

Unearthly beauty

ZOE SALDANA
on the appeal
of playing aliens



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At a very youthful-looking 36, the *Avatar* actress Zoe Saldana has already been told that she's too old by Hollywood producers. *Helena de Bertodano* can only imagine her riposte...

Photograph by **Yu Tsai**

A sci-feisty heroine

Zoe Saldana does not mince her words. "When men - producers - say, 'You're old,' to me that is the most laughable f— ridiculous thing a moron could ever say."

Saldana has just turned 36. Ageism in Hollywood is one of the many aspects of the industry that enrages her. "By the time you're 28 you're expired, you're playing mommy roles. We're not the ones putting ourselves in those places. We're allowing ourselves to be put in those positions. I just won't allow it."

So, instead of the mother roles, Saldana ducks right outside the box. In *Avatar*, the 2009 science-fiction blockbuster that made her name, she played the blue alien Neytiri, and now in the new Marvel superhero film *Guardians of the Galaxy* she plays a deadly green-skinned assassin, Gamora.

If anything, she looks younger than her 36 years as she walks into L'Ermitage hotel in Beverly Hills in skinny jeans, bright-yellow Chloé pumps and a black cardigan. Her hair is long and loose and she wears no make-up. Her sole accessory is her dog, Mugsy, a scraggly off-white terrier-mix she found a few years ago when she nearly hit him with her car as he tried to cross a busy road. "He was a stinky, skinny, ugly dog," she says, feeding him a dog treat. "But I just knew he was *my* dog."

Not, she says bluntly, that she is a rescuer by nature. "I'm just sticking to animals and maybe children. But not adults. Especially not men. I'm not rescuing anybody."

We choose an outdoor table in the empty restaurant, near a waterfall, and Saldana orders a hearty meal of

guacamole and tortilla chips, chicken and salad. Usually, she says, she prefers the Beverly Hills Hotel but she has boycotted it since its owner, the Sultan of Brunei, announced the imposition of full sharia law, including stoning to death for adultery and homosexuality. "Sometimes you just have to take a stand. So my husband cannot go there either. If I found out [that he'd gone there], I'd kill him."

Her husband is Marco Perego, an Italian artist whom she secretly married in 2013 in London, while she was filming *Guardians of the Galaxy*. They live together in Hollywood near her two sisters, one of whom is married to an Englishman. Zoe is the middle sibling and all three are very close. "We're always in each other's business, now more than ever because of the World Cup." The day after we meet Saldana is



hosting a World Cup party for the Italy/England game. “I’ve already given my sister’s husband and [Marco] the sermon: they have to keep a balance and not cheat and bring an entire tribe of either Englishmen or Italians. The English drink beer and are loud and Italians drink wine and champagne and they’re fragile and get really emotional.”

There does not seem to be any hint of fragility about Saldana. “I was never raised to please others. It’s not that I’m rebellious, it’s just a natural way of being.”

Saldana was brought up in New York. When she was nine her father, who was from the Dominican Republic, died in a car accident – this early tragedy may be one of the reasons why she is so tough today. Her Puerto Rican mother sent Saldana and her two



a very confusing time for us. We had to deal with, ‘Girls don’t wear that’, ‘Cross your legs’, ‘You can’t play with boys after a certain age’. I was like, ‘What? Are you out of your mind?’ My sisters and I never adapted to that.”

But it was in the Dominican Republic that she discovered her love of dance, enrolling in an academy where she studied ballet, jazz and modern Latin. When she finally returned to New York her foundation as a dancer helped her

None the less, her dance education imbued her with an inner strength. “Ballet taught me to be focused internally on myself and I think that’s why I’ve been able to succeed in Hollywood in terms of keeping a healthy mental state. I couldn’t give two s— about whatever anybody else is doing... There’s nothing about me physically or internally that I would like



Clockwise from left Saldana in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*; *Star Trek Into Darkness*; her latest film, *Guardians of the Galaxy*

‘I was never raised to please others. It’s not that I’m rebellious, it’s just a natural way of being’

sisters to live with relatives in the Dominican Republic while she stayed in New York to earn enough to send them to private school. “New York was not a good place to be raising kids in the late 1980s and 1990s,” says Saldana. “She made the best decision – we are here because of that decision.”

She still remembers her father vividly. “He was very possessive of his daughters. And he had the best laugh. He laughed with an open mouth: my sisters and I are told that we laugh that way. You would never think the way I laugh belongs to my body. I laugh like an old Latino man.”

It is true that she laughs often and loudly. Despite the feistiness of her statements, she is friendly and engaging company, not nearly as difficult as she likes to make out.

Although bilingual, at first Saldana and her sisters found it hard to adjust to life in the Dominican Republic. “It was



land her first film role, playing Eva, a headstrong ballerina, in the 2000 film *Center Stage*.

At times, she says, she wishes she had become a dancer instead of an actress. “The dancer doesn’t need anything. You become a dancer not because you’re going to be rich or famous [but] because you’re going to dance. So a dancer is really unimpressed by Hollywood. They wouldn’t even know how to spell the word. They’d be like, ‘What, honey? No, I don’t have time to go to the movies...’”

to change.” On paper, this comes across as more arrogant than it sounds in person. What she means is that she is neither jealous nor competitive, not that she doesn’t care about other people.

After *Center Stage*, Saldana appeared in the Britney Spears film *Crossroads* (2002) and then played a female pirate in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003). But she is perhaps best known for her science-fiction work, including Uhura in *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013).

I ask her why she thinks she is picked for such roles and she answers without hesitation. "I'm not afraid to use my imagination. I'm not just saying the lines and then, when they say 'Cut', going, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I just said that.' No, if anything, you'll hear me go, 'Wouldn't it be awesome if it was in real life?'"

It helps, she says, that she was raised by a "sci-fi buff" mother. "I grew up watching *Metropolis* [Fritz Lang's 1927 science-fiction film] and *2001: A Space Odyssey*." Her family were also fans of the original *Star Trek* series, which they would watch dubbed in Spanish. So when Saldana was offered the part of Uhura, her mother was ecstatic, overruling any doubts Saldana had. "She was like, 'You're doing it.'" During filming her mother rang her constantly to give her notes on the part. Saldana would play the hilarious messages back to her friends in her trailer. "Mom always knew best," she says with affection.

Guardians of the Galaxy, she emphasises, is unlike other science-fiction films. "It's like the anti-hero hero movie... The characters are misfits: insecure, abandoned, hurt, scared, conniving but good-hearted people. They become heroes without losing their street cred. Even though 80 per cent of these characters won't be relatable on a physical level, they're much more relatable on a deeper internal level than any other hero movie out there."

This is the main criterion Saldana uses in choosing films: the believability of the characters. And she doesn't hesitate to say if a script sucks. "Why would I beat around the bush? I'd be wasting your money and your time if I played

fitting that she has taken on the role of the uncompromising singer Nina Simone in the forthcoming film *Nina*, which is out in December. "It was a very fresh perspective, very unapologetic – because Nina was a very unapologetic individual."

Saldana says she inherits her strength of character from her mother, who visits her often from her home in New York. They are very close, although they drive each other mad. "My mother starts every



Saldana with her husband Marco Perego, whom she married secretly last year

other sentence with, 'You know what you need to do...' Like 70 times a day. And I'm like [she rolls her eyes], 'What do I need to do?' She asks me not to play Björk in the car, then the TV is too loud, then, 'Did you turn off the stove?'"

'To me, a woman is not an incompetent, impotent, inept creature. Yet half of the scripts you read in Hollywood have characters like that'

someone who doesn't feel to me like a realistic woman. To me, a woman is not an incompetent, impotent, inept creature. I've never met a woman like that. Yet half of the scripts you read in Hollywood have [subservient] characters. I'm not a maid to anybody." It seems

She hopes to have children herself – but says she has not set a deadline for herself (despite the current tabloid speculation that she is already pregnant). "I never plan anything, I don't even know what I'm buying for today's dinner." Still, she has given considerable thought

to how she will be as a mother. "I think it's inevitable that we end up like our parents. I hope that I inherit the good things and not the things that I could have lived without as a child. There are things about my mom that obviously I have to raise my children with, but there are also things about our Latino culture – that ancient traditionalism – that we'll never ever do to our children. That thing about, 'You're not friends

with your kids, kids should fear you.' Your daughter needs to call you a friend. It's not the military, you're not training soldiers to send off to the f— war."

Recently she starred on American television as Rosemary in *Rosemary's Baby*, a miniseries adaptation of the novel. It was produced by Cinestar, the company she has set up with her sister Cisely to produce Latino-centred media projects with Lionsgate. The company absorbs most of her creative energy these days. "Usually at 3.30am or 4am when I wake up making lists, it's our company I'm thinking of."

But she says her career is very secondary to her personal life. "The only thing I want to do and be in life is happy."

And is she? "Yes, I am." But she admits to the occasional spell of despondency. "Sometimes my husband says [she puts on a strong Italian accent], 'I won't let you go into darkness.' And I go, 'OK, you're right, then let's go for ice cream.' I can snap out of things really easily."

In the meantime she will continue to be very selective about her roles. Some time ago she was offered a part as the "love interest" of an actor 30 years her senior (she doesn't say who). "I said, 'Eurgh, no f— way.' And they said, 'But Zoe, he's the hottest actor.' I don't give a f— how hot he is, I'm not going to endorse that – not until the day I see more romantic movies with Diane Keaton, Sandra Bullock, Meryl Streep with young hot actors working as their sidekicks. Only then will I say yes." ● "*Guardians of the Galaxy*" is released on Thursday