



‘I’ve never been a party person. I never go out’

She may have an Oscar and be half of the world’s sexiest acting couple, but Penélope Cruz is happiest out of the limelight. *Kate Bussmann* finds out why

PENELOPE CRUZ IS DRESSED for the Arctic, albeit a curious part of it. She’s wearing a khaki duvet coat so huge it could double as an actual duvet, a studded denim boiler suit (The Kooples, we both learn, when she shows me the tag on her collar), and preposterously toasty sheepskin boots from Mou (‘they’re so warm, I love them,’ she says, her Spanish accent turning the word into ‘loff’). It’s a look that’s far from how we’re used to seeing her. On the red carpet, the 43-year-old is the embodiment of classic Hollywood glamour,

in satin and lace Ralph & Russo couture, for instance, at January’s Golden Globes, where she was nominated for her astonishing portrayal of Donatella Versace in the series *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. Or in the adverts for her two new campaigns for Lancôme, for whom she’s been an ambassador since 2010. Or at the Fashion Awards in London a few days before we meet, where she wore a crystal-encrusted Chanel gown, plus the same manicure she’s wearing today – although one ruby nail has

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NICO BUSTOS

'I talked to Donatella on the phone – in a way I needed her blessing to play her'

since snapped to a more realistic length for the mother of two young children.

That nail aside, beauty-wise she is as immaculately made up as you'd hope for the daughter of a woman who ran a beauty salon not far from where we're currently sitting, in a deserted hotel lobby in Alcobendas, the working-class suburb of Madrid where she grew up. The location has been picked for convenience rather than nostalgia – it's on the road to the out-of-town home she shares with husband, actor Javier Bardem, 49, and their children, Leonardo, eight, and Luna, five. Bardem was her co-star in her very first film, 1992's *Jamón, Jamón*; they got together as a couple after making Woody Allen's 2008 comedy *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*; and share the big screen again in March's thriller *Everybody Knows*, in which they play former lovers reunited in a desperate search to find her kidnapped daughter.

Penélope spent much of her childhood in her mother's beauty salon where, along with plenty of skills ('I learned how to do hair colour, rollers, cuts...'), she came to understand the real power of beauty. 'Seeing these women coming in and leaving feeling a bit better about themselves wasn't just because of the physical transformation, it was because they took that little time for themselves, one or two hours, where they could relax,' she recalls. 'It was a sacred space. It wasn't just about beauty, it was about what it meant for women who were busy with children or work, like my mum was.'

Those hard-working, down-to-earth values run deep. She arrives early, politely sends her agent away when she appears before our allotted time is up, and is genuinely perplexed as to why I'd fly all the way from London to Spain to meet her. At this point in her career, she could hardly be busier, with four other films coming up after *Everybody Knows*, and a Lancôme shoot the day after we meet, so making space for herself doesn't happen a lot. 'I grew up watching a mother who worked hard, and now she's the one who tells me, "You have to take time for yourself,"' she laughs. 'She didn't take time for herself so you grow up feeling like you have to live up to what you saw, no? I come from a family of very hard-working women with strong personalities, it's what I've always seen.'

No wonder she was so attracted to the role of Donatella, although even she admits that it was surprising casting. 'What did Ryan [Murphy, the show's director] see me



Above Penélope at the Fashion Awards at the Royal Albert Hall last month



Jamón, Jamón 1992



Vanilla Sky 2001



Volver 2006

in where he thought I could do that?' she remembers thinking. 'But then I thought, it actually makes sense, because I feel I *could* do that.' The Versace family were not involved in the making of the series, and has since issued statements condemning it as 'reprehensible' and 'full of gossip and speculation'. But Penélope knew Donatella, having worn Versace in the past, and so when the offer came, she called her up. 'I talked to Donatella on the phone – she wasn't part of the show, and in a way I needed her blessing to do it, because I respect her a lot. She said if someone was going to do it she was happy it was me. I wanted to show the side of her

I knew, the vulnerability and kindness, and the sense of humour she has about herself.'

The show – and Penélope's performance – won resoundingly positive reviews, and despite everything, Donatella reportedly sent her flowers to congratulate her on the Golden Globe nomination.

She and Bardem will also be on the red carpet this awards season for their roles in *Everybody Knows*, which has been nominated for eight Goyas, Spain's equivalent of the Oscars. She's pleased to be acknowledged, but you don't have to read deep between the lines to see that she's not that into the spectacle. 'I love fashion, but I minimise



Vicky Cristina Barcelona 2008

easier. We didn't work weekends, and not every day.' They don't have strict rules, but everything has to have a balance. 'I don't like taking my characters home, for example. That's not healthy. And it doesn't make your performance better. The older I get, the more I value that acting is a game of imagination. You can jump 100 per cent into that fiction.'

They may form the most alpha of power couples, but at home they live a much quieter life. Their children are never seen on their Instagram accounts or on the red carpet. ('I want my kids to grow up in a way that is as anonymous as possible,' she has said.)

But then, Penélope doesn't go out much either. She only went to the Fashion Awards, for instance, because it was sponsored by Atelier Swarovski, for whom she designs a range, and because she was giving an award to friends. 'I like being at home,' she insists. And not just since she and Bardem had their children. 'You get used to not going anywhere. But I've never been a party person, so I don't care. I've never really gone out, even when I was 17.'

something, so she asked Penélope to choose a different script and return the following week. She did – only to have a second failed audition. On the third try, she was signed, and has stuck with Bayonas since, always loyal to the woman who discovered her.

But Penélope admits now that the intensity of those years came at a price. 'I crashed afterwards,' she says. 'I was so tired and I saw that I had to choose: I had to forget the idea of becoming a dancer or studying a different career. I had to take a risk, and I chose acting.'

The risk soon paid off. She was nominated for a Goya for *Jamón, Jamón*, praised for her film debut as a factory worker pregnant by the boss's son, whose mother tries to break up the relationship by paying the thuggish Bardem to pursue her. Post #MeToo, the film is uncomfortable to watch: Penélope's character is exploited sexually, her lack of consent ignored. In its first scene, for instance, her boyfriend pulls down her top and kisses her as she repeatedly says no; and in its wake, Penélope was reportedly so burned that she tried to avoid doing nude



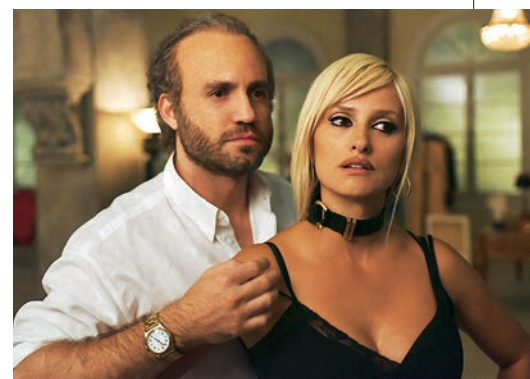
The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story (below) 2017

Everybody Knows 2019

the fittings – I'm very practical in that way. I'll have seen things before in pictures or in sketches that I suggest. I'm lucky: I get to work with amazing designers. They know what they're doing, and I know what I like.' She has always loved clothes though, and she and her sister, Mónica, also an actor, have collaborated on ranges for brands such as Mango. As children, 'my sister and I used to lock ourselves in the bathroom with magazines and pencils and we would change the designs, drawing on top of them.'

For the most part, she and Bardem take turns working, but when they're starring in the same film, she insists that 'it's actually

Penélope was a pretty unusual 17-year-old. Passionate about acting 'since I was a little girl', she was fiercely motivated but had no connections (her father worked in a store selling homewares). At 13, she auditioned for an annual talent search run by Madrid-based agent Katrina Bayonas. By then, she was already funding acting classes by modelling, while keeping up straight As at school and studying classical ballet at Spain's National Conservatory. That first audition, however, was a disaster: the script was *Casablanca* – even the most precocious teenager would find it a stretch to follow Ingrid Bergman – but to Bayonas, it was clear that she had



scenes, but wasn't always successful. 'There are a lot of things in that movie that now would be done differently, she agrees. 'But Bigas [Luna, its late director] was a very special person, very loving. I don't think any of those things were done from a bad place.' She adds: 'There is a revolution happening now. And hopefully it will change a lot of things for women not just in our industry.'

It's an issue that's close to home for Penélope: her close friend Salma Hayek made claims about her career being stymied by Harvey Weinstein when she refused his advances; and having made two films, including *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, with Woody Allen before his adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow reasserted her accusations of childhood sexual abuse, she has stated that she believes the allegations should be looked into again. (Bardem, meanwhile, condemned Allen's 'public lynching'.)

Even in the early years of her career, Penélope had a strong self-protective instinct. 'I was very lucky because I was never into drugs and alcohol, and I think that's what saved me from danger. My friends and family were there for me, even

she was duly nominated for her first Oscar.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona, which followed two years later, is the film that changed her life for ever. As well as winning an Oscar for her role as an unhinged artist ('I laughed a lot – but she's one of those characters who thinks she's always right, so I had to defend her reality'), she was also reunited with Bardem. Over the years, they'd done smaller projects together, and the Spanish film world being small, would see each other around. 'We didn't spend a lot of time together, but I know his family and we were



and too hot, too cold, too busy... I loved LA when I was single, but it's too focused on the industry – it's not the ideal place to raise children. I like London a lot. I wouldn't have a problem living there.' She cracks a smile. 'The only thing that is difficult is the weather. I know I'm not saying anything new, but for Spanish people, it's hard.'

She and Bardem do get recognised in Madrid, but 'it's not a constant thing. Places like this, or London, it's very easy to do the normal things you need to, and I don't want to give that up.' Are their children aware that they're famous? 'I'm not sure if they understand the concept, but we deal with that in a natural way: I explain, for instance, that maybe that person has seen a movie [we were in].'

She's thankful she came of age before camera phones and social media. 'It's very different today,' she nods. 'Teenagers now are less protected than they were and probably less than they will be 10 years from now. There have to be rules to protect them. There's something very unnatural about a 10- or 12-year-old with a phone and

'I wanted to be a mother since I was a little girl. I'd ask Santa Claus to bring me babies'

when I was travelling by myself. That gave me the confidence to say no, because I always knew I had my home to come back to, and that they would be proud of me if I respected the values they taught me.'

Within a few years, Hollywood had taken notice. For her first English-language film, 1998's *The Hi-Lo Country*, she had to learn her lines phonetically, but the work came thick and fast. In 2001 alone, she starred opposite Nicolas Cage in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, Johnny Depp in *Blow* and Tom Cruise (whom she dated for a short while) in *Vanilla Sky*. (Asked if she thinks casting agents couldn't see past her looks, she makes a face, embarrassed by the question. 'I'm so lucky to get these amazing roles, to be offered material with such diversity – that's what I've always looked for. I can't complain'.)

Compared to what she was doing in Spain, though, these were relatively decorative, undemanding roles. Back home, she had begun a career-long collaboration with film-maker Pedro Almodóvar, muse to his mentor, resulting in films such as 1999's *All About My Mother*, in which she played the unlikely role of an HIV-positive nun pregnant by a transvestite; while her magnetic performance as a mother trying to protect her daughter in his 2006 film *Volver* finally made Hollywood recognise that she was much more than a pretty face, and

friends, just not friends who see each other a lot.' They got together after the movie wrapped, and in July 2010, with Penélope pregnant with their first child, got married in a secret ceremony in the Bahamas, with just family present. Leonardo was born the following January.

'I wanted to be a mother since I was a little girl,' she says now. 'I always asked Santa Claus to bring me fake babies, and I've always played the character of a mother. But even if you think you know what it's going to be, it's so amazing what happens when you see your kid for the first time: you then see the world differently for the rest of your life, because you're always going to think about somebody else first.'

Spain was the obvious place for them to make their home, where they have nights in doing karaoke ('all the songs from *The Greatest Showman* – I love that movie'). Here is where the family is, it makes sense. I love New York but it's too hectic for children,



From left Penélope with her sister Mónica; with Lily Collins and Lupita Nyong'o for Lancôme; with Javier in Cannes



access to social media. Mine are little – we have no television at home, and there's a very limited amount of screen time with content chosen by us, appropriate for the age. But no access to the internet. That's a crazy idea. There have to be regulations to protect young people.'

Our time up, I fold up my questions, and she sinks back into her armchair, visibly relaxing – even her voice sounds less tense. Ever polite, she stays a little while longer, chatting and laughing more in those few minutes than the rest of our time combined. And suddenly, I get a glimpse of the woman who, in the early years of her career in Los Angeles, would cheer herself up in the goofiest way imaginable, singing karaoke alone in her apartment, not a care in the world. ◇ Penélope Cruz is ambassador for Lancôme. *L'Absolu Rouge Drama Matte* is available now, and *Teint Idole Ultra Wear Nude* launches next month