



Love, Lust & What She Didn't Wear

OSCAR WINNER MARISA TOMEI ◀

PLAYS A DOTING MOM IN THE NEW MOVIE *PARENTAL GUIDANCE*,
BUT HER ROLES HAVE OFTEN REQUIRED HER TO BARE BOTH FLESH AND SOUL.

SHE TALKS ABOUT HER BROOKLYN CHILDHOOD, DATING YOUNGER MEN—
AND WHAT SHE LEARNED FROM THAT *WRESTLER* STRIPTEASE / BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **ALEXEI HAY** /

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MARISA TOMEI, who shifts so easily from madcap comedy (*Crazy, Stupid, Love*) to dark drama (*The Ides of March*), is equally adept at shifting in her seat. Arriving at a poolside cabana at the Avalon Hotel in Beverly Hills wearing cuffed denim shorts and a rose-colored top, Tomei tosses off her leather thongs,

folds up her aviator shades and within minutes turns her Jetsons-style molded plastic chair into an ersatz jungle gym. With the agility of an eight-year-old, she hangs nearly upside down, her legs draped over one armrest, her head propped on the other. "I'll just assume the analysts' position," she says with the easy laugh that finishes most of her sentences.

Humorous self-deprecation is not what you expect from an actress who won Oscar nominations for her roles in such serious fare as *The Wrestler*, in which she played an aging stripper, opposite Mickey Rourke, and *In the Bedroom*, in which she appeared with Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson as a woman from the wrong side of the tracks. In *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, Tomei was riveting as the two-timing wife of a narcotics-numbed husband (Philip Seymour Hoffman) who spends her Thursdays having sex with his brother (Ethan Hawke). She transfixed Broadway audiences with her dance of the seven veils (minus veils) for Al Pacino's Herod in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.

No, this is conduct more becoming the actress with serious comedy chops, the star who put herself on the Hollywood map some 20 years ago playing Mona Lisa Vito, Joe Pesci's big-haired, shoulder-padded, Brooklyn-accented

girlfriend in *My Cousin Vinny*. Mona's rapid-fire court testimony illuminating the finer points of the 1964 Buick Skylark's axle arrangements and tires is a touchstone of movie-comedy history. Tomei was new to Hollywood, sleeping on a friend's couch, when she heard that that performance had earned her a nomination for Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Her 1993 win was a major upset, given that her conominees were Vanessa Redgrave, Joan Plowright, Judy Davis and Miranda Richardson.

This Christmas, Tomei is back with another family-friendly comedy, *Parental Guidance*, starring Bette Midler and Billy Crystal. Tomei plays their daughter, Alice, a mother of three. When her husband (Tom Everett Scott) asks her to join him on a business trip, Alice reluctantly recruits her mom and dad—whose parenting style is at serious odds with her own—to stay with the kids. "Where you would say, 'Quit your whining,'" she warns them upon arrival, "we would say, 'Use your words.'" Crystal, who coproduced the movie, came up with the story after a five-day visit from his granddaughters several years ago. Although it's a comedy, there are touching scenes, too, including a climactic moment between Crystal and Tomei. "It's a little vaudeville and a little *On Golden Pond*," says the actress, who calls the film one of

her best professional experiences. The movie's clash of generations simply reflects reality, she adds. "That's the way families are: totally sublime and completely distressing—and yours."

Tomei is not a mom in real life (unless her 11 godchildren count) but often plays one, always with striking ease and believability. "It's really fun to work with kids," she says. "You don't know what's going to happen. When they're in the zone, it's the best." In *Parental Guidance*, she was such a natural at nurturing that director Andy Fickman sent her a Mother's Day card. "Marisa is a gifted actress who makes subtle choices that are sometimes deeper than the lens can see," he says. "When you're watching her on the monitor in real time, you're like, 'Great!' But when you project to the big screen, what you thought was a great moment was twice as great because of the look Marisa did or the hair toss or squint of an eye."

Crystal first met Tomei when he was in preproduction for 1992's *Mr. Saturday Night*. "No one knew her very well," he says. "It was before *Cousin Vinny*. She was too young for what I was looking for, but I was so moved by her audition I called her agent and said, 'I can't cast her, but she's great.' A year later she wins the Oscar. When we thought of her for this part, she came in and

said, 'Great. Now I'm too old.' Not at all. She's a perfect fit for Bette and me."

There's an ageless quality to Tomei, on camera and off. "Marisa's in her Hollywood-late-thirties," says producer Dan Bucatinsky, a friend who has known her since they were six-year-olds at summer camp in upstate New York. (Translation: She turns 48 this month.) "She doesn't snuff out the youthful spirits she's always had."

Many actresses have difficulty finding satisfying roles as the decades pass, but Tomei does not. "My career has gone against the grain," she says. "It's really working out for me so far. There are seasons for everything. You recognize that things pass, opportunities flow, and there are times to seize them and times to be fallow. I'm not working right now, and it's not just [because] 'Oh, I'm really tired.' It's a deeper recognition of a cycle, like a field that needs to lie fallow for a while to have another really good crop. I've learned to be easy on myself with that kind of timing."

She gravitates toward projects that "don't maybe satisfy in a very tidy way," she says. "I prefer a beautiful mess. I'm drawn to things that are really not conventional."

John Cusack had known Tomei for years before costarring with her in the 2008 political satire *War, Inc.* "Marisa dug the politics of the piece," he says. "It's a dumb sports analogy, but there are a lot of gym fighters who talk a good game when the pressure's not on, but when you're into day 40 of a grueling shoot in Bulgaria and you see someone continually caring about what she does that much—Marisa cares so deeply about doing good work. She wears everything on her sleeve and says, 'Take me as I am'—and then just brings it."

That's even harder than it sounds. *The Wrestler*, she says, "was gut-wrenching material, emotionally and physically challenging." Before she did her first striptease, in front of a room full of extras, "I downed a number of shots of whiskey," she admits. "I definitely felt the dual thing of feeling so vulnerable but also empowered,

because the guys, when they're watching you, they're really like little children, wide-eyed, and you could see where they'd give you anything you wanted. There's a certain kind of freedom and control: You're hovering over them; they're little and you're tall. I had heard strippers talking about it, but I didn't know I'd feel that way acting it." Rourke sent her a bouquet of flowers afterward. "He was a complete gentleman," says Tomei.

There's a searching quality at the heart of Tomei's characters, both the comedic and tragic roles, a vulnerability that softens the contours of even their most questionable behavior. Take the lusty middle school teacher who has her way with Steve Carrell's recently separated character in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. "Marisa brings real humanity to the people she plays," says Carrell. "When you watch her in a role, there's a sense that you're only seeing what her character is allowing you to see, but there is much more that's hidden."

Jonah Hill confesses to being abjectly in love with Tomei, and not only because she was the first celebrity to give him props. "She came up to me in a restaurant the day after *Knocked Up* came out and said, 'I love you—you're

scene I've ever shot is the one of just me and Marisa crying on the bed. I'm basically saying, 'This guy's not right for you,' and she's admitting that she's made a lot of mistakes and that our relationship is fucked up. I've never had a moment connecting with an actor so much. She and I have remained good friends. I really treasure her."

Tomei grew up in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Her father is a retired attorney, and her mother, a retired schoolteacher, now leads culinary and cultural tours in New York City. Tomei went to Edward R. Murrow, a magnet high school with an emphasis on the arts. "We had a drama teacher who brought a lot of joy into my life," she says. Her parents introduced her and her younger brother, Adam, also now an actor, to Broadway shows and local productions. "My mom would take us to the Heights Players," a community theater in Brooklyn, she says, "and afterward you could have your birthday party onstage. So all these things added to the magic of what theater was. Also, seeing how happy it made my parents—that transference of 'Oh, I want to make them happy.'"

Her parents' approach to child rearing was liberal and supportive. "Whatever you want to do, we are behind

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awesome,'" he remembers. "When she walked away, my friends were like, 'That was crazy!'" What sealed his adulation was playing her son in *Cyrus*, an offbeat comedy that depicts the overly close relationship of a single parent and an adult child. The arrangement becomes increasingly problematic as Tomei's character tries to date a new man (John C. Reilly). "My favorite movie I've ever been in is *Cyrus*," says Hill—high praise, given his Oscar nomination for his role in *Moneyball* with Brad Pitt. "And my favorite

you," is how Tomei describes it. "My mom was into consciousness-raising groups. She'd have them at our house. Women were coming into their own when I was a little girl. She raised us with that idea, to be who you are."

In the summer, the family went upstate to Goldens Bridge, a community also known as "the Colony," which was started by immigrant socialists in the late 1920s. "It was like *A Walk on the Moon*," says Tomei, referring to the 1999 movie with Viggo Mortensen and Diane Lane, set in the Catskills. Homes

were arranged around a lake, connected by a few dirt roads. “The Colony had a counterculture, hippie vibe,” says Bucatinsky, whose parents also had a house there. The center of activity was a barn where skits and talent shows were performed. “No one locked their doors or wore shoes,” says Tomei. “Everyone knew everyone, and everyone was your mom. It was really heaven. Sometimes when I have good dreams, I dream of being there, of that kind of safety. If you

birth of two. “She was a stellar support, holding my hand,” says Bonet, who changed her name to Lilakoi Moon in 1992. “My son was born in a major rainstorm at 3 in the morning, and Marisa was there. She’d come with me to my midwife appointments, read everything, watch the DVDs. She has a very thorough curiosity.” Asked to sum up her friend, Moon settles on “delicious. And hilarious. She’s a delicious, hilarious, ethereal delight.”

and took a lot out of me,” she says of the shoot in South Africa.

Over the holidays she’ll have time to lighten up—and cook. Her extended family, who have been known to travel to Italy en masse for vacation (“craziness, but a lot of fun”), are making an effort to preserve their traditional Italian recipes. “We put names in a hat, and someone from the younger generation will pick someone from the older generation who will teach them

one dish a year,” she says.

“You just have to have that cheesecake, that certain sauce, you know?” Or that zeppole. Two years ago, Tomei and her brother resurrected an old family recipe for the sugary fried dough that had been deemed too difficult for 21st-century

schedules (not even the older generations felt that they had time to do it). “Ultimately it wasn’t that hard,” she says, “but the surprise, to see all my aunts and uncles, and my dad, as if he were six years old: ‘My God! You made zeppole!’ They lined up at the kitchen door. It was the most thrilling thing.”

Tomei splits her time between homes in New York and Los Angeles and until recently had a long-term relationship with actor Logan Marshall-Green (*Prometheus*), 12 years her junior. Asked if she has any comments on younger men, she allows that “variety is the spice of life” and laughs. As for marriage, which hasn’t yet been part of her life script, “I feel differently about it at different times,” she says. “Basically my pattern is that I’ve been in long, monogamous relationships—12 years, four years. I’m really just interested in true love and intimacy, and whatever package that comes in is OK with me. I haven’t been that focused on marriage as a goal in and of itself.”

Not that there hasn’t been opportunity. Before ending our conversation to go back to shooting Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jonah Hill, 28, has a final request: “Will you ask Marisa if she’ll marry me?” ❀

MARGOT DOUGHERTY profiled Diane Lane in the September issue of *More*.

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had something going on with your mom or dad, there were a lot of older people around and you could find your way. For me it was the theater. I’d sit by the people who did the writing for the shows and be their little helper. There were ways to mature outside your nuclear family that were really helpful.”

In high school, she starred in *Pippin* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. After graduation, in 1982, Tomei went to Boston University to study theater. She dropped out after a year to work in New York. “Oh, my God,” she says. “I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I didn’t have any connections. I’d just get the newspaper, and if it said, ‘We need someone to dance for the Grand Ole Opry,’ I’d think I could do it: I’ve taken tap lessons! I would just go on anything. Even as a joke I wouldn’t be able to audition for the Opry now. Where did I get the cojones?” She landed parts in Off Broadway plays, then got a one-line role in Garry Marshall’s *The Flamingo Kid*. That led to a recurring part on *As the World Turns*; a YouTube clip shows her playing a dirt-smudged Cinderella in a dream sequence featuring Phyllis Diller as Fairy Godmother.

In 1987, Tomei nabbed a role as Lisa Bonet’s roommate in the *Cosby Show* spinoff *A Different World*. She has since become godmother of Bonet’s three children and was present at the

Tomei has made more than 40 films—from *Slums of Beverly Hills* and *Wild Hogs* to *The Lincoln Lawyer*—all while keeping a hand in theater. “I like all the lives I get to live within one life,” she says of acting, “the little details of cultures I get to learn about, exploring the different themes, the things that are important to a particular character or story. I feel they come to me for a reason, to reflect or bring up something in my own life.”

Her forties find her feeling comfortable in her own skin. “No matter what age you are, there are cycles of where you put your energy, things you’re trying to let go of and to cultivate,” she says. Now her emphasis is on “making more and more heartfelt and authentic decisions. You have to keep your eye on the prize, be more courageous, more connected to life.”

Tomei has two other films ready for release: *Love, Marilyn*, a documentary about Marilyn Monroe in which she joins other stars in reading the icon’s newly revealed diaries and letters, and *Inescapable*, the story of a man who escaped persecution in Syria but returns 25 years later to look for his daughter, who disappeared on a business trip. Tomei plays Fatima, the fiancée he left behind. She transformed herself into an Arab woman for the part and perfected the accent. “It was heavy subject matter



Here and on page 76:
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