



# MATERIAL *Girl*

Accomplished actress, smouldering sex symbol and peerless luxury brand muse, **Scarlett Johansson** is the quintessential silver screen siren of her generation. She talks to *Paul Kay* about pushing the boundaries, and why bubbles are a girl's best friend



**IN THE RED**  
Johansson poses for the cameras at the 2011 Oscars

**S**TANDING ON THE PENINSULA SHANGHAI'S rooftop terrace overlooking The Bund, the twinkling and futuristic Pudong skyline usually stands uncontested in drawing all eyes – but not tonight. Part of the reason for this is the impressive marquee that has been erected for the evening's Moët et Chandon gala dinner, a structure made from thousands of champagne flutes that glow with an ethereal indigo light. Also eye-catching are the large mirrored tables within, replete with shimmering candles and yet more champagne glasses soon to be filled with extravagant bubbles, including the 100-year-old Moët Grand Vintage Collection 1911. But even these glamorous gildings are outshone by the night's main attraction.

*"I'm convinced Woody Allen will write my swan song someday, my Norma Desmond character"*

Just as the tuxedo- and ball gown-clad guests are settling into their seats, an announcement is made that causes the hum of conversation and the clinking of glasses to cease. Then, as 150 heads turn eagerly in her direction, Scarlett Johansson makes her entrance, looking every inch the silver screen siren with her bottle green Marc Jacobs dress, striking auburn hair and million-dollar smile amid sweeping spotlights and a blitzkrieg of camera flashes. Pudong never stood a chance.

It's in a far mellower setting that I meet Johansson early the next afternoon. The actress is curled up in an armchair in a suite at the Waldorf Astoria, a little further along The Bund. Casually dressed in jeans and grey jumper, with hair scraped back, she looks very different from the larger-than-life Hollywood icon who lit up the Shanghai night 12 hours previously. And yet she exudes an unmistakable magnetism, her star quality impossible to mask – even through what looks suspiciously like a hangover.

Too much champagne?

"So much champagne," she mock groans. "I woke up this morning and I was like, ugh, never again, and then of course I had a lunch this afternoon and... *the champagne was flowing again!* [Laughs] I turned to Daniel [Lalonde, president and CEO of Moët et Chandon] and I was like, 'Moët is trying to kill me. You are trying to *sink* me!'"

Given the previous night's festivities (following the champagne-paired dinner, the party moved to nearby Bar Rouge, where golden jero-boams of bubbly popped non-stop until the wee small hours) it's a fair accusation. But then, one suspects that Moët would rather keep their brand ambassador alive. After all, it's not every day one finds a representative who not only has the talent and intellect to match her looks, but who is also down-to-earth, charming and eloquent. When Johansson speaks, her words seem measured and well thought out, her irresistibly husky voice occasionally enlivened by a dulcet lilt or a theatrical flourish when she recounts an anecdote. And she has charisma to burn. In short, she is perhaps *the* cinematic sex bomb of her generation – and all this before her 27th birthday. To put that in perspective, Marilyn Monroe – who Johansson famously paid tribute to in a 2009 Dolce & Gabbana cosmetics ad campaign – had yet to appear in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *How to Marry a Millionaire* or *The Seven Year Itch* by that age.

But then, the New York-born Johansson made her start early. Her big-screen debut came aged nine with a small part in Rob Reiner's critically

### Scarlett's Movie Line

**GHOST WORLD**  
Director: Terry Zwigoff (2001)

**LOST IN TRANSLATION**  
Director: Sofia Coppola (2003)



**GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING**  
Director: Peter Webber (2003)

**A LOVE SONG FOR BOBBY LONG**  
Director: Shainee Gabel (2004)

**MATCH POINT**  
Director: Woody Allen (2005)

panned comedy *North*, but by 16 she had gained plaudits for her roles in indie flicks *Manny & Lo* and *Ghost World*, and the Robert Redford-directed *The Horse Whisperer*. She made the transition to adult roles – and to the mainstream consciousness – with Sofia Coppola's superb *Lost in Translation* in 2003, and followed that up with well-received turns in the likes of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) and *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008). However, it is her work in a trio of Woody Allen films – *Match Point* (2005), *Scoop* (2006) and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008) – that has done most to define her career to date, and the actress says she hopes to work with Allen again in the future. "I do his catering. He knows that. I make sandwiches for him and stuff," says Johansson playfully. "I'm convinced that Woody will write my swan song someday... My Norma Desmond character [from *Sunset Boulevard*] waiting in the wings."

Most recently, Johansson has developed a penchant for superhero movies, including Frank Miller's *The Spirit*, *Iron Man 2* and the forthcoming *The Avengers*, written and directed by fanboy supreme Joss Whedon. Indeed, Johansson tells me that she shot her final scenes for *The Avengers* and "hung up the rubber suit... for now" the day before boarding the plane to Shanghai. She'll also be seen later this year in Cameron Crowe's *We Bought a Zoo*, opposite Matt Damon, and is about to start work on Jonathan Glazer's adaptation of Michel Faber's darkly satirical novel *Under the Skin*, in which she plays an alien who abducts hitchhikers in northern Scotland for a nefarious intergalactic corporation.

**STAR QUALITY**  
**BELOW FROM LEFT** Johansson at the recent Moët et Chandon gala dinner in Shanghai; the actress onstage with Liev Schreiber during her Tony Award-winning run in *A View from the Bridge*





Johansson chooses her jobs carefully, largely based on the people she'll be working with. Her role as Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* – which she reprises in *The Avengers* – came about mainly because she “desperately wanted to work with [director] Jon Favreau and... desperately wanted to work with Robert [Downey Jr].” Similarly, Johansson says she was attracted to her upcoming role in *Under the Skin* because of “Jonathan Glazer... and I think the idea of playing a character who goes through a sort of transition into a phase of self-awareness and self-discovery. I thought that process would be interesting. It's a really beautiful and tragic story that Jonathan has written, and I'm excited for it, I'm excited to work with him, I think it will be... [Pause]...life-altering in some way. We'll see. I hope I come out alive on the other end of it.”

Pushing her career boundaries is something that Johansson does habitually. Last year she fulfilled a childhood dream by making her Broadway debut in the Arthur Miller-penned *A View from the Bridge*, winning a Tony Award for her troubles. She has also recorded two albums: *Anywhere I Lay My Head* (2008), in which she covers songs by Tom

**DOUBLE BUBBLE ABOVE**

Johansson is hoisted aloft on a chaise longue while shooting a recent campaign for Moët et Chandon

Waits (and which was named 23rd best album of 2008 by British music magazine *NME*), and *Break Up* (2009), on which she collaborated with New Jersey singer-songwriter Pete Dinklage. And she's active politically, campaigning for Barack Obama in 2008 and recently endorsing New York mayoral candidate Scott Stringer. She plans to get involved in Obama's re-election campaign too – “because the alternative is so terrifying.” Perhaps it would help swing a few votes if they put her on a button, I suggest. “What, Scarlett Johansson for Barack Obama for President?” she laughs. “That's a lot of words to fit into a button... Maybe a giant button.”

It's a whimsical idea of course, but not one without serious merit. After all, Johansson's face has been employed to sell all manner of products in the past few years. As well as being Moët's ambassador, she is also the face of Spanish clothing brand Mango and Dolce & Gabbana cosmetics, and has featured in major campaigns for L'Oreal, Calvin Klein fragrances and Louis Vuitton. But does Johansson find it difficult to resolve these commercial endorsements with her work as a serious actress?



“I don't think the two are really related,” she says. “I don't think about my career as an actor when I'm doing photoshoots for Dolce or Moët. It's a different thing.” The actress also says she enjoys the old-fashioned razzle-dazzle of being Moët's muse. “It feels almost like a return to the golden age of Hollywood or something, it's very glamorous working with them. To travel around and have these huge glamorous dos... and wine and dine and meet fascinating people from every ilk... It's really the best gig, I have to say.”

While there are a few obvious differences, it's hard not to think of Johansson's current sojourn in relation to *Lost in Translation*, where she starred opposite Bill Murray, who played an American actor visiting a big Asian city to promote an alcohol brand when he could be off, as he says, “doing a play somewhere.” Is this a case of life imitating art?

“You think that's weird, it was totally surreal when we had a celebration with Moët last year in Tokyo,” says Johansson, grooving on the memory. “I was like, ‘this is crazy. *I'm living the dream!*’ I think it depends. I think if you balance, if you're working on stuff that you're proud of... as opposed to just sort of scraping by and busying yourself with work that's not fulfilling, then yeah, it must be incredibly depressing. But I'm fortunate that I've been able to balance the two things, so it feels, in that sense, different. I don't feel searching in that way. At least not in my career...”

Johansson is famously unwilling to discuss her private life with the media, but her recent romantic ups-and-downs have been well documented. She divorced from husband of three years, Canadian actor Ryan Reynolds, earlier this year, and subsequently had a brief relationship with the 51-year-old actor Sean Penn that, according to the gossip blogs, ended badly. Worse was to come a few days after our interview when a series of naked pictures of Johansson were leaked onto the internet. Unfortunately for someone in Johansson's position, such interest is nigh impossible to avoid.

*“I'm a private person and I don't feel like I need everybody all over my business”*

**THE ISLAND**  
Director: Michael Bay (2005)

**SCOOP**  
Director: Woody Allen (2006)

**THE PRESTIGE**  
Director: Christopher Nolan (2006)

**THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL**  
Director: Justin Chadwick (2008)

**VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA**  
Director: Woody Allen (2008)



**IRON MAN 2**  
Director: Jon Favreau (2010)

“It is incredibly difficult,” she says. “You have to do a bit of dancing... skirting around things. Bobbing and weaving I'd say. Not only am I just a private person and I don't feel like I need everybody all over my business, but for me I feel like the less I know about somebody personally, the easier a time I have believing they can slip in and out of different characters.”

Moreover, Johansson says she feels uncomfortable with the media's desire to place everyone neatly into a pre-decided category. “I don't really feel like a sex symbol,” she says. “I've never felt like that, I've always felt like a character actor. I've always wanted to be a character actor. I think it can be a bit of a challenge to break out of the pigeonhole that the media can put particularly female actors in, either the bombshell, or the girl next door, or the other woman, or the funny girl... I think each actor has their own struggles trying to get out of that straitjacket of the label that the media places on you. But I think you just have to be creative with your choices in order to get out of that.”

In this respect, Johansson has done a fine job of keeping the media on their toes, and her eclectic CV is testament to a creative force that one suspects has not yet reached top gear. Convincing the world she is not a sex symbol, however, may be the one thing that's beyond her reach. **T**

**CHARACTER BUILDING**  
**ABOVE FROM LEFT** Johansson is deadly as Black Widow in *The Avengers*; and talks to the animals in *We Bought a Zoo* with Matt Damon

IMAGES: REX FEATURES; SNAPPER MEDIA