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SARAH
PAULSON

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PLUS TAMARA MELLON / SAINT LAURENT IN MALIBU / NICK FOUQUET / STATE OF SUSTAINABILITY



In her private and professional lives, *Sarah Paulson* has never followed a conventional path. The Emmy and Golden Globe winner explains why she prefers the life less ordinary

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

“I’ve always been with people who are older. Man or woman. It must be what I gravitate toward. I don’t know why”

The moment Sarah Paulson heard that her co-star Rihanna was jealous of the striking neon green plastic-fringed Prada dress she wore to their *Ocean’s 8* premiere last year, she realized she had arrived. “When Rihanna wants your dress, everyone else can take a seat,” jokes Paulson when we meet at West Hollywood’s San Vicente Bungalows.

Neon frock or not, it is hard not to notice Paulson these days. After years of slogging away as a jobbing actor, she now finds herself — at age 44 — on the Hollywood A-list, having appeared in a multitude of high-profile movies and television series. (To make things official, in 2017, *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world and in 2018 she was ranked one of the best-dressed women in the world by fashion website Net-a-Porter.)

Paulson says she has always been drawn to dramatic clothes. “The truth of me is [I love] a sparkle. I had a crown I wore as a child that had rhinestones and sequins all over it and a magic wand: My sister and I would take turns sleeping in them,” she admits as we sit down at the bar inside the exclusive members-only club, where guests have stickers placed over the fronts and backs of their phones to enforce the club’s strict “no photos” policy. Paulson rolls her eyes when she sees my bandaged phone. “Don’t you love it?” she asks dubiously. I tell her that the house rules make me feel as

though I’m back in high school. “That’s exactly what I said,” she exclaims. She immediately conveys she is on your side: There is no celebrity hauteur.

She is fresh-faced with a hair-just-washed look wearing a striped ruffled cotton shirt and white voluminous pants with Stan Smith sneakers. Off the red carpet her two go-to designers are Dries Van Noten and Nili Lotan — “I’m all in Nili Lotan today” — and her style icon is, she says, Diane Keaton, who also happens to be a friend. “I’ve been in her closet: I can put on her hats, I can try on her glasses. I like having a fashion idol whose clothes I could actually steal!”

She wears no makeup, no jewelry, no nail polish. Her only accessory is her iPhone, with a case imprinted with the words “Judy Fucking Davis.” “I’ve been working with Judy Davis [on the upcoming Netflix series *Ratched*] — and to me there is maybe no finer actress.”

Paulson has just spent a rare night at home with her partner of four years, the 76-year-old actor Holland Taylor (*The Practice*, *Two and a Half Men*). “We’re both very busy. ... We’re not in the same place a lot. So when we are, it is extraordinarily precious time for us. Sometimes we don’t want to do anything. We don’t leave the house. We don’t want to have dinner with our five other friends who we love and adore. We just want our time. ... We’re just holding hands, watching *Chernobyl* on HBO and sleeping.”

She knows their relationship is unusual. “It’s a twofold thing: one is that it’s with a woman; the other is it’s with someone significantly older.” But she has spent a lifetime confounding expectations. “I didn’t go to college. I didn’t get married. I didn’t have a family.” Her career upturn has surprised even her and her glee is palpable. “Never in my wildest dreams could I have expected to act with Judy Davis. And I’ve got her email! And I can call her up if I want to! That, to me, is an achievement.”

The roles that have propelled her to such a position speak to her versatility. *American Horror Story* was her big breakthrough: She appeared in the first eight seasons, playing different characters and winning multiple awards. In *12 Years a Slave*, she played the cold wife of a brutal slave owner. Then in 2016, she played real-life prosecutor Marcia Clark in *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*, which earned her an Emmy and a Golden Globe. Last year, she joined the all-female heist movie *Ocean’s 8*. And this year, she shares the screen with Nicole Kidman in *The Goldfinch*, playing Xandra, the trashy stepmother who emanates “a strong smell of Juicy Fruit,” as author Donna Tartt memorably describes her in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. “She’s like sandpaper,” Paulson adds.

Reading the book several years ago, Paulson made a resolution to one day play Xandra. “I said it out loud in my bed, I remember it so





distinctly.” She knew she would have to battle for the part. “You don’t make the jump from that gal who plays Marcia Clark to this Vegas [gal] who probably sells drugs. It couldn’t be more extreme.”

Luckily Paulson likes nothing better than to scrap for a role. “I had to audition, which I haven’t done in a while. I got a spray tan. I wore a wig and I brought cigarettes and smoked them. [Before the audition] I spent an hour in my car screaming because her voice is described as raspy.”

Would she do anything for a role? “I think I would,” she replies thoughtfully. “I’m about to start something where I’m gonna have to gain a significant amount of weight — 20 pounds. I was talking to an actor I admire greatly the other day, and she was like, ‘I wouldn’t do that, I would just be too worried about my health.’ And I was like, ‘Wow, what does it mean that I would do it?’ I will try to do it with help. I won’t just start visiting Carl’s Jr. every day.”

In the meantime, though, she remains particular about her diet, quizzing the waiter about the brunch options. At first she is interested in the omelet, but when he describes the ingredients, she starts shaking her head. “You lost me with squash. You don’t want squash in your eggs, that is strange. But two eggs any way? I get very excited. I would love two eggs, fried over medium plus.” (She also orders an accompanying ginger-turmeric juice that makes her screw up her face in disgust when she tries it. “It’s like taking medicine — awful,” she grimaces, putting it firmly to one side.)

Born in Tampa, Fla., Paulson moved at the age of 5 with her mother and sister to New York following her parents’ divorce. She says she always knew she wanted to be an actor, and New York gave her that opportunity. She spent afternoons watching theater in the park and attended the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts.

After graduating, she flew to Los Angeles to test for the 1995 series *American Gothic*. She got the role and left for North Carolina to shoot the series. But after it was canceled, instead of returning to New York, she moved to L.A. “My formative years were spent out here.” She misses the “kinetic energy” of New York, but has come to appreciate the beauty of the West Coast. “I feel so lucky to live in California. It’s so unique and special and has so much to offer.”

She and Taylor maintain separate places



of their own. “Gwyneth [Paltrow] and Brad Falchuk are doing it,” she jokes. “I think there comes a point when, especially later in your life, you think, ‘I like my stuff, you like your stuff, your stuff doesn’t go with my stuff, why do we have to get rid of half of it? We can do this in a grown-up way that works for both of us.’”

Previously, Paulson was in a relationship with actor Cherry Jones, who played President Allison Taylor in the Fox series *24*. She and Paulson were together for five years and Jones was 18 years her senior. “I’ve

always been with people who are older. Man or woman. It must be what I gravitate toward. I don’t know why. But I’ve never met anyone my own age that [made me feel], ‘You are the one,’ or ‘I want to explore this.’ That just hasn’t happened to me.”

She was engaged once — to Tracy Letts, an actor and playwright (who is nine years older than Paulson). “I was young — 24. We loved each other, it just didn’t work out. He’s with Carrie Coon and I adore him and her and their child.”

TORY BURCH dress, \$898.

Opposite: N. 21 BY ALLESANDRO DELL’ACQUA dress, price upon request. VRAM earrings, \$30,220.

The only difference, she says, about being with someone older is that time is far more treasured. “It puts things into hyperfocus. ... There’s a real gift in it, because the nature of it forces me to see the preciousness of it and not be walking around with this ridiculous notion that we’ve got forever.”

On a recent podcast, Taylor was asked if she was concerned about the age difference and replied: “Well, if she dies, she dies.” I repeat this to Paulson and she laughs. “It’s so funny [when she says that]. It’s disarming. But people don’t always get it.”

Paulson also has a “complicated” relationship with social media. Although she updates her Instagram regularly and has 2.4 million followers, she finds herself enraged sometimes by comments. “When they attack Holland and say mean, terrible things about her, that makes me shake with rage. I want to reply so badly, and I don’t. ... Who knows what it kicks up in them: their own curiosities or maybe they were raised to think [a relationship with a woman] is disgusting. ... [I think,] ‘Your ugliness is about you.’ I know why it’s normal and OK for me to love who I love.”

Paulson has not ruled out having children: “I’m a bit long in the tooth, [but] I did freeze my eggs years ago. I have no idea how viable they are. I have to look at the choices I’ve made in my life and recognize that [they] have led me down a particular road.”

Although she feels that things have improved enormously for women in the acting industry, she is aware that, as an actor in her mid-40s, the clock is ticking loudly. “I feel like I have one leg up and an arm up in a tiny window. The gravitational pull is like a guillotine, but I refuse to let the thing come down on my head.”

Even so, she says she feels lucky. “Because Ryan Murphy [co-creator of *American Horror Story*] is so invested in telling the stories of women who are over 40, I’ve [felt] nothing short of celebrated ... and extraordinarily supported in my work environment. I have a man behind me saying, ‘Fly baby, fly.’”

She has just wrapped *Ratched*, another Murphy project, based on the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Paulson plays the lead [the notorious Nurse Ratched] and is also an executive producer. She says she would like to produce and direct more — she directed an episode of *American Horror Story* (“It was overwhelming and thrilling”). But at the end of the day, she affirms, “I really still like to act.” ●



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