

# Femme de Siècle

Audrey Tautou's latest role is worlds away from her super-cute image: that of mysterious and notoriously prickly fashion legend Coco Chanel.

By Matt Mueller

For many, Audrey Tautou is and always will be Amélie. That's a testament to the enduring power of the 2001 film that launched her to international fame, and the actress' delectable performance as its winsome, sugar-sweet heroine. She's far too proud, professional and ambitious to say it out loud but, despite working at a dervish's pace since then (12 films, including her brief Hollywood detour in *The Da Vinci Code*), Tautou has never come close to finding a role as mesmerizing or memorable. Until now, that is – in *Coco avant Chanel*. Scan any photo of the celebrated designer, especially in her younger years, and it's obvious why so many producers have sought out Tautou to play her. Her face is softer than the angular fashion queen's, but she has the same elfin physique combined with an air of provincial origins and steely, evident resolve.

"The character of Coco Chanel has been hovering around me for years," laughs Tautou, ensconced in the suite of a chic Parisian hotel promoting the biopic, which was directed by Anne Fontaine. Perhaps surprisingly, she's not dressed in Chanel today – as she has been for many of *Coco avant Chanel*'s promotional interviews – but rather in a risky, frontier-inspired Marc Jacobs ensemble. Indeed, Karl Lagerfeld – Chanel's creative director since 1983 – has been so impressed by Tautou's fashion sense, he cast her as the prestigious face of Chanel N° 5, replacing Nicole Kidman. (She recently reunited with her *Amélie* director, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, for the scent's new advertising campaign.)

In person, Tautou radiates sweetness and charm, her gently waved, short black hair and piercing dark eyes as captivating close up as they are on a cinema screen. Tautou had an idyllic upbringing in rural France. An outdoor-loving tomboy, she studied the oboe and, inspired by Dian Fossey, wanted to be a primatologist until she caught the acting bug at 14. When she finally moved to Paris to learn the trade, she



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Clockwise from top left In *Coco avant Chanel*, Chanel (Tautou) monitors the workers in one of her factories; Coco with her lover, Arthur ‘Boy’ Capel (Alessandro Nivola); Tautou as the moody Chanel

recalls being terrified by the stylish Parisian women and considered fleeing back to the countryside. But, like Chanel, she persevered in the face of adversity.

Sitting in Tautou’s steady, unflinching gaze, it’s not hard to believe Fontaine’s claim that she was her one and only choice to play Chanel. “She’s very thin, androgynous, like a little boy,” says Fontaine. “And she has this toughness when she looks at you, as well as a charming smile. It’s that mixture, that ambiguity, that was so perfect.”

Tautou responded positively to Fontaine’s plan to portray Chanel only before the designer became an icon. “This period, when Coco was building herself and asserting her personality, was the most interesting part of her life,” says the 32-year-old actress, who draws parallels with her own experience as someone who toiled for years honing her craft before gaining success. “When a person succeeds beautifully in life, they have a tendency to say, ‘I was sure of this success!’ I was fortunate to experience that with *Amélie*, but before that, I had no clue that fame would land on me. I was, like everybody, trying to move forward with doubts and questions and uncertainties.”

To call Coco Chanel a legend is to understate her phenomenal impact on fashion history, so it is surprising that only now has a French director put her life on film. Fontaine admits that the French film industry – perhaps worried about besmirching the country’s icons – has never been keen on the biopic as a genre. It was perhaps the global success of *La Vie en Rose*, which garnered Marion Cotillard an Oscar for her portrayal of Edith Piaf, that helped bring Coco’s story into existence. (Their stories even have similar origins: Chanel, too, was a penniless cabaret singer before she became the legendary couturière; in fact, the nickname ‘Coco’ came from the title of a song she used to perform).

Gorgeously shot with lavish period detail and a charismatic performance from Tautou, *Coco avant Chanel* follows the notoriously spiky and formidable couture queen as she scrapes her way up in a man’s world – from provincial seamstress to world-famous designer. There are many *amour* detours along the way, too: Coco was the kept woman of wealthy playboy Étienne Balsan (Benoît Poelvoorde), who introduced her to equestrianism, her lifelong passion outside fashion; and she had a doomed love affair with Arthur ‘Boy’ Capel (Alessandro Nivola), a polo-playing British industrialist who is said to have inspired many of her designs.

Tautou expertly conveys Chanel’s free-spiritedness and sharp-tongued wit, and even sees some of herself in the prickly superstar. “There may be a similar lucidity on the world that surrounds us, a sense of attention and observation,” Tautou muses. “A faith in one’s instincts; a capacity to decipher quickly the true personality of

another person, his psychology and intentions. Chanel was not easily impressed. She was quick in detecting hypocrisy and superficiality. I hope I am like her – a very upright, honest person who does not sell her soul.”

Although the film only goes up to the beginnings of Chanel’s celebrity, her personal style and the inspirations for her pure, unstructured garments take centre stage. The designer, whose boyish look was shocking in its day, waged an all-out war on breath-stifling corsets, flouncy, frilly gowns and ridiculous hats that she called ‘pies’. She revolutionised female style with her signature elegant simplicity, often taking inspiration from her lovers’ wardrobes (her passion for tweed jackets reputedly came from the Duke of Westminster).

“Chanel anticipated feminism,” says Fontaine. “She created a very simple uniform for this period and influenced a way for women to be independent. She changed things not in an ideological way, but in a practical way. It was fascinating that a woman of no cultural background just used her own personality to invent. She was her own laboratory.”

Fontaine was keen to show the inspiration for some of Chanel’s best-known creations. However, as no one can say for sure, Fontaine instructed the film’s costume designer, Catherine Leterrier, to imagine believable scenarios. So Chanel’s striped sailor’s top, jodhpur-style trousers, the little black dress and, of course, the famous bag – shown in its humble origins as a quilted canvas sewing kit – all make star appearances.

Though many biographies have been written about Chanel, she was notoriously vague about her past. So it’s no wonder Tautou sometimes felt a bit confused about her performance. “It takes some cunning to know who Chanel really was,” adds Tautou. “I’m still not sure that everything that has been said and written about her is close to her true self.”

“Audrey was worried she was not being tough enough,” adds Fontaine. “I had to push her to be more weak because when Coco was young, she was not like she was at the end: cold and not very kind. I tried to make her vulnerable underneath the toughness.”

Tautou believes Chanel’s legend endures because, for all the obstacles that life tossed in her path, she never gave in. “Her strong nature, her arrogance, her pride and her intelligence allowed her to create what she achieved. She wasn’t concerned with others, or their recognition of her success. She was only dedicated to fulfilling herself.” ■

**Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Premiere, Grazia, The Guardian and Wonderland**

**Coco avant Chanel opens on 31st July in the UK**