



# girl on fire

It may have been only five years ago that the thirtysomething Jessica Chastain first set the screen alight with her illuminating talent and beauty, but the daydreaming girl from Sacramento knew acting was her destiny from the age of seven. On the eve of her latest film *The Huntsman: Winter's War*, Daphne Merkin meets the award-winning actress with the poise of an old-fashioned movie star and the inner steel of a warrior princess

*Photography by Ryan McGinley Fashion editor George Cortina*



“I just knew *acting* was what I was going to do. It wasn't like that's what I'm *going to do* when I'm older, it was like that's *what I am*”

It's hard to imagine, meeting Jessica Chastain on a Monday morning over breakfast, that she was ever the object of classroom bullying ("I was the leper in school"). It's harder still to imagine that this lovely looking woman, with vivid strawberry-blond hair, luminous porcelain skin and striking gray eyes – eyes that seem to see further into things than ordinary people, eyes that might even be described as a tad haunted – wasn't told she was pretty until the sixth grade when her family moved and she started a new school. "I was the awkward, red-headed girl with freckles," she insists, in her pleasantly nuanced voice. "You behave the way people treat you." The truth is, I suspect Chastain, who exudes an endearing diffidence, still doesn't know how beautiful she is ("If you saw me without a stitch of makeup, I would disappear") and still thinks of herself as awkward and unformed, despite the poise with which she moves through the world, on- and off-screen. Speaking of Cate Blanchett, for example, whom the 39-year-old Chastain reminds me of in her natural grace, the actress insists she "felt like a child compared to her elegance, her groundedness. It's like she's who I want to be when I grow up. She has a regalness about her that I don't have."

We are sitting at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Manhattan, in a silvery restaurant space, and at 9am have the place all to ourselves, except for an attentive waiter. Chastain had been waiting for me, nursing a cup of tea, when I had dashed in a few minutes late. She is nonchalantly dressed in a black sweater and pants of no discernible lineage, sporting unmanicured nails and just the faintest touch of mascara and umber eye shadow. She seems unaware of her own glamorous aura and I am immediately struck by her sense of calm and the way she has of centering her attention completely on the person she's talking to, both rare qualities in her profession. Within minutes of saying hello, we're off, discussing how she prepares for a part. "I steal," she says, with a laugh, and then adds, "I actually even stole Pablo Picasso's quote – he said 'Good artists copy, great artists steal.' But I don't just look at one performance usually; sometimes I use paintings, sometimes music."

The longer we talk, the clearer it becomes that Chastain has a wide-ranging curiosity and an independent-minded way of looking at things – be it her views on celebrity, her interest in "every form of art", including fashion (she is a fan of Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci and Sarah Burton at Alexander McQueen), her favorite film directors (Terrence Malick and Michael Haneke) or the element that chance plays in an actor's success. When it comes to fame, she says, quite simply, "No thank you," clarifying her answer by observing that "I've never

dated anyone famous. I had time before this happened to really watch the industry... I want to be able to have my family and have this normalcy and go see a play and not have the audience watching me watch the play." As for the stellar trajectory of her career, she believes that "everyone gets lucky at some point. I think the trick with any kind of art form is to be prepared when the luck finds you..."

Chastain burst on the scene in 2011, seemingly out of the blue – "I know that's what everyone thinks, that I came out of nowhere" – and with her acting chops clearly in evidence, appearing in no less than seven films, including *The Tree of Life*, *The Help* (for which she received an Academy Award nomination) and the critically acclaimed *Take Shelter*. She was the sensation of the moment, effortlessly straddling vastly different roles, from the ethereal mother in *Tree of Life* to the hapless but well-meaning outsider Celia Foote in *The Help* ("I had to fight, fight, fight for that role – no one saw me in that character except the director"). She seemed equally skilled at playing serious and comic characters – and what one noticed the most, perhaps, was how deftly she slipped under the skin of whomever she was inhabiting. She seemed unconcerned with her appearance, going makeup-free to play the loving wife of a disturbed construction worker in *Take Shelter* and putting on 15 pounds for her role in *The Help*. Indeed, she is the sort of actress whose immersion in a given role is so complete that you often forget you are watching Jessica Chastain.

Which, it must be said, is exactly how Chastain likes it. Since that initial high-octane success, her skill has been creating a career for herself that eludes easy characterization, by choosing such diverse roles as a CIA agent in *Zero Dark Thirty* (for which she won a Golden Globe), a Mossad operative in *The Debt*, a hard-boiled wife in *A Most Violent Year* and an astronaut in *The Martian*. Chastain sees being typecast as a "trap actors can fall into" and points to Marilyn Monroe as someone who got "boxed in" by her own construction of herself as "every guy's dream". When I ask her if she takes it as a compliment when she isn't remembered in a role, she recalls: "Someone said to me once, 'You were in that?' It makes me so happy." She goes on to note that "the exterior is defined by the interior – just stuff you've worked on already. I never start from the outside." Kathryn Bigelow, who directed her in *Zero Dark Thirty*, observes that Chastain approached the role of Maya, the CIA operative on the hunt for Osama bin Laden, "with genuine curiosity, courage and humility – and, above all, a hunger for the truth. It's that hunger for truth which sets her apart." Her preparation, Bigelow adds, consisted of "total immersion, giving her this magnificent capacity to >

Previous page:  
sweater by  
Chanel, £1,390  
Opposite: top,  
£2,324, and  
dress (worn  
underneath),  
£3,100, both by  
Givenchy by  
Riccardo Tisci;  
jacket by Saint  
Laurent by Hedi  
Slimane, £700





Opposite: shirt by Gucci, £420; jeans, £235, and belt, £150, both by Frame Denim at Net-A-Porter.com; necklace by Me & Ro, £420

disappear in a role". This sort of disappearing trick owes much to her training at Julliard (the New York performing-arts college), which emphasized meticulous research, something Chastain very much enjoys. It led her to delve into Celia Foote's impoverished background, growing up in the curiously named Sugarditch, Tennessee – a detail not gone into in the novel but which, when she researched it, turned out to be a poor, predominantly black suburb whose name came about because it was next to a ditch of open sewage. "When you go into a script like that with a magnifying glass, it hopefully prevents you from being able to play something that is just shallow." The takeaway from such careful homework helped to deepen a character who is easy to write off, as Chastain points out, as "slutty" and "dumb" and was probably the defining characteristic of her role in a story so wholly driven by racial conflict. She says of Celia's relationship with Minny, her maid, "She treated her like a sister. She was completely color-blind."

Although Chastain only came to general notice for her work in her mid-thirties, her interest in acting started way back when she was, by her own account, a "very unhappy" child growing up in Sacramento, California. "My imagination was so much stronger than my reality," she says. "You know, I would always just daydream." Chastain, who is close to her family (she is the eldest of five siblings), says, in addition to being bullied in school and treated as "dumb" by her teachers, she "couldn't figure out how to express myself". In an effort to help her, her parents (her father is a fireman, her mother a vegan chef) signed her up for Little League (a traditional American baseball club for children), which, in the event, only made matters worse. "I was not a great player. Also, my dad was coaching the team." Her beloved grandmother gave her ballet lessons, which she loved (her dancing skills are much in evidence in the 2008 film *Jolene*), but it was only when her grandmother took her as a seven-year-old to a play, and she realized acting was an actual "job", that Chastain felt she had met her destiny. "I just knew that was what I was going to do. It wasn't like that's what I'm going to do when I'm older, it was like, that's what I am."

Growing up, Chastain wasn't much of a student but watched movies all the time. It wasn't, however, until she went to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival on a school trip, and saw Marco Barricelli in *Richard III*, that she became obsessed with Shakespeare. "That's what really started my reading because, before that, all reading was associated with homework." As a Christmas present during her senior year of high

school, she got a subscription to the Sacramento Theater Company. The wish to become an actor never left her, although, as she explains, "It wasn't really a wish; it was just something I knew I was going to do."

Despite her delicate appearance, overtly expressed self-doubt and soft, melodic voice, there is something deeply driven about Chastain, a laser-like quality of focus. "I never dreamed what my wedding dress would look like," she confides, "but I always dreamed about my Oscars dress." She had her eyes set on Julliard, which she attended after winning a scholarship that had been funded by the late actor Robin Williams. Before she graduated, she fought for her class to present a showcase of their work in LA, which went against the school's tradition. "The people in Julliard said 'It's impossible, it's too late.' I didn't accept that as an answer; I felt it was wrong. After all the years of training, after all the money we had spent, it was an easy thing to fix. I was very aggressive," she admits, laughing at her own ferocity. "I told my class, 'You guys, I think we need to write a letter to the school to tell them we need a showcase.'" They did and her performance so impressed producer John Wells that he offered her a talent-holding deal: "For eight months, they paid me a huge sum of money. They basically own you; it's like the old contracts the big studios used to have."

After that things began to percolate. She did a pilot for the writers of *The West Wing*, who were considering creating a character for her (it didn't end up happening) and secured a guest spot on *ER*. After flying back and forth between New York and LA, she eventually decided to live with her grandmother in LA and "audition for everything". Over the next four years, she tried out for roles without much success – casting directors appeared to find her admirably intense but someone else always seemed to get the parts – while she continued to take classes and read plays. Then, in 2006, Chastain auditioned for *Salome*, the play that launched her career, at Al Pacino's request. She read in front of a small audience, which included Pacino who was set to play King Herod. "It was like, from the minute I met him, he believed in me," she recounts, still sounding vaguely incredulous. "As I was acting out the scene, there in the dark audience I could hear Al saying, 'Oh my God! Wow!'"

Chastain positively glows when discussing Pacino, whom she considers to be her greatest acting teacher and "one of the greatest actors in our cinematic history. Look at *The Panic in Needle Park* – from the very beginning, there's something about him. He's just so free and he allows the camera in." She credits him with teaching her "everything about the camera and film, but he was also the first one to look at me and go 'That girl.'" She explains she was initially >



Top by Chloé,  
£1,190; necklace  
by Me & Ro, £420





“I never *dreamed* what my wedding dress would look like, but I always dreamed about my *Oscars dress*”

Pajama shirt, £875, and pajama trousers, £875, both by Dolce & Gabbana



This page: dress  
by Saint Laurent  
by Hedi Slimane,  
£3,135, at  
Net-A-Porter.com;  
jacket by Saint  
Laurent by Hedi  
Slimane £1,565  
Opposite: dress  
by Alexander  
McQueen, £4,995;  
necklace by Me &  
Ro, £420



“freaked out moving from theater to camera” and that it was Pacino who instructed her to acknowledge the camera, to accept it as a part of her rather than ignore it. “Because, more than anyone,” she declares, “the camera will see directly into your soul. More than you and I, sitting here talking to each other...” Pacino also taught her that “everything has to be real. So whatever you’re feeling, you have to acknowledge what is happening right now. You’re showing your most intimate secrets.” Pacino, in turn, returns the high regard, calling Chastain “the most illuminating young actress I’ve ever seen. Her artistry transcends her natural beauty. She has profound talent.”

These days, Jessica Chastain no longer has to run around in a sweat, her hair disheveled, “begging for work”, trying to prove her thespian mettle at audition after audition. Although she used to be bi-coastal, she now lives in New York, where she says she “feels life more” than in LA. She has been involved with an aristocratic Italian Moncler executive, Gian Luca Passi de Preposulo, for four years and is definite about wanting children. She loves to cook – after *Zero Dark Thirty* came out she took a cooking course in New York – and her favorite dishes are desserts “like poached pears with sweet potato ice cream”. She has been a vegan for nine years and enjoys yoga and outdoor activities, such as biking and hiking, but doesn’t work out regularly. In her off-time, she loves to travel, and when she’s home, she is a culture vulture, going to plays, concerts and museums. She also likes giving dinner parties for family and friends.

Meanwhile, her career is “like a jigsaw puzzle” and the one thing she wishes for is more time. She admits to being drawn to dark scripts, but at the same time states that her experience acting in a production of *The Heiress* has convinced her that, “the next time I’m on stage, it has to be a comedy”. She has two films coming out shortly – *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, a World War II drama about Antonina Zabinski who helped save hundreds of people and animals from the Nazis. Chastain was thrilled to be playing such an incredible figure in Poland’s history while also working with animals, one of her passions. (She has a mutt, “a three-legged wonder” named Chaplin.) But firstly comes next month’s prequel to *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *The Huntsman: Winter’s War*, in which she plays witch-hunting warrior Sara, who reminded Chastain of her childhood heroine, Sorsha – “this redhead warrior goddess” – from George Lucas’s 1988 film *Willow*. “I just thought, oh my God, it’s like my childhood fantasy to be in this movie.”

*The Huntsman* is Chastain’s first venture into big-budget, fantasy-franchise land, but it also

follows her tendency towards playing strong-willed, strong-bodied women in female-led films. She stars opposite Charlize Theron (“I am a huge fan of Charlize Theron,” she tells me, twice) and Emily Blunt as warring sorcerer sisters, and had to learn a Scottish accent for the role, as well as work with stunt doubles to train for the fight scenes. Throwing three of the most talented actresses working today on screen together, along with a splash of magic, impressive special effects and Chris Hemsworth in the lead male role, pretty much guarantees her the sort of box-office glory which will, in turn, only open more interesting professional doors in the future.

Perhaps most intriguing, though, is Chastain’s new production company, Freckle Films, which she’s launched with Trudie Styler and Celine Rattray of Maven Pictures. The all-female executive team already has two films optioned, both based on novels with women as the main protagonists. Although Chastain admits to having “more opportunities than I’ve ever had in my life”, she is concerned about the paucity of good roles for women, especially black women. Last year she gave a speech about diversity at the Critics’ Choice Awards and in December wrote an essay for *The Hollywood Reporter* about the experience of working on *The Zookeeper’s Wife* with women in key positions – including the director, the screenwriter, the producers, a camera operator and a stunt coordinator. “When you have both genders represented,” Chastain wrote, “then you have a healthier point of view... You don’t feel a hierarchy; you don’t have anyone feeling like they are being left out or bullied or humiliated. Sometimes, being the only girl on a set, you can feel like a sexual object.”

As our breakfast draws to a close, I find myself loathe to end our conversation. There’s something both down-to-earth and unconventional about Chastain, making her intriguing to talk to on almost any subject. She doesn’t remind me of actresses her own age but rather of older ones, such as Diane Keaton, whose sense of presentness she has, and Liv Ullmann, whose porousness, as well as a discernible lack of filters, she shares. “The goal is just to be open all the time,” she says. “If you are, you’re open to the greatest ecstasy of love and happiness but then you’re also open to the other side...” I ask for the bill and, before she leaves, she checks that PORTER will be paying for breakfast rather than me personally; she has that kind of considerateness, that lack of hauteur. I’m not sure she’s going to become regal any time soon – at one point she apologizes for checking on her cellphone camera to see if she has spinach in her teeth – but for now she is wonderfully and enigmatically singular as she is. ■

*The Huntsman: Winter’s War* is out on April 8

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Hair Ryan Trygstad at Starworks Artists.  
Makeup Jeanine Lobell at Tim Howard Management. Nails Geraldine Holford at The Wall Group. Set design Matt Jackson at Brydges Mackinney. Production Mary-Clancey Pace for Hen’s Tooth Productions. Shot on location in New York on February 3, 2016

