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THE OUTSIDER

How Penélope Cruz
took on Hollywood
and won



PHOTOGRAPH BY GILLES BENSIMON

THE BEAUTY MYTH

As one of the world's most attractive women – albeit one who hates her nose – Penélope Cruz could spend her entire life being gorgeous on screen. Instead, she's played a derelict, a nun, a terminally ill prostitute... The actress talks to Helena de Bertodano about typecasting, Tom Cruise and how it feels to be 'the true princess of Spain'

Penélope Cruz was once described by Ralph Lauren as 'the best-looking human being I have ever seen'. Now she's sitting in a West Hollywood café near her home, drinking decaffeinated cappuccino and listing her physical shortcomings with the help of her 19-year-old brother, Eduardo. 'My brother thinks

I have a lazy eye,' she says, with a giggle.

'Not a lazy eye,' Eduardo says, 'just something a bit strange.' Cruz smiles and rolls her right eye dramatically.

'He also loathes this part of my nose.' She points to a little bump. 'And this.' She lifts the tip of her nose to show where the flesh between her nostrils hangs down a fraction. 'What else do I have that's wrong?' she asks her brother.

'Your ears,' Eduardo points out helpfully.

Cruz nods: 'This ear is bigger than that one,' she says, pushing back her dark, wavy hair to reveal two perfect-looking ears. 'And I have too much curves here.' She grabs a smidgen of excess flesh just below her waist. 'So you see,' she declares with satisfaction. 'What [Ralph Lauren] says is a little bit out of proportion.'

But Eduardo, who is in Los Angeles on a visit from their native Spain, is not letting her off so lightly: 'What about your feet?' 'Oh, yes,' Cruz says delightedly. 'He thinks my feet are horrible.' The Nike trainers she's wearing make it impossible to pass judgement;

she is en route to the gym and is clad in a white Juicy Couture towelling tracksuit, a long cream Puma padded jacket and a thick woolly Mexican hat, which she does not remove, even inside. It is an odd ensemble: she looks more like an Eskimo than a Hollywood superstar.

But a superstar she is. Like Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman, the 30-year-old has managed to become that rare thing: a European actress who has made it on to the Hollywood A-list, playing opposite the pick of America's actors: Johnny Depp in *Blow* (2001), Nicolas Cage in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001) and Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky* (2001). Her reputation for enchanting her leading men – particularly Cruise, with whom she had a three-year relationship after *Vanilla Sky* – has done no harm to her burgeoning fame. Cruz and Cruise split up last January and she is now going out with the Texan actor Matthew McConaughey, whom she met last year while making the upcoming film *Sahara*. But she and Cruise remain close. 'He's forever my friend,' Cruz says today. 'He's a very good person.'

On the whole, though, she does not like to talk about her relationships, and is irritated because a recent article claims that she 'confirmed' she was dating McConaughey. 'I didn't confirm anything,' says Cruz, who talks in fluent but heavily accented English, with the occasional Spanish word thrown in. 'If they see us together, *bueno*, they see us together. But I don't talk about it. It has nothing to do with my job.'

Such reticence is at odds with the endearingly natural and adult approach Cruz generally adopts towards the business of being a star. Today, for example, she is not wearing a trace of make-up, and her face is pale; her fingernails are refreshingly unmanicured, even a little grubby. Even though she is sitting in a window seat, no passer-by seems to recognise her, perhaps because it's pouring with rain and everyone is in a hurry. 'I like it here when it's raining,' Cruz says as she watches people scurry across the street under umbrellas. Cruz, however, hasn't felt a drop of rain, having arrived at the restaurant door in a chauffeur-driven black Range Rover. The only other hint of glamour is the large diamond-encrusted ring she wears on the first finger of her right hand. 'It comes from me,' says Cruz. 'It's the only thing I have bought for myself.' Friendly and vibrant, she constantly gesticulates as she talks – almost as though she is talking in sign language. She has a warm laugh, nearly a guffaw. And she eats: declaring she is 'so hungry', she orders quiche and baby blue potatoes – this is not your average neighbourhood greasy spoon, but an elegant 'boutique' which serves caviar and champagne rather than tea and fried eggs. 'Would you like sevruiga with the potatoes?' the waitress asks. 'Oh, yes,' Cruz says enthusiastically. When her food arrives she digs in immediately, licking the crème fraîche off her knife.

Cruz's essential earthiness is reflected in the films she has made. Where Julia Roberts fretted that the sexually explicit lines she had to utter in *Closer* would make it impossible for her to remain 'America's sweetheart', Cruz has had no compunction about playing thoroughly sophisticated, old European parts: her first major film role, at the age of 17, was as a teenage seductress in *Jamón Jamón*, a sexual farce which

made Cruz's name in Spain. Pedro Almodóvar later cast her in two of his films, *Live Flesh* (1997), in which she plays a prostitute who dies giving birth on a bus, and *All About my Mother* (1999), in which she plays a nun made pregnant by a transvestite and infected with Aids. Recently she has made *Head in the Clouds*, a drama in which she plays a Spanish Civil War refugee who has a lesbian affair with Charlize Theron. 'I like to do material that is risky and different,' she says. 'I'm not scared of anything. I don't care how difficult, how challenging, how controversial a role is... Also I have a physicality that changes a lot so I don't always look good – which is good for my acting.'

Not looking good is relative; Cruz's latest role, in *Don't Move*, is as a destitute woman who is raped by a successful married surgeon who subsequently falls in love with her – and she with him. She is very moving – and almost unrecognisable, with bad teeth, terrible skin and a rat's nest of hair. But the huge, liquid brown eyes mean that even the most sterling efforts of the make-up artist prevent her from becoming ugly. Not that she sees it that way: 'Friends who have seen the movie say, "My God, you've aged quickly, you didn't take care of yourself." But I was never worried about looking ugly. There was so much

truth about that character, I felt it was like an honour to be able to play her, to forget about me and to forget about my ego completely.'

She is impatient with those who keep asking her how she can play a character with whom she has so little in common. 'People tell me, "But you

have never been poor." It doesn't matter, everything is inside of us. My life has been very different, without any lacking of clothes or food, a home, a family. But I have always had a lot of questions with myself about self-destruction. You realise you have the power to create or to destroy, including yourself, and I realised that very, very young. And this woman is unconsciously driving herself to death.'

Cruz, of course, has embraced life, though hers has not always been a life of privilege: 'I didn't grow up as a millionaire, my parents had to work very hard to raise us.' In fact, her mother was a hairdresser and her father was a car mechanic; the family lived in the working-class Madrid suburb of Alcobendas. As well as her brother, Eduardo, she has one younger sister, Monica, who is a flamenco dancer. Penélope was born in 1974, the year before General Franco died, and grew up as Spain experienced 'la movida', as its gleeful emergence from fascist repression was

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Big, Rex

known. 'What I noticed was all of a sudden everybody was naked in the movies. I watched a lot of movies as a child and... I felt the political change in my country through them.' They also changed her: as a small girl Cruz trained as a ballet dancer but decided at 13 that she wanted to act. 'I saw *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* [directed by Almodóvar]. I said, "I want to be an actor so I can work with that man."'

Which, of course, she did. Indeed, she still cites Almodóvar as her favourite director, and he in turn has written a role specially for her in his next film: 'I'm a mother, and for the first time he's not going to kill me off. I think it's very important for me that I keep being a European actress that works here [in LA], too. I don't want to be anything else but what I am. I can work here and have every day less accent if I keep working on it, but I would always be a Spanish actress.'

Her public wouldn't let her be otherwise: in an interview with *Vanity Fair* Almodóvar spoke of how Cruz is worshipped at home: 'The true princess of Spain is Penélope – much more so than the king's daughters.' 'Pedro is so funny,' Cruz says self-deprecatingly when I mention this. 'He makes me laugh.' She describes him as one of her best friends. 'We write each other about three times a week and he does like an X-ray of my personality; sometimes I forget how well he knows me. He knows how much I worry about everything. The other day I called him from the airport. I was waiting for the plane with my brother and everything was going well and I was relaxed and I was like, "I'm sure I have something to worry about, I cannot be this relaxed." So I came up with something to worry about and I called Pedro – I had already spoken to him five minutes earlier – and I said, "Please don't tell this friend of ours that I did such and such because I didn't do it." And he was like, "Honey, don't worry, I won't. And don't worry, the kid doesn't have the



pox" – that's an imaginary kid – "and no, nobody has died, everything is OK, and don't worry."'

It's not everyone who has Pedro Almodóvar's private number, but Cruz insists that she tries hard not to lose touch with reality: 'I would be miserable if I did. It has to do with the way you look around when you are walking down the street. It is important to have contact with a stranger in the street and take a trip and make new friends in the jungle and never lose the thing you have with your family. Without that I think our job is so dangerous.'

Still, I say, contact with strangers cannot be easy when the paparazzi are following your every move. 'They're more extreme in Spain. The first days when I get there, too many cars follow me, but after a few days they relax a little bit. I'm not complaining; as long as they leave my family alone and they're not rude, it's OK, they can take all the pictures they want. I try to do my normal life, but there are things I wouldn't do if 20 of them are behind me. I always see them and I always feel them, and my

friends are always surprised because I can say, "There is one behind that tree there 100 metres away," and they're, "No, you're paranoid." But I smell them.' I ask if there is anyone watching her right now. She glances out of the window. 'I'm not sure about that green car over there,' she says, nodding towards an unexceptional-looking car parked quite far away in a side street on the other side of the road. 'Maybe.'

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the green car has crawled closer. Suddenly there are photographers at each window, one with a video camera. Cruz turns her head away slightly but otherwise does nothing. A heavyset man clad in black appears in the doorway. 'Do you want me to block them?' he asks. Cruz shrugs and spreads out her hands as if to say, 'What's the point?' I ask her who the man is. 'Oh, he works with us,' she says. It dawns on me that this is her bodyguard, who has been stationed outside the door all along.

Her brother re-appears – he's been outside, smoking. '*Hola, mi amor*,' says Penélope, kissing him. He is tall and very good looking, with the same dark eyes as Cruz, and is dressed in baggy rapper gear with a woolly hat pulled down over his head. Cruz tries to persuade him to have something to eat. 'I've eaten at home,' he says. 'But shall I ask for a mushroom quiche for you? *Es muy bueno*,' persists Cruz. 'No, no,' her brother replies. 'I really don't feel like it.' 'What about an orange juice?' she urges. 'All right, I'll have an orange juice,' he says in defeat, then vanishes outside again, leaving the orange juice untouched on the table.

'I'm his second mother,' she declares. 'I gave myself that title. My mother sometimes has to stop me from being so protective with all my family. My brother can't wait for me to have a baby so that I relax a little bit.' She does indeed plan to settle down and have children – 'last

Penélope Cruz, from far left, with Matthew McConaughey in January; with her brother, Eduardo, in 2004; and in a scene from her new film, *Don't Move*

week I said by the time I was 35. But I don't know.'

Would she like a normal family life? 'I want a family but normal for me is very relative,' she says. 'I also want to adopt a baby one day even if I have my own. When I was in India [where she once set up a charitable foundation] I tried to adopt because I saw a baby that I fell in love with but they didn't let me because I wasn't married. Something very strange happened; it's like we recognised each other.' (Although her upbringing was Catholic, Cruz subscribes to the usual Hollywood hippy-dippy cocktail of beliefs. 'I never call myself one thing. I like a lot of things from Buddhism. I like some things about the essence of Christianity but I think it has nothing to do with the way young people are living now, and I like a lot of things from Scientology [perhaps a relic of her relationship with Tom Cruise, who espouses Scientology] because I've seen it take a lot of people out of drugs and that for me is a huge thing because I completely hate drugs.')

Until she does start a family, though, she is working hard. She is set to appear in three other films this year: *Sahara*, a Hollywood action adventure; *Bandidas*, a comedy western in which she and her great friend Salma Hayek play bank robbers; and *Chromophobia*, a British psychological drama starring Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas. 'And Ian Holm,' Cruz says: 'I have some love scenes with Ian Holm that are...' She pauses, looking for the right word, '...that are incredible. I play a whore who is dying of liver cancer.'

That's another role that may well play welcome havoc with her ravishing looks: still, she will have to work even harder if she wants to disguise herself from the paparazzi. As she gets up to leave, they move away from the windows. She climbs into the back of the Range Rover, lights a cigarette and waves goodbye. But as her car moves off, I notice the green car pull out from the kerb and slip into the traffic behind her. ●

'Don't Move' opens on 18 March