

# 1883

magazine

DIGITAL COVER

1883MAGAZINE.COM

# MIA MCKENNA-BRUCE

WEARING VALENTINO



feather and silk dress Huishan Zhang

**MILIA**  
PHOTOGRAPHY MAKIYO LIO STYLING MIRANDA ALMOND  
**mckenna-**  
**BRUCE**

**IN THE COMPELLING  
COMING-OF-AGE  
DRAMA**

**DRAMA**

***HOW TO HAVE SEX***

**MIA MCKENNA-BRUCE**

**SOLIDIFIES HER STAR**

**POWER - AND SHE**

**HAS A BAFTA NOM**

**TO PROVE IT.**



skirt, shirt, tie, black boots  
& leathers VALENTINO



silk dress Philosophy di Lorenzo Serafini

The best way to describe Mia McKenna-Bruce is a ball of sunshine. She genuinely radiates joy — whether she's talking about her vast and diverse filmography or gleefully singing songs from past Disney films the minute they are mentioned (as she did on her 1883 shoot) or her diverse filmography. Everything she does, she shines at. And in the critically acclaimed film *How To Have Sex*, McKenna-Bruce's star is shining brighter than ever. *How to Have Sex* is a coming-of-age drama film written and directed by Molly Manning Walker, in her directorial debut. The story focuses on three teens experiencing a British rite of passage — travelling abroad to Malia for chaos — to blow off steam after their exams. McKenna plays the bubbly Tara who, unlike her two friends Skye [Lara Peake] and Em [Enva Lewis], is the virgin of the group. Aside from having fun with her friends, Tara's goal for the trip is to lose her virginity before they depart back to England. Much like McKenna-Bruce herself, Tara is vivacious and a smooth talker, the life of the party and can talk her way out of anything.

Amidst the hormones and vodka shots, the neon lights and club outfits, lines are blurred and the movie's tone shifts entirely as audiences follow Tara as she attempts to make sense of what has happened to her. As a viewer, it's both the best film I watched all of last year and also the hardest. Like many before me and many after me, *How To Have Sex* doesn't just ask you to reflect on your own teenhood and the experiences you faced, but begs you to open your eyes to the way we discuss sex and consent. Molly Manning Walker incorporates integral themes — friendship, rape culture, toxic masculinity — and how they conflate into each other, especially as one comes of age. Where sex education systems fail to properly teach youths about sex and rape culture, the art that creatives make — like Molly Manning Walker's *How To Have Sex* — can give people a point of reference and have the power to open up and say "This happened to me."

The response to *How To Have Sex* speaks for itself. After premiering in May 2023 at Cannes Film Festival, audiences were in immediate agreement that what they just watched was equal parts revolutionary and harrowing. Although the film's themes are, sadly, not uncommon, what gutted people most was just how real it was. McKenna-Bruce's portrayal of Tara is one that viewers have said will stay with them for a lifetime, noting on how, with just a flick of an eye or a muted expression, she can easily depict Tara's mindset and story so succinctly. Over a few months, I was lucky enough to chat with McKenna-Bruce a handful of times between the release of the film and her much-deserved EE BAFTA Rising Star nomination, each conversation serving as a chapter in her story and detailing her star power glowing more and more. In conversation with 1883 Magazine, Mia McKenna-Bruce chats about the work she did to create the character of Tara in *How To Have Sex*, the importance of authentic storytelling, receiving her EE BAFTA Rising Star nomination, and beyond.

**Mia! You had such an incredible 2023 with becoming a new mum and everything to do with *How To Have Sex*. Thank you so much. If someone told me in the fall of 2022 that 2023 would turn out the way it did, I would think you're insane!** [Laughs]

**I feel like having such a huge year was a long time coming for you, though. You've been acting since you were 10 and you've come into your own. When you look back, can you chart your growth and development as an actress?** Oh, good question. I think I've started to figure out what I want to do and why I want to do it. I think particularly in the past couple of years, I've learned the stories that I want to tell that mean something to me. Acting as a child compared to acting as an adult is a whole different thing. It's still very playful which is the main thing, I think I'll always carry that with me from when I was a child. You realize the responsibility that you

have now as an adult, whereas as a child I didn't take any of that into consideration. You realize the weight of it.

**Touching on staying playful — I was listening to the podcast chat you did with Charlie Brooks and you talk about embracing how acting growing up was like 'playing' for you, how did you tap into that mindset for the role of Tara in *How To Have Sex*?** I think a big part of it is the team that you're working with. Particularly on *How To Have Sex*, it was such a unit — we were having a great time, the whole time, despite the themes of the film. I'm just really lucky that because I started quite young, I've been able to keep that side of things — the playfulness of it — with me. When you genuinely love what you're doing, it's easy to keep it there.

**Yeah, and on that same podcast, you mention feeling like you wanted to quit acting because you felt so much pressure so you went travelling for a bit.** Yeah, I got to 18 and I was making the switch from acting as a child to acting as an adult. The pressure I put on myself was ridiculous. I remember texting my best friend Georgia and just saying, 'Why do I do this to myself? I hate this!' because I'd get so worked up. I think I built it up in my head that every audition was my last chance. It [the pressure] wasn't healthy. I thought about how much I didn't love it more than the pressure. I lost the reason why I loved it. So, I had to go away, step back from it for a bit, and find out why I was doing it. I took it back to basics.

**How long did you go travelling for?** It was supposed to be three weeks but it ended up being seven months! [Laughs] I went to Australia and New Zealand. My best friend and I got a job in Sydney at a call centre and we settled there. We rented a flat, we had our little cars. We were made up to stay in Australia. Then Georgia realized that she should probably go to uni and I realized that I wanted to carry on acting.

**This sounds like a screenplay waiting to be written!** [Laughs] Really! It was the best thing for me.

**I love that you were able to come back to yourself.**

**You needed to leave to fall in love with it again.** Yeah, definitely. It was just like that. I just needed to breathe for a minute. I'd been super, super lucky because I had been working from quite a young age, but it meant that I hadn't stepped away from that since I was 9 or 10. I needed to let my hair down a little and figure it out.

**I read that you like to spend time with your younger singers to get into their minds when you're playing younger characters. Did you speak to them about Tara and *How To Have Sex*?** Yeah, I did. I have two younger sisters — one is 16, Tara's age, and the other one is 21. It's really helpful having them be in that headspace right now. It was really helpful with the world of TikTok and everything now because initially in the script there were quite a lot of references to TikTok and stuff like that, but was taken out because we wanted it to be as accessible as possible. That first round of auditions were self-tapes and Molly [Manning Walker] asked for a TikTok video. I just remember thinking, 'This is so unknown to me!' [Laughs]

**Oh gosh, same! What did you have to do? My little sister made me dance and I felt so awkward.** Same! I had my sisters help me out. I ended up doing one with my dog and sister, that 'best friend' trend. I'm shocked Molly gave me the part after that!

**NOW, WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED PREPARING FOR HOW TO HAVE SEX, WAS IT A BIT DAUNTING GOING INTO THIS FILM KNOWING THAT YOU WERE FIRST ON THE CALL SHEET?**

**I DIDN'T PROCESS THAT AT ANY POINT. I THINK IT FELT LIKE SUCH A COLLABORATION FROM THE BEGINNING THAT I NEVER FELT THE WEIGHT OF THAT, OR THAT IT WAS JUST ON ME TO TELL THE STORY. EVEN IN ALL OF THE SCENES, TARA GOES ON SUCH A JOURNEY, BUT IT FEELS LIKE IT IS EVERYONE'S STORY TO TELL AND EVERYONE WAS TELLING THIS STORY. IT FEELS MORE LIKE THAT NOW THAT WE'RE IN THE AFTERMATH OF IT AND TALKING THROUGH IT, I REALIZE THAT IT'S TARA'S STORY.**

**I SPOKE A LITTLE BIT WITH YOUR CO-STAR SHAUN [THOMAS] ABOUT HOW MOLLY WAS SO OPEN WITH COLLABORATING. IF SOMETHING FELT OFF, OR IF YOU WANTED TO TRY SOMETHING ELSE, THERE WAS SPACE FOR THAT. WHAT WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?**

**IT WAS AMAZING. FOR ME, MY BIGGEST FEAR AS AN ACTOR WAS IMPROV. BUT FOR THIS, WE HAD SUCH A GREAT REHEARSAL PROCESS AT THE BEGINNING AND MOLLY HELPED US DIVE SUPER DEEP INTO GETTING TO KNOW THESE CHARACTERS. BY THE TIME WE WERE IN MALIA, ANYTHING THAT WAS THROWN AT US WAS EASY TO HANDLE BECAUSE WE KNEW THESE CHARACTERS SO, SO WELL. WE ALSO WORKED ON A 360 SET — ALL THE DRAWERS WERE FILLED WITH WHAT THEY WOULD BE FILLED WITH, LIKE MAKEUP AND SUCH, AND THE ROOMS WOULD HAVE ALL OF OUR OUTFITS THAT WE'D WEAR THROUGHOUT THE FILM. WE COULD FULLY LIVE WITHIN THE SET TO THE POINT WHERE IT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE A SET AT ALL. IT ALMOST DIDN'T FEEL LIKE WE WERE ACTING FOR MOST OF IT.**

**I love that! I've never heard of anybody talking about a 360 set before, it must've helped inform your portrayal so much.** Yes! Everything was there and the first time the girls saw the room was the first time we, as actors, all saw the room too.

**Touching on character building in a 360 way... Do you get new stationery for your characters when you start a new role?** [Laughs] Yeah, so to learn lines I always write them down. It helps me think about what's going on [for the character]. I've always been a bit of a stationery freak ever since school, I love it. It's an excuse to get new folders, pens, and notebooks, and I try to do it as the character and buy what I think they'd buy and use.

**I love that so much. Was it easy for you, the cast, and Molly to work on creating the backstory for Tara?** Yeah, we spent a lot of time with Molly creating the backstories of the girls. Particularly we fleshed out the friendship between the three of them, like how long they've been friends, where they met, and what they had been up until this point. We wanted to know the kinds of relationships they had with their families and parents, too. We spent a lot of time doing that and then Molly would give us more context to know where the characters were.

**Scenes that resonated with me were the bits with Tara and Badger in the bathroom telling jokes to one another. How did you guys develop that rapport before shooting?** That was the last scene we shot and Molly did that on the day. She was like, "We need to do a scene with you telling Badger some jokes," which meant I had to think up some jokes. It was just us in the bathroom with Tara telling the jokes and my goal was to make Shaun laugh while his character is passed out. I was desperately trying to get him to laugh!

**Shaun only had lovely things to say about your jokes. He told me a story about an alligator.**...[Laughs] Oh my god, I have a funny video about that! It was quite late and we were all delirious, so we were super hyper. We were sitting in this green room and there was a blowup alligator. Shawn walks over and pretends to be Steve Irwin and wrestling this alligator. It doesn't sound funny now but I promise at the time it was hilarious!

**It sounds funny! Shaun could barely tell me the story without laughing.** It was the most random stuff that would set us off. This might make no sense to you, but do you know what apple boxes are?

**Yeah, you stand on them to film right?** Yes! Since I'm really small, sometimes I have to stand on the box or the camera has to be placed on an apple box. One time, Lara [Peake], who plays Skye, had to pretend we were talking to Shaun when it was an apple box. So, whenever anyone would have an apple box around, we'd say 'Hi Shaun!' It's so stupid but we found it so funny.

**It does sound like being in school when anything and everything can be funny.** Yeah, in between scenes there's so much setup the crew has to do, so we would just have energy boiling over and we'd come up with these stupid things!

**What I find interesting is how many other topics this film touches on in addition to sexual assault — toxic masculinity, girlhood, friendship, and even first impressions. Admittedly I assumed Badger would be someone much more insidious just based on how he looks. Did those more underlying themes jump off from the script to you?** Yeah, definitely. I mean, in terms of Badger, not so much because of how he looks because that wasn't determined until we were well into the process. The themes of friendship 100% stood out from the beginning as well because I remember being that age and the friendships that you have at

that age can be so heavy. You just take so much from other people because you think that's what you have to do to get on, so reading that struck a chord in me. That pressure just comes from all over. Particularly for Tara, she's depicted as being very loud and bubbly with the ability to talk her way out of anything, but then she has so much going on underneath. That, for me, I relate to when I was a teen. I'm very small in height so I always felt like I had to be the loudest in the room to get noticed. I think I saw that in her as well.

**Skye's sneering at Tara is difficult to watch, but those types of friendships exist when you're growing up. Even just seeing how she was interacting with Tara I just remember thinking, 'Please just be nice to her!'** Yeah, you just want to shake her and ask her why! Hopefully, that's another thing people take away from the film as well — there's no need for those jabs. That's not something I've seen either, that side of friendships on screen particularly for that age. At that age, you think your friendships are the be-all and end-all of everything so you take too much from people and vice versa. You want that acceptance from your friends. I think that rang true with me and Lara because in real life we are such good friends, so it was heartbreaking to have to play that.

**I was listening to a podcast with Molly Manning Walker and she talks about the importance of finding the right person to play Tara. Victims are portrayed in a particular way — loud and bubbly but how they feel inside is very different. Did you find it difficult to have to jump between the two mindsets throughout filming?** I don't want to say it was easy, but it felt like it flowed. I think that was in Molly's writing and getting to work on that 360 set because it reflected where Tara's mindset was at the time. Even though we didn't film chronologically, we filmed all of the club scenes first. By the time we got into the aftermath with all of the hotel stuff and everything, it slowed down a lot and everything became a lot quieter. It felt like a natural transition into the quieter space for Tara.

**What also must've opened your eyes was seeing audience reactions to what happens, some men have even said they realize they've made mistakes in the past. Yeah, and that means we've done a good job. It's incredible to have people be able to watch it and reflect. We talked to a group of young people in Rome, I think they were between the ages of like 16 to 18, and Molly and I barely had to say anything. They were debating it amongst themselves, which was incredible because the main thing we want is to get these conversations going and give people that safe space to start to talk about sex.**

**I think it should be shown in sex education classes. Sometimes art is the best way to get that message across.** It's been a while [since sex ed] but from what I was taught and what I know my sisters have been taught, there's still nothing that covers consent or the fact that it should feel good for two people. They just focus on the biology of it and it doesn't go beyond that. How are people supposed to navigate that?



cape ERDEM  
pink dress Samanta Virgino  
ankle boot IZIE

**EVEN WITH TARA AND THE BED SCENE, I CAN ONLY IMAGINE SOME OF THE TEENS WHO HAVE HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND THEY HAVEN'T HAD THE KNOWLEDGE TO IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZE IT.**

**YEAH, THAT'S THE BEAUTY OF THE FILM — WE SIT WITH TARA IN REAL TIME FIGURING OUT WITH HER. IF YOU HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED THAT BEFORE, YOU FEEL WHY THAT WOULD IMPACT SOMEONE THE WAY IT DOES.**

**I'M SO GLAD THE FILM ENDS WITH THEM ALL CHEERING "WE'RE COMING HOME!" AND TARA SEEMS TO MOVE ON A BIT FROM WHAT HAPPENED. I KNOW THINGS ARE TYPICALLY SHOT OUT OF ORDER, BUT WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO FILM THAT SCENE?**

**THAT WAS TOWARDS THE END, IT WAS WITHIN THE LAST WEEK OR SO. AT THAT POINT, WE HAD BEEN ON THIS WHOLE JOURNEY WITH TARA ALREADY. TO HAVE THAT RELEASE [AT THE AIRPORT], YOU CAN TELL THAT SHE HAS FRIENDS THERE FOR HER AND THAT SHE'S STILL IN THERE SOMEWHERE. SHE WASN'T DEFINED BY THAT HOLIDAY OR WHAT HAPPENED TO HER. I'M REALLY GLAD THAT WE DID GET TO EXPERIENCE THAT WITH HER AND FILMING IT RIGHT AT THE END BECAUSE WE HAD SUCH A MAGICAL TIME AND WE WERE SAD THAT IT WAS ENDING! GETTING TO SCREAM THAT IN THE MIDDLE OF AN AIRPORT FELT GOOD.**



feather and  
silk dress  
Huishan  
Zhang

**What advice would you, from Mia, give to Tara if you could?** Oh, great question. I think I'd want to tell her to talk to her friends, honestly. Stop putting up with Skye!

**Totally, and you know Skye has her own set of teenage issues she's working through, too.** Exactly! I just wanted to tell Skye that she didn't need to be like that. I think if I were to turn around to her and say, "Not cool," it would make her reflect on what she's doing. It's always about having an open conversation.

**Now, since the release of the film, you've won a British Independent Film Award and now been nominated for the EE BAFTA Rising Star Award. Between those two experiences, can you tell me where your head is at?** I really can't even tell you! [Laughs] I thought there was no way to top 2023 but we are on quite a good trajectory. My head is all over the place.

**When you won the BIFA, were you expecting it at all?** No, absolutely not! I didn't even have anything prepared to say and I don't even know what I said, I just blacked out.

**[Laughs] I can relate to that! I think it's so nice that you could share that experience with Shaun who also won. I know you guys had a bit of fun on the red carpet, too.** It was so much fun because Shaun's award was announced first and once you win, you have to go to a separate area and talk to the press. He didn't even know that I won after him, so I got to come up and show him my award and it was such a special moment.

**And now you've been nominated for the EE BAFTA Rising Star Award which I knew you'd get! Give me some context — how did you find out? Where did you find out?** I was told when I was on a rush hour train in London so it was busy. I had to keep it a secret, obviously, so I was just trying to be really, really chill which was really, really difficult. I rang my mum straight away and was like, "I can't tell you what right now because I'm on a train but I have some good news!" Then she just had to sit and think on that [laughs].

**You both had to suffer with the knowledge [laughs]! How has it been to see everyone's reaction to your nomination?** So overwhelming in the best way, especially with my friends and family who are sharing it and messaging me their screenshots of them voting. I just can't believe how much it means to so many people.

**And you're nominated alongside some incredible actors, like Jacob Elordi and Phoebe Dynevor. Yeah, I look up to them so much, so to be considered alongside them...** That in itself is a dream come true. All of this is just absolutely mental.

**I'm just genuinely so excited for you, it feels like such a huge moment for you and I said that back when we first had our original chat about the film. It felt like you were about to have a huge breakout moment and you are!** Yeah, it's just absolutely mind-blowing to me. Since the film came out, it's been such a quick turnaround and it's been amazing. I've been able to talk to you a few times and each time we speak, it's more exciting news! I feel like we're all doing it together.

**I love that. Now that the film has been out for a bit and people have been able to see it and bring it into their own lives, has your relationship with the film changed or developed at all?** I think I've realized just how touching it is to have the kind of reactions that we've been having. It's amazing to make something that matters to so many people but it's been hard to know how relatable the story is. So, when it first came out, I didn't realize how emotional I would be for the first few days. It took me a minute to sit with knowing that what we've done is a really good thing because it means that we are hopefully bringing change. It's a real universal story and everyone can relate to it in some kind of way. It's been fascinating to be able to talk to so many different people about it.

**What do you think the Mia that first accepted the part of Tara back when you were offered the role would say if you were to tell her the journey this film would take her on?** I think she'd say, "Are you insane?" [Laughs]

**And to think that one day you'll get to tell your son about the first year of his life and what happened during it!** [Laughs] I know! It's mental.

*How To Have Sex* is out now on MUBI.

Voting opens at 11am on Wednesday 10th January 2024 at [ee.co.uk/BAFTA](https://ee.co.uk/BAFTA) and closes at 12pm on Friday 16th February 2024.

The award will be presented at the EE BAFTA Film Awards on Sunday 18th February 2024.

Interview **Kelsey Barnes**  
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