



# La Bellucci Vita

THE ITALIAN SILVER-SCREEN GODDESS TELLS PAUL KAY WHY MOTHERHOOD IS GREATER THAN ANY ROLE SHE'LL EVER PLAY, AND WHY SHE IS DRAWN TO THE DARK SIDE

**S**OMEWHERE ON THE upper floors of the Portman Ritz-Carlton in Shanghai, a pair of burly security guards are whispering into headset mics, their faces masks of grave concern. They look me up and down in unison, pause to receive more instructions, then part symmetrically to let me enter the plush suite beyond. Inside, it's a hive of activity, with designer-clad assistants buzzing to and fro in the grip of intense concentration. And in the middle of it all sits Monica Bellucci, her posture perfect, her glossy black hair cascading over the shoulders of an exquisite floral dress. When she turns to welcome me with a smile, it's utterly cinematic.

The actress and model is in town as a guest of Cartier for the glitzy launch of the Tank Anglaise watch. It is, she reveals, her first visit to China. "It's incredible, such strong energy, so much going on. In Europe, we look so old!" she exclaims. "I've never had this feeling before in any other place. Even New York looks old compared to here. It's unbelievable." Bellucci has had a close relationship with Cartier for more than 10 years, she says, but her connection with the Tank watch goes back even further: she fondly recalls buying a Tank with the pay from one of her first modelling jobs.

Born in Città di Castello in Umbria, Italy, in 1964, Bellucci says she had ambitions to become an actress from a young age, but on the quiet streets of a small town it seemed like a pipe dream. She cites Italian bombshells Claudia Cardinale, Gina Lollobrigida, Sophia Loren and Monica Vitti among her early inspirations, as well

as the films of Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti and Vittorio de Sica.

Bellucci began modelling at 13, moving to Milan in 1988 as her career took flight and breaking into acting soon after. Her Hollywood debut was a small part in Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* in 1992. "It wasn't a role, just a moment," is how Bellucci describes it, but it was enough to reaffirm her desire to pursue a career as an actress.

Her acting and modelling careers progressed steadily in tandem through the 1990s, during which she garnered roles in a string of largely European art-house films. But it was 2000's coming-of-age tale *Malèna* (written and directed by Giuseppe Tornatore of *Cinema Paradiso* fame) that really made the world sit up and take notice. The Italian-language film saw Bellucci play the title character, an alluring widow who becomes the object of jealousy and desire in a small town in wartime Sicily. The film earned two Oscar nominations as well as a legion of fans for Bellucci, confirming her arrival as a silver-screen beauty in the classical Hollywood mould.

The next decade saw Bellucci accepting roles that made her impossible to pigeonhole, mixing controversial choices such as Alex in Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible* (2002) and Mary Magdalene in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) with lighter roles in *Asterix and Obelix Meet Cleopatra* (2002), *The Brothers Grimm* (2005) and the *Matrix* sequels (2003). Most recently, she has completed two very different films: the Bahman Ghobadi-directed *Rhino Season*, in which she plays an Iranian woman caught up in the country's Islamic Revolution, and *Des Gens Qui S'Embrassent*, a French-language comedy.

"I think in my work I like to look at the dark side of human beings," says Bellucci. "Sometimes, in these roles, you can do mean things without being mean for real, without being dangerous to others. Through one life, you can lead different lives."

With her good looks and sex-symbol status, it would be easy for Bellucci to play only glamorous roles, but this desire to push the boundaries and embrace parts with emotional depth takes her

#### AT A GLANCE

##### WORK IT OUT

"I have never done therapy, maybe because my work helps me"

##### COMIC TIMING

"When I was younger, I was crazy with comic books, so it's not a coincidence that I've done movies like *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, *Dobermann* or *Shoot 'Em Up*"

##### CRYING GAME

"I cry every day because kids, they give you so many emotions. Sometimes they say things you would never think of"



*"I like to look at the dark side of human beings"*

down a different path. She is determined and strong-willed too, as she demonstrates during our interview when a publicist attempts to cut things short owing to a schedule change. "No," says Bellucci firmly, fixing the interloper with a determined stare. "No. I will finish this interview."

Bellucci married French actor Vincent Cassel in 1999, having met him on the set of 1996's *L'Appartement*. Cassel's proposal was, says Bellucci, unexpected. "We were in a car, I was going to Puerto Rico to shoot a film [*Under Suspicion*] with Gene Hackman and Morgan Freeman, so we knew that we would be separated for a long time, and he asked me to marry him just before I boarded the plane," the actress recalls. "He came with a beautiful ring, and I thought it was old-fashioned but at the same time I was moved because it was so nice, a very chivalrous gesture."

The couple have since had two children, Deva in 2004 and Léonie in 2010. During each pregnancy, Bellucci appeared on the cover of Italian *Vanity Fair*, once naked, and once in lingerie.

The couple have co-starred in a number of movies and are currently developing an idea for a film they hope to shoot in Brazil, a country they visit often. Working with one's spouse may not be everyone's preference, but for Bellucci it's ideal.

"Now we have two kids, to have time to stay

together like that and work and have the kids with us, it's just perfect," she says. "To find time for family and work is not easy, but I'm lucky because I'm an actor and I work if I want to work, I don't work if I don't want to, and I can bring my children with me, so it's much better to be an actor than a doctor or a lawyer if you want to be a good mother."

Indeed, it's when she's with her children that Bellucci says she is happiest. "For me, family is very important, because I'm Italian," she says. "In Italy family is very important, it's the basis of life."

But has motherhood changed the types of roles she chooses? "No, not the roles; because I am an actor I want to feel free in my choices," states Bellucci unequivocally. "Of course, in the past I have done movies that were a bit polemic, such as *The Passion of the Christ* or *Malèna* or *Irreversible*, but I don't say today, because I have children, I won't do strong things again. My work and my life as an actress have nothing to do with my life as a mother. For my kids I want to be a mother, I don't want to be an image of magazines or of movies – for them I'm just a mother. But when I act, I'm an actress, and I want to be always free. I don't want to be, 'Ok, from now on I'll just do fairytales.' It's boring to think that way."

She tries to live her life, she says, with respect for herself and for the energies of the world.

"I think it's all about that, about spirituality. Not religious, but respecting the energies is so important, and listening to the energies. I think it's a spirit thing, I think if you do something that makes you feel happy, I think you keep young." She has, she says, no regrets. "Not because I was always good," she clarifies, "but because even the bad things that happened to me are big lessons." ■

CITY LIGHTS

Monica Bellucci with the CEO and President of Cartier International, Bernard Fornas, in Shanghai