



I am expecting Thandie Newton to be a bit of a nightmare. An email goes around a few days before our shoot, asking if the team can please confirm that "there will be goat's milk and organic soya milk available". Oh, I think, she's one of those. A Hollywood control freak so used to getting what she wants that teams of people are employed to make sure there aren't any unauthorised dairy products in her vicinity.

In previous interviews, she has come across as spiky and defensive; the kind of celebrity who treats questions like poison arrows, wearing her fame like a suit of armour. So it is with trepidation that I pitch up at the photographer's studio. Everybody is huddled around a computer screen, checking out the final edit. In the centre, Newton is a firework, her tiny, perfect body dripping sequins and radiating raw heat. Poring over the shots, she and the photographer are debating whether or not to offer us the pictures unretouched. "Why not?" says Newton, and here they are. Perhaps not such a control freak after all.

You immediately see why she is the face of Olay's anti-ageing range, Total Effects. She was 39 last month, but her face is unlined and yet agile; even up close, her skin is eggshell smooth. There's something else, too — a girlishness that could place her in her midtwenties. Perhaps it's because, in her own words, she feels like she has recently been given "a new start".

And so Newton starts to reveal herself. She's passionate and opinionated, yes, but as warm, open and expressive as Oprah, who, she tells me, is one of her mentors. Towards the end of the afternoon, she even grabs my arm and says: "I've been on the verge of tears this whole interview, all the subjects we've been touching on." Subjects such as her experience with the Hoffman Process, an eight-day residential course to help people coping with stress and anxiety. Was this the "new start"?

She cannot gush enough about what it has done for her: "It's like an MOT for the soul. No, an MOT for the ego. It's about how the soul gets clouded by so much crap, you lose sight of it. It's really clever and very effective. It's like someone reaching in and flicking a switch inside you, turning you on. I didn't change, I'm still me — just far more me than I've been for a long time."

This, after years of therapy to help cope with her feelings of "otherness". Growing up in a mixed-race family in Devon, "from about the age of five, I was aware that I didn't fit. I was the black, atheist kid in the all-white, Catholic school run by nuns. I was an anomaly". There followed a battle with bulimia and a destructive relationship with a much older man, the director John Duigan. But this — "my old bullshit stuff, which has been spoken about so many times and is just ancient history" — she bats away with a dismissive flick of the wrist. Her Buddhist studies have taught her that "we spend so much time being angry, thinking it's not fair and reacting, as opposed to accepting. Right now is never good enough. But it is; it has to be. It's about finding a contentment, living each moment".

She certainly seems full of life. Dressed in an oversized mohair jumper, hair scraped back, she has eyes that are still made up and

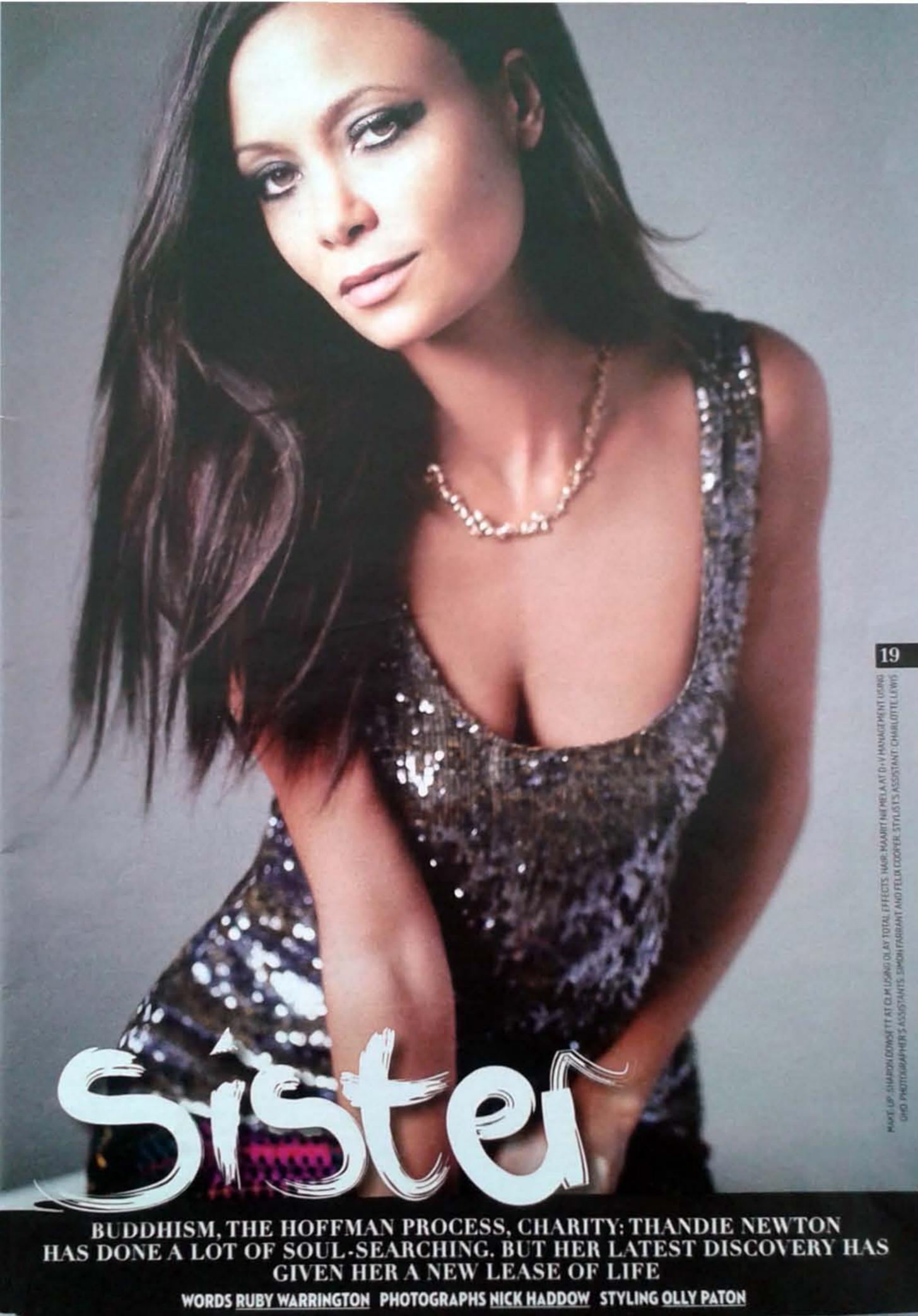
**THIS PAGE**

Dress, £2,450, by Antonio Berardi, from Harrods. Shoes, £495, by Christian Louboutin

**OPPOSITE**

Top, £350, by Irwin and Jordan, from Fenwick, London. Skirt, £465, by Ashish, from Browns. Necklace, £9,900, by Solange Azagury-Partridge

# Soul



# Sister

**BUDDHISM, THE HOFFMAN PROCESS, CHARITY: THANDIE NEWTON HAS DONE A LOT OF SOUL-SEARCHING. BUT HER LATEST DISCOVERY HAS GIVEN HER A NEW LEASE OF LIFE**

WORDS RUBY WARRINGTON PHOTOGRAPHS NICK HADDOW STYLING OLLY PATON

“IT'S LIKE SOMEONE FLICKING A SWITCH INSIDE YOU, TURNING YOU ON. I'M STILL ME — JUST FAR MORE ME THAN I'VE BEEN FOR A LONG TIME

» take up half her face. She resembles a very beautiful Fraggles: throwing her arms around as she talks, reeling backwards in her chair, constantly searching the space in front of her for the right words to make her point. She is a ball of pure energy when she should, by rights, be exhausted.

She is currently trying to fit in time with her two young daughters, Ripley, 11, and Nico, 7, while working nights playing the lead in Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*. Her husband, the director Ol Parker, is away in LA, and she's feeling the pressure of being the parent on call. Her girls have lots of late nights, she tells me, so that they all get to hang out. But then parenting isn't about rules, she adds. So what kind of mother is she? "I try to be a mirror, instead of impressing myself on them all the time. I take responsibility for my behaviour, explain to them. The reason I'm rushing is...; 'It's not your fault I'm upset.'" She rolls the Diana Ross eyes. "But if I come across even remotely annoyed with them, I do get, 'All right, mummy', and I think, Jesus, you have no idea what real rage is."

You get the sense that beneath the meticulously self-examined surface, rage is an emotion that Newton is very familiar with. She has spoken before about her experience of racial insecurity, and of being sexually objectified as a woman in Hollywood. Emotion ripples through her entire body when she tells me she got into Buddhism as a way of "trying to reconcile what I was seeing on the news with human behaviour. A situation like the Congo. How is that happening? How is that happening if you have even a degree of empathy?"

Instead of going around in attack mode and feeling angry with the world, however, these days she's trying to do her bit to help. She slips ever so slightly into Bono mode when she tells me: "I think empowering women is what I'm here to do. It's not even a decision, it's just what's happened." Having two girls and "certain struggles in the film industry" have made her committed to "the empowerment of human beings and the innocent". Hence her involvement with the V-Day project for survivors of "horrific sexual violation" in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

You do have to wonder if there was another mini tantrum, however, when she made Ripley forgo gifts at a recent birthday party, asking her friends instead to donate money to an orphanage the family sponsors in South Africa. But she's all feeling again when she tells me how "the kids arrived clutching their money, and they wanted to be the ones to put it in the box. Ripley raised £700. But the real value..."

It all paints a worthy picture. But what about the Newton we see topping best-dressed lists, telling me how "tickled" she was when she was signed by Olay "because Oil of Ulay is what my mother used: that was the smell of being a woman". What about the Newton in today's pictures? "Oh, I love fashion. For me, it's about being a girl and having fun." She corrects herself: "Being a person and having fun. And celebrating creativity and life." She doesn't work with a stylist, preferring to "have a rummage on Style.com". Her favourite designers are "Giles, Jonathan Saunders, Stella, Erdem. People say to me, 'You're so good, the way you champion British designers.' And I'm, like, 'Are you kidding? I want to look good.' And, also, I want to look now and new".

I ask if her kids are into labels. "They're into styling more than fashion. Dressing up." Was she, when she was growing up? She is serious again: "I wasn't. Not at all. I was in a lot of denial about my appearance when I was younger, so I certainly wouldn't want to draw attention to myself. Maybe I'm making up for it now." There's a big smile. "Yes, I think I am." ●

ST Check out the actress's career in pictures at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/style](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/style)

T-shirt, £231, by Antik Batik; [my-wardrobe.com](http://my-wardrobe.com). Glitter jeans, £415, by Alexander Wang, from Browns. Ring, £850, by Solange Azagury-Partridge

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