

WORDS: *Matt Mueller* PHOTOGRAPH: *Chris Floyd*

Power player

In just a few years, Naomi Watts has gone from struggling actress to one of cinema's leading ladies. Here, the star talks about her latest role, in David Cronenberg's Eastern Promises, and how falling in love and having a baby have transformed her life once again

Sporting a loose black tunic with rolled-up sleeves and black leggings, minimal make-up and blonde hair cut in simple, shoulder-length fashion, Naomi Watts makes a mockery of the glam-making machine that trails most Hollywood actresses, who feel interviews demand as much beautifying attention as a night on the red carpet. You can usually count on an on-hand vanity-puffing entourage to supply their charge that A-list glow. However Watts, with her relaxed, natural beauty, obviously requires little effort to look stunning in the flesh.

Meeting up with *Emporium* in Toronto, where she's attending the film festival to promote *Eastern Promises*, the determined, award-winning actress – and brand-new mum – hands her six-week-old son Alexander Pete to the nanny and sits down to discuss her role in David Cronenberg's crime thriller. As Anna, a gentle but lonely midwife, Watts finds herself swept dangerously close to a secret, sinister world of Russian gangsters and sex trafficking in London after she delivers the baby of an abused teen. When the teen's haemorrhaging proves fatal, Anna wants to trace the surviving baby's family. This leads her to uncover lurid, incriminating revelations in the girl's diary that lead her straight to Viggo Mortensen's enigmatic, tattooed driver (Nikolai) and the ruthless Russian criminals he serves.

"The thing that draws me to any role is a transformation," says Watts, 39. "And in this film, I go from being a fairly depressed young woman, not really connecting with anything, to someone who's awakened and starts connecting with other people."

Cronenberg sought out Watts because he knew he needed compelling chemistry between Anna and Nikolai. His hunch

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was proved right as Watts and Mortensen share some gloriously captivating scenes together as they go from adversarial suspicion to tender affection.

Three weeks into *Promises'* shoot, Watts found out she was pregnant with her first child, with partner Liev Schreiber (star of *The Manchurian Candidate*). "It certainly created greater meaning for me," says Watts, who meticulously researches her roles and spent

time in delivery rooms for this one. "You know, holding the baby and all the things I read on midwifery and watching some births and a C-section." Didn't the caesarean give you pause for thought? "Yes! I didn't know I was pregnant at that time but I do remember thinking, 'Whoah, that's intense.'"

Intense roles have always been Watts' stock in trade, although in person she's bright, affable and quick to laugh, unlike the maudlin characters she plays. Born in Shoreham, Kent, Watts had an itinerant childhood. Her father Peter passed away when she was seven, and she and her older brother Ben were ferried around the UK by their Welsh mother Myfanwy, until they all emigrated to Australia when Naomi was 14. There, she began taking acting classes and met Nicole Kidman on her first ever casting call (for a bikini commercial, no less). The two actresses went on to co-star together in the 1991 Aussie film *Flirting*, and have remained firm friends ever since.

Although Watts followed Kidman to California in the early '90s, she could only watch in awe as her friend's career skyrocketed while hers refused to leave the ground. Hollywood for Watts comprised

HIGH FLYER
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of endless near-misses or, when she did score a role, bad TV movies, blink-and-you'd-miss-'em bit parts and trashy horror films such as *Children Of The Corn IV*.

After being told she wasn't sexy enough to play Ben Stiller's girlfriend in *Meet The Parents*, she finally got the break she'd been striving so hard for when David Lynch cast her in *Mulholland Drive* in 2001. She wasn't even required to audition, with Lynch picking her headshot out of a pile of glossies on his desk. Watts stunned critics with her soul-baring performance as Betty/Diane, the split-personality actress who anchors Lynch's surreal kaleidoscope. She suddenly found herself in the club. Big-name directors demanded to meet her and a swift succession of high-profile roles followed: horror hit *The Ring*; Peter Jackson's remake of *King Kong*; and *21 Grams*, for which she was Oscar nominated.

But *King Kong*, says Watts, was a small "detour" rather than a concerted effort to move into blockbusters. She loved the experience, but her inclination to work on independent movies with visionary directors is evident by *Eastern Promises* and her next film, *Funny Games*. The latter is director Michael Haneke's remake of his own disturbing arthouse thriller from 1997. In it, Watts plays a middle-class housewife whose family are submitted to mental and physical torture by two feckless youth.

"I did *Funny Games* before *Eastern Promises* and it's ironic because Michael Haneke is addressing violence in quite a specific way in his film, he's poo-pooing it and any movie that glorifies it or makes it look cool or funny or sexy. So I've got two movies that are sort of contradicting each other. But I choose my films most of the time because of the director and whether there's violence or sex or anything that



Damsel in distress: (clockwise from top) Naomi Watts playing the prey of King Kong; with her real-life partner Liev Schreiber in *The Painted Veil*; alongside actor Vincent Cassel as a midwife who gets lured into a world of Russian gangsters in her latest film, *Eastern Promises*

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might be controversial, I try to make sure that it's always driven by truth."

Even the arrival of baby Alexander (nicknamed Sasha) won't alter the dark material that attracts her. "Obviously it's going to change things from a scheduling point of view, like, 'How long is this shooting? Where? And how do Liev and I make that work?' But I'm not going to suddenly turn around and start making kids movies. Maybe later on, I'll think, 'Oh, I've got to do one for my son or to impress his friends.' But right now, what interested me then is still interesting to me now.

"I'm now much less attached to my career and that came not just with the baby but with meeting Liev. It took me 10 years to get to *Mulholland Drive* and I was on such a mission to keep the momentum, but then I realised I can pull back and relax and enjoy other things too. And now having a baby, I'll probably just want to work once a year."

She and Schreiber met making the period drama *The Painted Veil*, in which she played an unfaithful wife and Schreiber was her callous lover. Since they got together in 2005, they've worked hard to keep their private life under wraps, including battling to avoid the paparazzi, who've become brazen in their schemes to snap the couple's son (Watts had to get a police escort recently just to go food shopping in LA). She describes Schreiber as a "very hands-on dad – if he had his way, he'd be breastfeeding too!"

Currently shooting espionage drama *The International* with Clive Owen in Berlin, due for release next September, Watts has also been linked to a remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, while the theatre-loving (and Tony-award-winning) Schreiber is keen to

see his partner's name in lights on Broadway. Watts isn't so sure, terrified of Manhattan's brutal theatre critics, but she may yet be tempted. For now, though, it's motherhood that's consuming her. She's still struggling to adapt to the two-hour snatches of sleep she's able to grab between changing and feeding ("He's a big eater!") but, for someone who's always prided herself on being punctual, she is also resigned to the chaos. "It's all the packing and the equipment!" she muses. "I can never get the timing right. I'm nursing, so it's all about the feeding and when you try to get in the car, if anything goes wrong, there's a succession of errors and then everything starts going wrong. I will not be on time ever now!"

But Watts wouldn't have it any other way, especially having achieved so many of the goals she set for herself when she emigrated to America. "It feels great to have worked with some really – in my mind – important filmmakers," she says. "I had a great time doing it and I worked with great actors and now, being a mum, I feel like my life is very full and charmed."