholic school, often playing the boys’ parts, like Tony in “West Side Story.” She remains close with her family, but she talks about those years as fraught with existential dread. All the life paths readily available to her seemed unmanageably constricted. She couldn’t imagine a future for herself; she felt trapped.

“When I was a teenager, there was a lot of what I felt, especially as a woman, that wasn’t allowed to be said,” she told me. “I sometimes felt like I was going to explode, like I was too much. There was all this feeling in me — I felt *so much*, and it felt like it was being kept so quietly and tightly.”

What did she feel couldn’t be said, I wanted to know, and she paused to find her words. “Female ... desire. Female hunger, female bodies, female intellect — yeah, a female hunger. I felt like everybody was starving around me. And in a way, if you were starving, you were doing great. In order to join the world, you must starve and be smaller than yourself, and then you’ll be palatable. Internally, I was exploding.” When, as a teenager, she felt depressed and frustrated, she dove into old films, obsessing over Katharine Hepburn or Judy Garland. At 17, she applied to drama school and was rejected, bringing that dream to a halt.

The next day, she decided to audition for the reality talent show “I’d Do Anything,” in which young actresses competed for the role of Nancy in a West End production of the musical “Oliver!” The footage of this competition is still on YouTube, and in it, teenage Buckley stands center stage week after week with her moussed spray of red curls and wide gold hoop earrings, doing something that can only be described in clichés: singing her heart out, singing for her life. Her voice was applauded, but she was criticized repeatedly for what the judges perceived as overly “masculine” body language — she was coached to “be more ladylike” and to “get your womanly head on.” I looked back at the footage and found this assessment of her physicality to be bizarre, not to mention sexist. It seems, in retrospect, like another expression of the kind of rigidity around “palatable” displays of womanhood Buckley has spent her adult life reimagining. It’s not footage she seems to enjoy re-encountering. She was clearly a talent — she was Andrew Lloyd Webber’s favorite — but also just an earnest teenager gamely belting one power ballad after another, voice clean as brass. Still, there’s a blueprint of the present-day Buckley there: a certain urgency that comes through in her performances. When she sings “As Long as He Needs Me,” she looks hungry, as if she could swallow the whole world and it wouldn’t be enough.
When she was filming “The Lost Daughter” during the pandemic, Buckley says Gyllenhaal developed a habit of whispering images and notions into her ear when they were between takes. What Buckley remembers her whispering most was, “You’re starving, you’re absolutely starving.” The film is based on an Elena Ferrante novel about an academic who abandons her young daughters to pursue a love affair and the space to write — a choice she looks back on decades later with mixed feelings. The film shows the protagonist, Leda, in both eras of her life: suffocating under the weight of early motherhood and domestic obligation, and reflecting on her life as an older woman vacationing alone. The older Leda is played by Olivia Colman; Buckley plays Leda the young mother, desperately in love with her children but even more desperate to get away from them.

The movie probes the taboo of a mother whose needs don’t align with those of her children and, facing that conflict, chooses herself. Leda calls herself an “unnatural” mother. This self-accusation is undermined by the tenderness and pathos with which Buckley plays her. Buckley’s Leda is tired and trapped, but also playful, loving, dutiful. She resists villainization. She holds her children as if she never wants to let them go — until she lets them go. Who wouldn’t want what she wants — more time to think and write, to sleep with Peter Sarsgaard? Buckley said she loved the opportunity Gyllenhaal gave her to “be curious about what is maybe a version of what motherhood or womanhood might actually mean, not something that’s just palatable. The unspoken truth of what it is to be a woman and to actually really take a bite of the apple. And relish it. And not apologize for it.”

If there is a thread connecting Buckley’s early work, it’s her taste for playing women who want something they are not supposed to want. In “Beast,” her 2017 film debut, Buckley plays Moll, a 20-something who is so desperate to get away from her controlling mother that she begins a relationship with a man she comes to suspect is behind a string of local rape-murders of young girls. In “Wild Rose,” often thought of as her breakout role, she plays a 24-year-old Scottish woman recently released from prison who is desperate to be a country singer in Nashville, a dream she struggles to subordinate to the needs of her two young children. In the HBO mini-series “Chernobyl,” she plays the pregnant wife of a firefighter who responds to the nuclear explosion; she chooses to be with her husband as he dies despite being warned that his body is radioactive and dangerous to her pregnancy, a choice that costs her the child. In Season 4 of the TV series “Fargo,” she plays a cheerful Minnesotan nurse who, calling herself an “angel of mercy,” surreptitiously kills her patients. In a 2020 filmed production of “Romeo and Juliet” for the National Theater, she plays an earthy, forceful Juliet with an adult sense of what she wants. These women might be seen by others as morally compromised — certainly the nurse is — but maybe more to the point is that they’re intentionally colliding with the most complicated aspects of human agency.

In “Men,” Buckley plays Harper, a young widow who takes a solo retreat to a manor in the English countryside, where she is slowly hunted — or haunted — by a series of male archetypes: a policeman who disbelieves her; a vicar who accuses her of stirring his lust; a silent, naked figure covered in leaves, meant to evoke the Green Man, a pagan figure with a
face covered by foliage, who symbolizes the cycle of life and death. For two and a half hours, Buckley is mostly alone onscreen with these many men who attack her, mock her, flash her, lurk outside her windows, gaslight her, blame her. (All of them are played by one actor, Rory Kinnear, with the exception of Harper’s dead husband, who is played in flashbacks by Paapa Essiedu.) Among other things, the movie is an allegorical recitation of all the ways men have ever brutalized women.

![Buckley in “Men.” Credit...A24, via Everett Collection](image)

The film is tough, obviously, and gruesome in a way — but it also has a soaring feeling, or perhaps it’s better to say that Buckley as Harper is full of awe and pleasure, both fight and spiritual flight. There’s a scene in which she is alone in the woods staring down the barrel of a dark, abandoned railway tunnel. It’s foreboding, pitch black, precisely the kind of passage you hope the woman in the horror movie comes to her senses in time to avoid entering. Harper lingers on the edge of the darkness, looking alert, apprehensive. Then she sings a quick note, sending it into the dark. It comes back as an echo. She smiles and does it again, and then again, singing calls and responses until the tunnel is duetting with her, wrapping them together in song.

I’ve been meditating on Buckley’s choice of words, to “really take a bite of the apple.” That original sin — an ancient, biblical act — is unequivocally a disobedience, but it is also a foundationally human gesture: to expand oneself no matter what it costs, to demand the right to see the world as it really is, to eat what is delicious. The forces opposing this kind of act are fierce. In “Men,” one of the first things Harper sees upon her arrival to the country house is a tree teeming with apples in the front courtyard. She takes one on her way in, closing her eyes to enjoy it. A few minutes later, the house’s landlord, touring her around the home, sees the apple with a missing bite, and his face darkens. “No no no no no. Mustn’t do that. Forbidden fruit.” In a moment he will tell her he is kidding, but in the intervening seconds, as Harper begins to stammer an apology, she looks genuinely afraid.
After we concluded our walk, I headed for the airport, and Buckley went to work: She had an evening of script review to attend. Still, before I made it home, she managed to send via email and text a shower of things she loves: a video of a Georgian men’s choir sitting around a table crowded with beer and thick sandwiches and bowls of waxy fruit, singing a Christmas carol (“I would give my clown’s nose to be a fly on the wall at that Christmas dinner,” she wrote); a playlist of songs that she has been returning to for the last two years; a book of works by Peter Birkhauser, who painted from his dreams; a Richard Brautigan novel; a more recent novel by Kiran Millwood Hargrave about a 17th-century Norwegian village where all the men died, leaving the women alone. Later, she sent me Joni Mitchell’s song “Little Green.” “Good auld Joni to crack the heart wide open,” she wrote. She signed off, “Big huge love.”

From a different person, especially an actor under observation, I might have dismissed this as disingenuous. But Buckley seems to move in a spirit of abundance. She wrapped me, upon first meeting face to face, in a big huge hug while wearing a big huge puffer coat. She was full of big huge questions. (“Do you have dreams for yourself, for what comes next, as an artist and as a woman?” she wanted to know.) Her laughter is full-bodied. “Her laugh just takes over every space in the most glorious way,” Polley told me. “When I think of those times in that hayloft, we were dealing with such difficult subject matter, but one of my main memories is Jessie’s laugh and how infectious and contagious it is — how once Jessie starts laughing, everybody starts laughing, because it’s like with her whole self.”

Frances McDormand told me that when Buckley arrived on set for “Women Talking,” “she immediately found a place in town that had bulk nut supplies. I guess she eats a lot of nuts — and so she brought everybody bags of nuts.” McDormand snorted with laughter. “She’s just — she’s just a good ‘un.” McDormand also told me she recognized herself as an actor in Buckley. I pressed her on it, but she didn’t know how to be more specific. Gyllenhaal said something similar, telling me that she felt that Buckley was “somehow artistically like a sister.” The repetition struck me, but it didn’t exactly surprise me. One reason I have found Buckley so hard to look away from onscreen, no matter what her characters are enduring, is that she seems familiar to me, too. Her hunger is recognizable.

Her current project in Toronto is a dystopian sci-fi romance about an institute that can measure, based on a sample of someone’s fingernails, whether you are 100 percent in love with your partner. Buckley plays a woman who is in a “100 percent previously tested relationship” certified via fingernail but who finds herself wondering whether what she’s experiencing really is love in its totality. “That hundred percent isn’t necessarily — it doesn’t feed her enough,” Buckley said, laughing. She has been listening to a lot of Peggy Lee’s “Is This All There Is?” It’s a jaunty, plucky song about a woman facing the worst, watching her house burn down and thinking, Is that all there is to a fire?
I pointed out to Buckley on our walk that most people prefer not to spend their time imaginatively inhabiting the most unsettling contradictions of human desire, or confronting humanity’s ugliest responses to it.

“I mean, I’m drawn to it.” She laughed. “And sometimes that’s scary. I can’t help it. I don’t know why,” she said. “But don’t you think it’s healthier, instead of denying our reality, that we live and die, and there’s pain, and there is damage, and there’s also a huge amount of love, and there’s hope, and there’s fear, and there’s institutes, and there’s chaos, there’s ... ?” She shook her head, as if stunned. “Like, what the hell are you doing if you’re not, like, standing in the middle of it?”

And it comes out one way or the other, she argued. Refusing to attend to the wounds won’t make them go away. What she noticed, working on “Women Talking,” is that “the violence is almost like air. You know, it’s always around, but it never actually presents itself. It’s something that’s continuous.” The women cannot isolate the evil behind what’s happened to them to one man; they can’t even only blame the men. The monster is everywhere, even behind the faces of people they love. It’s in some of their religious teachings; it’s in the ways they were taught by their parents. It’s in them, the women, too. The women are considering whether to stay and fight for change or to leave, a choice that would be made much more difficult because they were forbidden as children to learn how to read, or even to know where they were in the world. Most of them have never even seen a map. This, too, is a kind of violence, the women realize.

Their way out, they have decided, is to look at the problem directly and to talk about it. What they will do next — whether that’s changing their culture or leaving it — requires inventing a conception of the world, and of their place in it, that they cannot even begin to fathom. They’re engaged, one woman says, in “an act of wild female imagination.” This phrase — wild female imagination — was used by their religious leaders to dismiss the assaults as fiction, to claim that the violence was all in the women’s minds. Now the women will adopt those words, and their wild minds, for a different purpose.

That feeling, of pushing toward a better, bigger way of being in the world that you can only barely imagine, is familiar to Buckley. What she likes about clowning, Buckley told me, is the presence it demands. “Proper clowns are so alive,” she said. “The best part of clowning is it happens in the moment,” and failure is as likely as transcendence — the two things are bound up with each other. In images, the archetype of the Fool is often depicted balancing at the edge of a cliff, one foot hovering out over the abyss, suspended in the possibility of both fall and flight. There’s an openness to possibility, no matter what the outcome may be. “I love it,” Buckley said, pausing over every word for emphasis, a look of pure glee on her face.

Jordan Kisner is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of the essay collection “Thin Places.”