

Bel Powley, new British actress

based on an article by **Sheryl Garrat**



- 1 Imagine sitting at the Sundance Film Festival, watching yourself star in 2015's most-talked-about movie so far. Nerves. Trepidation. You know the film will stand or fall on your performance. And then – as the credits roll – imagine realising that the applause is for you. “I found it so overwhelming,” says Bel Powley, the young British actress who lived through those moments during the first screening of her hotly anticipated film, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. After that screening, Powley was no longer just another 22 actress at auditions. Her role as Minnie Goetze, a precocious 15-year-old launching herself into adulthood, made her the toast of Sundance, its breakthrough star of 2015. Her phone started ringing almost as soon as she stepped out of the cinema, and she has worked continuously ever since.
- 2 As is usually the case, Powley's road to overnight success was a long one, starting with her first acting job at the age of 12. “I used to do a Saturday drama group called *Young Blood Theatre Company* with school-friends in west London. A casting director came to pick people out for a new BBC children's series called *MI High*. She picked me, I auditioned, and I got the job.” Her parents were horrified and initially didn't want her to do it. She got an agent and did more TV work, but remained fairly indifferent to acting as a potential career. Then, when she was 16, she was cast in a play at the Royal Court in London. “That was a game changer. It was only a five-week rehearsal period, but I learned more about acting than I'd learned in the four years before that. I got a taste of

what it's really like to work on a character – and obviously nothing beats the feeling of getting up on stage in front of an audience. That's when I started to think, 'Maybe I do like this!'"

- 3 With *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, she was so enamoured of the script that at the end of her audition tape she looked into the camera and talked in her own voice, telling the director M. Heller why she wanted it so badly. "I related to the character in every way, and that's why I wanted to do it. But I'd be lying if I said it just came naturally. The way you speak and the way you think as a teenager is very different, and I had to really tap back into what that was like, even down to the way I walked. As a teenager, your emotions are so much more heightened. Everything is so 25. You're either elated and it's the best night of your life, or it's the worst day ever. And that is genuinely how you feel."
- 4 After having finished filming *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* she went straight to work on *A Royal Night Out*, a British film, and she has also finished *Equals* for the American director Drake Doremus. Then she was in South Africa shooting *Detour*, a thriller, and now she is about to start work on *A Storm in the Stars* with director Haifaa Al-Mansour. Powley is making films back to back well into 2016, but says she's keen to return to the stage because that is where she learns the most. "It grounds me; it brings me back to really concentrating on character development. It doesn't have to be the West End or Broadway. I would happily do it in a studio theatre. I just want to do a play soon."

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