

Ireland-born actor **NIAMH ALGAR** talks to *Glass* about how her recent gut-wrenching roles in *Deceit* and *Censor* that place women at the centre of the narrative

'I AM DRAWN TOWARDS DARKER, BROKEN CHARACTERS'

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Having grown up on "a diet of Channel 4 and Film4", Niamh Algar has come full circle, appearing on British screens in 2018 in Channel 4's *The Bisexual* and in *The Virtues* by Shane Meadows a year later, when she was also named a BAFTA Breakthrough Brit. Just three years on, we find Algar on Channel 4 again, this time via Niall McCormick's *Deceit*, a gripping four-part series based on the 1992 Rachel Nickell murder investigation, where Algar plays the honeytrap undercover officer Sadie Byrne, aka Lizzie James.

After reading *Deceit*'s script Algar "cried, I could not believe it. She's so unbelievably brave ... I can't help but admire her strength", she says via Zoom. *Deceit* portrays a refreshing

new angle on the often male-dominated crime drama while also exposing the police's flawed investigation that led to the case against suspect Colin Stagg who was innocent of the murder and completely cleared of any wrongdoing. It was essential she never met Byrne in order to safeguard her identity, but this was not to Algar's detriment. "Every character that I've played has always felt like a real person," she says, revealing the research she undertook to get the role right. "I interviewed women who were part of the force at that time and got an understanding of what tools you would have needed to go about an investigation." She recalls how one ex-cop reminded her "when you mess

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up a line on stage or on screen, you get another tape, whereas if I mess up a piece of information I slip up on my cards ... I could end up dead”.

Algar felt the weight of responsibility all the more during *Deceit*'s filming because there was no escape due to lockdown. “It wasn't like I could meet my friends in the evening and go for dinner, have a couple of drinks and just feel like I was Niamh for the evening.” Instead she “kind of inhabited the character” of Sadie who would go home each night alone dominated by anxieties about her work.

Throughout all the challenging scenes to watch in *Deceit*, one that particularly hits hard is when Sadie calls her mother, knowing that she cannot “offload” her worries due to the secrecy of the undercover operation. “I think that was probably the hardest scene to shoot because it's probably the closest that it is to be the person where you have to ring up your mum, who you haven't talked [to] in a while, and you're still putting up a mask, and you so deeply want to ask for help, but you can't.”

This idea of shielding oneself from vulnerability is a concept that bleeds through into

Algar's latest role as Enid in Prano Bailey-Bond's horror flick *Censor*, a Film4 production. Enid's job is to censor the violent horror films that were gripping the nation during the 1980s. What we soon begin to discover is not only is she censoring at work but also in her private life, where she is burying the childhood trauma of her sister's disappearance. “My main research was looking up post-traumatic stress disorder and childhood trauma and how that manifests in spirit in adolescence.”

As in *Deceit*, Algar discovered that any previous screen adaptation that deals with psychological distortion or a mental kind of breakdown narratively focuses on the male's perspective of it. “What I love so much about [it] is that this is a very unique female perspective film, and it's a character that I hadn't seen portrayed before, especially by a woman. I kind of felt like I had a bit of free rein to create something that audiences hadn't seen before.” Gradually we begin to see Enid unravel, with reality and fantasy blurring.

Born in 1992 in County Westmeath, Algar grew up the youngest of five siblings in the



Shirt VINTAGE CALVIN KLEIN, Trousers CALVIN KLEIN
Coat JW ANDERSON

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middle of nowhere, “finding a home and a comfort and familiarity within the arts”. She elaborates, “I just found myself drawn to watching TV and film and discovering the world that way.” In particular she loved the old Westerns that her parents enjoyed watching. “I think there is a nostalgic feeling with film, especially when it’s movies that your parents love to watch” as a way “to communicate with your parents in an art form”.

Acting, though, was not part of her heritage and Algar had to steer her own path to get into the profession. “I was very much kind of doing it by myself and figuring everything else out first-hand, as opposed to having someone mentor me. But I think by doing it that way, it’s really nice to look back and reflect and be really proud of the work that I’ve done.”

She adds, “For me acting is cathartic, I learn more about myself by embodying the characters,

and there’s a reward in exercising those emotional muscles. I tend to be drawn towards slightly darker, broken characters, but I never see them as victims or villains. It’s always just intrigue in the way in which people make decisions and why they choose to do the things they do.”

Algar recognises that actors “get rewarded for being emotional” but nevertheless, one still has to be protected. Bailey-Bond was in every single scene of *Censor*, providing Algar with a safe environment. “I did feel like I was really being looked after. Sometimes it is difficult to do a scene that is quite emotional and where the character is sobbing uncontrollably. I am not a robot, it’s kind of hard to turn that off. But to have a director who acknowledges that and will not let you overuse that muscle within the take, and knows that when they have it, they have it, and they can move on.”

Actors also have to establish when they need to move on. Algar practices this by blowing out a candle at the end of a shoot, symbolically leaving the character “to go home and be me”. She’s also learnt the importance of rest between jobs. “Once you have rest, you get so much clarity and you’re able to process.” Indeed she will need some rest before her new project, Jodhi May’s *Mooring*, starring opposite Charlotte Rampling, whom she describes as a “tour de force”.

Algar’s career is at the centre of the ongoing gender revolution within the film industry, both on and off screen: “It is moving at such an amazing pace at the moment. You want to maintain that and not take the foot off the pedal.” She credits Channel 4’s role in this: “There’s day-care on set for mothers and it’s giving them that opportunity of being able to be in this industry and have a family. You don’t actually have to choose between the two, you can do both.” When it comes to scripts, “women are allowed to grow old, we are allowed to have flaws and not be perfect. There’s nothing wrong with imperfections and I think people’s stories only get more interesting as they grow older ... I think we need to re-imagine roles for women that sit outside of the social stereotype.”

With a throaty laugh and flash of a smile, Algar leaves our call with a heartfelt thanks, off to continue reinventing the female narrative, one TV show and film at a time.



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