



The title 'Being Julia' is set against a background of elegant, thin-lined swirls and small green leaves. The word 'Being' is in a classic serif font, while 'Julia' is in a more ornate, calligraphic serif font. The decorative elements are scattered around the text, with some swirls framing the letters.

Being

Julia

By Margot Dougherty

With

A COMIC RANGE THAT GOES FROM SLAPSTICK TO SATIRE, *VEEP* STAR JULIA LOUIS-DREYFUS IS A POP-CULTURE ICON—AND SHE GOT THERE WITHOUT SACRIFICING LOVE OR SANITY. HERE SHE TALKS ABOUT HER REMARKABLE CAREER, HER 25-YEAR MARRIAGE AND THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF FACING AN EMPTY NEST

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRIC SHAW

STYLED BY JONNY LICHTENSTEIN



SEEMS ONLY fitting to meet Julia Louis-Dreyfus in a coffee shop. She is, after all, Elaine, the hilarious, no-topic-is-taboo *Seinfeld* character who, with her pals Jerry (Seinfeld), George (Jason Alexander) and Kramer (Michael Richards), routinely slid into a booth at Monk's Café to hash over the issues of the day—steam room protocol, close talkers, rogue diaphragms. Twenty years later, Louis-Dreyfus looks like Elaine's hipper sister. On a wintry afternoon in Santa Monica she could be mistaken for a grad student: up-scale riff on an army jacket, black loose-fitting pants, a scarf twirled around her neck, large dark-framed glasses. If fellow diners at Caffè Luxxe recognize her, they're not giving themselves away. When it comes to spotting celebrities, she says, "nobody in L.A. gives a shit."

Or lets on that they do. Confronted with the comedy icon that is Julia Louis-Dreyfus, the coffee shop customers are more likely just playing it cool: Elaine's navigation of our culture's pesky social nuances was one of the key reasons *Seinfeld* became must-see TV. She got down with the boys (most memorably in the "master of your domain" episode) but was always our proxy, The Girl, brilliantly interpreting the role of smart, often shameless, always extravagantly funny female sidekick. Louis-Dreyfus is now deploying her potent comic arsenal as struggling Vice President Selina Meyer on HBO's *Veep*, which begins its second season April 14.

She did her homework for the role. "I talked to a couple of vice presidents," she says, without naming names. (Joe Biden and Al Gore are good bets.) "And I spoke to people on the Hill, chiefs of staff, people in the vice president's office, in the Senate offices, lobbyists, just to get a feeling for the inside culture, the nitty-gritty of it all. One chief of staff told me that she slept with her BlackBerry on a pillow next to her head because she had to be available 24 hours a day."

A large number of her character's dilemmas arise from being center stage—a familiar predicament for Louis-Dreyfus, who finds similarities in the worlds of Hollywood and politics. "As an actor, there's always another job that you want that you might not get," she says. "There's always someone

who is more successful or more famous. They're publicly competitive careers, and both worlds are male dominated, so I bring all of this to playing Selina."

But the actress herself bears little resemblance to that comic character. "She is not in any way starry or conscious of her status," says Armando Iannucci, the show's British producer and creator. "She just wants to be part of the team. When we have a guest actor who's about to work with her for the first time, you can sense their excitement but also nervousness. Julia will do her best to make them not feel worried. I have heard stories of her falling over on her face to make them feel at ease. She's very good at falling over."

The veep she portrays does a lot of face planting, too, but metaphorically; she's routinely blindsided by the capital's culture of posturing, intimidation and rabid ambition. But what's painful for Selina is endlessly entertaining for the audience. Nobody does smart-goofy like Louis-Dreyfus, whose Selina is both authoritative and crippled with insecurity, speeding from classy to crass within a single sentence. Often ignored, she exorcises her frustration with elaborate profanities, which seem that much funnier coming from a perfectly coiffed five-foot-three woman in Dior suits and staggering heels. The expletives trip naturally off Louis-Dreyfus's tongue; she uses them freely offscreen, too. "I don't know how not to," she says. "It's part of who I am. I think if I was having tea with the queen, I would remember not to say, 'Pass me the fuckin' sugar,' but beyond that . . ."

Louis-Dreyfus remembers the first time she got a laugh onstage. "It was a silly short play called *Serendipity*," she says. "I was in fourth grade playing a queen. I was supposed to faint, and everyone laughed. I thought, I didn't mean to be funny, but I'll take it." Even today, she says, acting is "like scratching a deep itch for me. I love getting into the skin of a character. I love being funny. I love making people laugh. I love being on a set and the camaraderie. It's a very pleasant task. I'm just so happy to have been able to eke out a living at it."

Of course, Louis-Dreyfus's "eking" includes winning a Golden Globe for *Seinfeld* and three Emmys: one for *Seinfeld*; one for her 2006–10 series, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*; and one last year for *Veep*. She's been in two Woody Allen movies (*Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Deconstructing Harry*), has had recurring roles on *Arrested Development* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and has a star on Hollywood Boulevard (in an appropriately comic touch, her name was misspelled).

It's a Hollywood truism that the tone on a film or TV set trickles down from the name at the top of the call sheet. Louis-Dreyfus's *Veep* costars, a comic ensemble that works in balletic, bumbling concert, credit her with making their work a delight. "She's void of any kind of arrogance or entitlement," says Tony Hale, who plays Gary, an assistant so abjectly devoted to Selina that he picks up her pregnancy-test kits and breaks up with her boyfriend for her. "She's a fantastic actress and a fantastic person. It's the truth."

"Julia is also a producer on the show," says Anna Chlumsky, who plays Amy, Selina's chief of staff. "For some actors, that's a title in name only, but she's in tune with every bit of the production. The wheels are always turning on how we

can make something cook even better. She's always on her A-game."

Amy Poehler, who was a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* when Louis-Dreyfus hosted the show in 2006 (the first female *SNL* alum to do so), has since become a good friend. "Here's the thing about Julia," she says. "She's a professional. She's kind. She's supersmart. But at the end of the day, she's fuckin' hilarious. It's just so fun to be around her."

She may downplay her celebrity, but Louis-Dreyfus is aware of what it can do. Longtime friend Laurie David, the ex-wife of *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David, is a board member of the Natural Resources Defense Council and co-producer of the Al Gore documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. David says she shared the actress's evolution: "We grew up together learning about the environment. Julia's one of those people who are very hands-on. She cares deeply about the ocean and climate and a variety of issues, and if anything is asked of her, she shows up. She's held picket signs and shot PSAs. I have a tremendous amount of respect for people who use their cachet and their resources for good, and Julia is one of those people."

Veep

is filmed in Baltimore, midway between London, Iannucci's home, and L.A., where Louis-Dreyfus lives with her husband of 25 years, writer-director-producer Brad Hall. (A second home, a bastion of reclaimed woods, solar heating and greenness, is in Santa Barbara.) Their son Charlie is in high school, and their older boy, Henry, attends college on the East Coast. "Had *Veep* come along five years earlier, I would never have done it," Louis-Dreyfus says. "But because Charlie is 15, I think to leave for a couple of weeks at a time is OK, first and foremost because I've got a great partner, Brad, who is just an amazing daddy. If he wasn't, I couldn't do this. I wouldn't do it."

Henry's departure for college hit the couple hard. "It's a big adjustment, having a whole body out of the house," Louis-Dreyfus says. She and her husband explored the subject in a short film, *Picture Paris*, which Hall wrote and directed. Louis-Dreyfus starred as Ellen, a woman who deals with the heartache of her son's departure by obsessing over all things French. She learns to make pâté and say *merde* in just the right guttural tone. She leases a luxury apartment in Paris over the Internet. Her husband is less enthusiastic.

Hall and Louis-Dreyfus made the movie independently (HBO later picked it up for a December 2012 debut), shooting in L.A. and Paris. "It was a ball," she says, "but it was a lot of hard work. Our older son worked on the L.A. portion, but when we went to Paris, we were on a tight fuckin' budget, so just Brad and I went. We shot for a condensed period, 14- and 15-hour days. I loved it."



Despite comic elements, bizarre ones at that, *Picture Paris* isn't all laughs. "What's nice about a short film," says Hall, "is that a character can have quite a complicated inner life, but you have to express it in a very short amount of screen time. Julia's very skilled in that, and I thought it would be fun to have her play a couple of different colors that she's not known for."

The two, who met while they were theater students at Northwestern University, work together constantly. "I'm always asking Brad to read scripts or whether he likes the rough cut," says Louis-Dreyfus. "I seek his advice and his take on whatever I'm working on. Even if we're not, on paper, doing a project together, we're doing a project together."

"Jules and Brad are such a good team on so many fronts," says Louis-Dreyfus's sister Lauren Bowles, an actress (she plays Holly the waitress on *True Blood*). "She is truly his muse." Hall also wrote and produced the 2002 sitcom *Watching Ellie* for Louis-Dreyfus, casting her as a jazz singer. The show, costarring Bowles and Steve Carell, was shot with a

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Asked for the secret to her marriage's longevity, Louis-Dreyfus says it was "good luck. We were just right for each other, and it just so happened that we found each other."

single camera (before *The Office* ignited the trend), and each episode explored 22 real-time minutes of the character's life. "Watching *Ellie* was a great show," says Louis-Dreyfus. "Very inventive and a little ahead of its time, to tell you the truth."

Despite decades of career kudos, "the family life that she has created is, hands down, Jules's first priority and what she relishes the most," says Bowles. "She and Brad—my God, theirs is truly one of those love affairs that have never waned."

Asked if there's any secret to the longevity of their marriage, Louis-Dreyfus pauses before deciding that it was "good luck. We were just right for each other, and it just so happened that we found each other." What initially drew her to Hall, she says, was that "fundamentally, we share a similar set of values. That doesn't sound very sexy, I know. But at the end of the day, it's nice to know that's in place. Particularly because in this town, with all the smoke and mirrors, it's easy to believe and be seduced by your own hype. Success and failure are tricky here, maybe more so than in other businesses, except perhaps politics. In both universes, very often an image is being sold. The struggle is maintaining a sense of yourself and your ideals while selling that image. To have a safe place at home is that much more important."

Julia spent her early childhood in New York. Her mother, Judith, and father, William Louis-Dreyfus, a Frenchman who was the president of the billion-dollar commodities firm Louis Dreyfus Group, divorced when she was young. Her mother's second husband, Thompson Bowles (whom Julia also calls Dad), worked for Project Hope, and the new family moved overseas, living in Tunisia, Sri Lanka and Colombia before settling in Washington, D.C. "I remember all of it," Louis-Dreyfus says of the travel. "Particularly Sri Lanka. I was seven or eight, and it was a shock to go there from Manhattan." She was the only white girl in school, and although she was advanced in English, her classmates were ahead in math. "I have a very fond memory of my dad teaching me my multiplication tables by making it into a song and figuring out a dance to go with it," she says. "It was wonderful. Then my mom would tutor me in English. I looked forward to reading because there was no television, so books and stories became the replacement." She remembers the family passing around a copy of *Little Women*, then sobbing and being unable to finish when they got to Beth dying.

The family moved to Washington, where Louis-Dreyfus went to an all-girls school and became active in theater. She was a freshman at Northwestern when fellow undergrad Hall recruited her for a troupe he and a friend had started. "I was crazy about her before she even knew I was around," he says. It wasn't long before the prestigious Chicago comedy group

Second City drafted her, and then, in 1982, *Saturday Night Live* came calling, hiring both Louis-Dreyfus and Hall as cast members. The couple moved to New York.

Both were unhappy. The *SNL* culture was "difficult," she says. "The show wasn't particularly friendly toward women." She and Hall, who fared somewhat better on the show as a news anchor, lasted three seasons. In 1986 they moved to L.A.; they married the following year. "I sort of went kicking and screaming," she says. "I said to Brad, 'Let's come out here for a little bit of time, but I don't want to have kids here. Let's just try to get some work and go back to New York.'"

Seinfeld, initially written for two guys, interrupted that plan. When NBC executives said the show needed a woman, Larry David, with whom the couple had worked on *Saturday Night Live*, brought in Louis-Dreyfus, and the outspoken Elaine Benes was born.

Elaine's bulky sweaters and boxy jackets concealed Louis-Dreyfus's pregnancies. Her work hours were family friendly; as toddlers, the boys went to the set, and when they were older, she was frequently finished for the day in time to pick them up from school. Though TV actors often use the summer hiatus to make movies, she turned down any project that would take her away from home. "I just couldn't bear to do it," she says.

With her second son's departure for college on the horizon, Louis-Dreyfus is thinking about her next phase. "I adore my children," she says, "and their growing up is bittersweet—mainly sweet; that's what people do, they grow up. As a parent, you're always worried about your children, but I'm looking forward to having a kind of freedom to go places and have adventures that I might not have been able to have when I was younger. That's what I'm telling myself right now, anyway."

Later this year she'll appear in a new movie from director Nicole Holofcener (*Friends with Money*), costarring James Gandolfini, as her love interest, and Catherine Keener. "The character I play is a masseuse and a little unkempt," she says. "I've got long, straggly hair and my Buddha things and my yoga pants." In this movie, too, her character grapples with a child leaving home. "Julia is very funny and down to earth and warm," says Holofcener, remembering their first meeting. "When she started talking about her son going away to college, she started to cry. I thought, OK, you're cast."

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Louis-Dreyfus surprised Holofcener with how easily she summoned tears in scenes that called for them. But off camera, the actress says her fifties find her more unflappable—for the most part. "It's a little strange seeing yourself age," she says. "You can't believe it's happening to you. Having said that, I really like having life experience under my belt. I feel that I have a firmer sense of knowing what I'm doing. And I don't feel apologetic about it. That's a good feeling to have." *

MARGOT DOUGHERTY last profiled Marisa Tomei for *More*.

