

# Stella



## THE ASCENT of LESLIE MANN

Meet Judd Apatow's  
favourite heroine  
(on screen and off)

**Love in an age of  
Twitter and Facebook**  
Why 21st-century dating  
is such a disaster area

**What's eating her, then?**  
The guru who taught  
millions of women to stop  
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Despite being one half of a Hollywood power couple, the actress Leslie Mann says she's no Little Miss Perfect. In fact, she tells HELENA DE BERTODANO, life with her husband, the director Judd Apatow, is far from idyllic. Perfect fodder, then, for their hilarious new film...

## Mann of the moment

Leslie Mann lowers her voice to a whisper. 'Do you ever have that feeling that your husband might be plotting to kill you?' Before I can answer she continues: 'Sometimes when I'm alone at home I think that Judd [Apatow, her husband and the director of the hugely successful comedy films *Knocked Up* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*] might have set up a hit-man to murder me. But he says he never thinks like that.'

Mann and Apatow are not like most Hollywood couples. Instead of projecting a rosy picture of their supposedly idyllic lives, they are more than happy to use the trials and tribulations of their marriage as fodder for their art (Mann has appeared in several of Apatow's films). *This Is 40*, Apatow's latest movie, which opens on Valentine's Day and stars Mann in the lead role, is loosely – and hilariously – based on their own relationship. In it, Paul Rudd, who plays Mann's on-screen husband, Pete, confides in a friend that he sometimes wishes his wife were dead.

Why would Apatow want Mann dead? 'I don't know...' answers Mann. 'Lots of reasons.'

Of course Mann – named last year by *Elle* magazine as 'Hollywood's queen of comedy' – is mostly joking. But like all good humour there is a kernel of truth. Marriages aren't perfect. Couples fight. Children can be difficult. In *This Is 40*, she plays Debbie, a character who was first introduced in *Knocked Up* as the irascible older sister of Alison, the main character. This time Debbie is turning 40 – like Mann herself last year – and trying to come to terms with her less-than-perfect life.



## INTERVIEW

Debbie's two daughters in the film are played by Mann and Apatow's own daughters, Maude, 14, and Iris, nine. 'It's fun – they play versions of themselves but they're not as crazy as that. Judd throws out areas they can fight about [on-screen] and they love it, they get it out of their systems.'

We meet for lunch at a restaurant in Santa Monica, near Mann's home in Los Angeles. When I arrive, 15 minutes early, Mann is already sitting at the table. And, as if this is not unusual enough, she is drinking a large glass of chardonnay. Most actresses arrive late and unapologetic, drink herbal tea, pick at a salad and gush about their marvellous director – while firmly deflecting any questions of a personal nature. Mann, it is safe to say, is no Hollywood clone.

I ask her why she feels the age of 40 is so significant. 'It seems like a tricky time, this stage of life. The kids are a little older, you have a little more space. You become your own person a little bit and then you start opening your eyes to everything around you and seeing the wreckage.' She laughs at herself: 'Oh dear – is that a midlife crisis?'

In the movie, both husband and wife seem to be undergoing midlife crises: their businesses are in financial peril; they find little joy in each other; their children are careering into adolescence and they are struggling to cope with the realisation that 40 is not exactly young anymore. And yet, Mann points out, 'I'd never want to go back to being in my twenties or thirties. I was lost and confused and uncomfortable in my own skin. I actually feel really good right now. I feel pretty OK about turning 40. I know myself a lot better. But sometimes I think: "Oh my skin looks different" [It is flawless and unlined.] I could pick myself apart.'

She looks pretty and petite in skintight jeans teamed with an orange and caramel colour-block sweater and nude stilettos. Her hair is scraped back in a ponytail and she wears little make-up.

Mann says she does not feel that it becomes harder to work as she gets older. 'My age doesn't seem like it's causing any real problems. I felt that more when I was 27. There was more urgency then. I had this terrible agent who would tell me I was too old – I finally got rid of him when I was 35.'

Certainly, Debbie is a more complex and fully realised character than her previous roles. 'Most of the movies [I did before] were about the male characters. The woman was just there to act p— off or sad. I've always complained to Judd about that and I think he's done a really good job of working towards changing that.'

Mann says that several scenes in *This Is 40* are inspired by their married life. At one point, Debbie walks in on Pete sitting on the lavatory playing Scrabble on his iPad. 'This is the fourth time you've gone to the bathroom today. Why is your instinct to escape?'

Pete replies: 'It is my instinct to come into the bathroom when I need to go to the bathroom.'

'How come I don't smell anything?'

Mann says that Apatow sometimes disappears into the bathroom to hide – she found him out because she could see him posting to Twitter while



Clockwise, from above: Leslie Mann with Owen Wilson in *The Cable Guy* (1996); with Katherine Heigl in *Knocked Up* (2007) and with Paul Rudd in *This Is 40*

he was in there. But she did not confront him there. 'I'd never go into the bathroom when Judd's in there. I'd never want to see what happens.' She giggles. 'I'd never want to smell the smell. We take it one step further for comedy's sake.'

*This Is 40*, she says, is a film 'about trying to make everything perfect and, in the process of doing so, everything falls apart. Because you can never make everything perfect and the harder you try the worse things become.'

She is refreshingly open about the sham of the blissful marriage. 'Everyone lies,' she says, working her way through a plate of fish tacos. 'It seems like nobody wants to be honest and say how things are really going. What's that all about?'

I remind her of a recent interview in which she and her husband talked about one genuinely happy couple they know. 'Really?' she says, racking her brains trying to think who that could

**'I'd never want to go back to my twenties or thirties. I feel pretty OK about turning 40'**

be. 'When was this? It's so unusual.... Actually, I do have a girlfriend from high school who has been with her boyfriend since she was 15. She always says how happy she is and how hot he is and how they have great sex all the time.'

Does she believe her? 'No, I don't believe her but only because that's not my reality.'

Mann grew up in Newport Beach, California. As a child she was taught not to express her emotions. 'We didn't really talk about things as a family. So when I went to acting class, I found I could express myself. It was such a great feeling that I got hooked on it. I was very shy, but when I was acting I could pretend I was someone else. I'm very comfortable when I'm working, I don't hold back at all.'

Her mother, an estate agent who divorced Mann's father when Mann was a baby, persuaded her to go to college, where she studied communications but dropped out before graduating. 'I was not interested at all. I met my acting coach there, who told me I should move to Los Angeles. And I got lucky and started working after about a year.'

She began her career at 18, appearing in television advertisements, then started to get small parts in films. In 1995 she auditioned for Ben Stiller's *The Cable Guy* - which turned out to be both a personal and professional turning-point. Not only did she get the role, she also met her husband-to-be. 'Jim Carrey wasn't available to read so Judd read his part. I don't remember Judd but I do remember Ben. I remember having a little crush on him. Later [Stiller] called me at my mum's and told me I had got the part. That was probably the most exciting moment of my life.'

During filming, she got to know Judd. 'He'd send his sister into my trailer to tell me how he had all kinds of dates so that I'd think that he was this in-demand guy or something. I remember thinking, "Good for him." Then we wound up going to this basketball game and that's when I realised he was a good guy. At the time I was dating bad boys: mean, good-looking boys.' Actors? 'No. There was a guy who worked at a newspaper stand who I was just obsessed with for some stupid reason. But Judd was just so nice to me and treated me so well and I remember thinking, "Oh, this is the kind of guy I should be with" - it was like a light bulb. And then that was that and we fell in love.'

As a young mother, says Mann, she struggled to find the right balance between work and home:

**'Judd was working all the time and I was alone with a new baby. I'm sure I was suffering from postpartum depression'**

Mann with her husband, Judd Apatow, in New York last year



*This Is 40* is out on Thursday

'It was so hard to go from being totally self-involved, a young actress living in Hollywood, to being a full-time mom living in the suburbs and going to "Mummy and me" classes and not having anything in common with the other mums. Judd was working all the time and I was just alone at home with a new baby. I went to some therapists and, although nobody was talking about it at the time, I'm pretty sure I was suffering from postpartum depression for a few years.'

As her children grew older, she felt increasingly torn. 'I would have a lot of guilt about being away from them. I did work a little bit but I wasn't allowing myself to be creative. I was half of me.

Now I feel like I'm all of me.'

Sometimes, she says, she craves a peaceful life. 'Everything is so chaotic. My nervous system can't handle it.' She laughs. 'I need my peace so, every once in a while, while the kids are at school, I lie in bed, close the curtains, watch television and eat food. [My life] is not like my Aunt Jean and Uncle Gary who live in Utah: they get up and eat breakfast at seven every morning, go to work from eight to five, come home and eat dinner at six o'clock, then they go to bed at nine o'clock. I long for that life, but if I actually had it, I would go crazy.'

It must be odd to play someone else's wife in front of her husband, who directs most of the films in which she appears. She and Paul Rudd have a number of sex scenes. 'Paul is like

my brother so I don't think Judd feels threatened at all by Paul,' says Mann. 'But there was one actor - I'm not going to say his name - who I had a kissing scene with and afterwards he asked me if I wanted a ride back but he didn't ask Judd, even though Judd was standing right there. It was really weird.'

Mann doesn't have a game plan. 'I'm a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants girl. I don't think things through. I feel like I could be good at directing or producing but I don't know. When I was younger I knew exactly what I wanted. Now it feels so open that I don't know what to hang my hat on. I've decided that this is my year of fun, though. That's my New Year's resolution - to have fun.' How is she going to fulfil it? 'I thought maybe I needed to experience something new. I'm open to anything.'

One thing she is certain of, however: 'I've decided I don't want to be the long-suffering wife anymore.' I point out that Debbie is not exactly long-suffering. 'That's true,' says Mann. 'OK, I don't want to do any more short-suffering wives, either. I'm done. I want to play an assassin.' ●