

What Kirsten did next

From child vampire to tragic Beth in *Little Women*, romantic comedies to action films, it's impossible to pigeonhole Kirsten Dunst, as her latest role in Lars von Trier's apocalyptic art-house movie *Melancholia* confirms

BY MATT MUELLER

Ever since she landed the Best Actress prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival for her role as a depressed bride in *Melancholia*, Kirsten Dunst has been feeling in a celebratory mood. "It was a big deal; it is a big deal. I keep celebrating," she says with infectious delight. The celebratory splurge has come with friends, family and colleagues. Dunst is proud of her victory, and rightly so. "I've been working in this industry for a long time. Even though I'm only 29, it's been 20 years of my life, and it feels good to be awarded something."

Melancholia comes from the mind of celebrated and controversial Danish provocateur Lars von Trier. The film features Dunst as Justine, a bride who sinks into a terrible depression on the day of her opulent wedding party but comes to find a strange comfort in the fact that the Earth is on an apocalyptic collision course with the giant celestial body of the title. Impending doom suits Justine – and Dunst rises to the occasion with a performance of wonderful depth and subtlety against von Trier's lush dreamscape visuals. The notion of Dunst starring in a seriously adult European art-house film might surprise some people, and it's not stretching matters to say that *Melancholia* is set to galvanise the actress' image and career.

For an entire generation, Dunst has been the embodiment of hip American teendom, but watching her stroll into a restaurant in New York's West Village dispels any notion that she's still that winsome high-school cutie with the snaggle-toothed smile. She's still sweet, and cute, the smile still endearingly imperfect (a trait that gives her beauty an unrefined quality and makes her interesting to watch). But today she's also a vision of sophisticated adult poise. Sporting a

summery Louis Vuitton dress – she's just come from the Upper West Side launch of her friend Sofia Coppola's new Vuitton collection – she strides elegantly to our corner table, where she orders chilled radish soup and an iced latté for lunch.

For those who haven't paid attention to Dunst's career in recent years, *Melancholia* serves as one of those stand-up-and-take-notice moments that any actress with serious aspirations dreams of happening. It's no surprise to hear Dunst say that she's always paid heed to who has won the best actress prize "because it felt like a really important thing to win as an actress in people that I admire". Cannes' bigwigs asked Dunst to stay for their awards ceremony, telling her the film might win something. Von Trier, having been declared "persona non grata" by the festival following a bizarre rant expressing sympathy with the Nazis, was unlikely to be the recipient but Dunst wasn't counting her chickens. She borrowed a dress from Chanel and turned up at the Palme d'Or shindig "thinking not negatively but very rationally so that if it didn't happen, I wouldn't be upset. When I was speaking to Lars earlier that day, he said, 'If I win for anything, please accept it on my behalf and say that I'm a big idiot.'"

As it was, her triumph shifted the spotlight away from von Trier's strange antics – and she insists all is forgiven. "He's a friend but the things he said were inappropriate," she says, adding, "He apologised. He felt very bad because it affected all of us." But it hasn't tainted her fond memories of making the film in Sweden, not least because the fact that the Danish filmmaker had sought her out in the first place "was a huge deal. When he told me that I had the part, I got off the phone, ran upstairs and was just jumping ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Dunst as depressed bride Justine in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*; in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*; with Simon Pegg in *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*; as pre-adolescent vampire Claudia in *Interview with the Vampire*; playing girl-next-door Mary-Jane Watson to Tobey Maguire's superhero in *Spider-Man*

up and down, cheering. I was like a little kid.”

For someone who's been on movie screens since she was a little kid (appearing in more than 60 movies to date), Dunst has appeared in her fair share of non-serious roles. In recent years, she's probably registered most prominently as an endearing romantic comedy presence (*Wimbledon*, *Elizabethtown* and *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*), or as love interest Mary-Jane Watson in the *Spider-Man* trilogy. But what has always marked out Dunst from her Hollywood peers is an admirable willingness to seek out riskier characters – an attribute no doubt instilled in the actress by a mother who was happy to let her daughter take on the role of the pre-adolescent vampire Claudia in *Interview with the Vampire*, despite the character's overt sexual overtones. It's a role that many other stage mothers steered their daughters well clear of, and one that Dunst remembers with abiding fondness.

“I was like the princess on that film,” she recalls. “Tom [Cruise] was so sweet and Brad [Pitt] is such a nice guy. I was the only girl in a movie with these two hunks. I was taken care of very nicely. And I was protected too. My character was sexualised, but my acting teacher would describe things in a way that a little girl could relate to, like ‘Imagine that you're hiding your favourite toy from your brother’ and that would result in me giving a look that could be seen to be coquettish.”

From those vampiric origins, Dunst went family-friendly for a few years in films like *Jumanji* and *Little Women* before striking out into an intriguing late-adolescent phase, playing a suicidal teen in *The Virgin Suicides* for neophyte director Sofia Coppola – “if I wasn't in the movie, it would be one of my favourites”, she explains. As Dunst reveals, “I've often chosen roles not because it's the best script but because I can do something different with the role.” She was also in the frame for some of Hollywood's most coveted young actress parts, landing the key role of Mary-Jane Watson in *Spider-Man* and its two sequels. Calling it “a landmark role in my career”, Dunst admits that she misses “our crew” – that is her co-stars Tobey Maguire and James Franco,

and the film's director Sam Raimi – now that their participation in the *Spider-Man* franchise has come to an end. Which is why *Melancholia*, and her Best Actress victory, have come along at precisely the right time for Dunst and her career.

She's honest about how her experiences have informed the character of Justine. Dunst revealed in 2008 that she had sought treatment for depression, and agrees that this difficult time had helped her understand Justine's disconsolate depths. “Every film I do is a cathartic experience, and I should be able to take things from my life,” she says. “I think that's the only way people feel truly moved by a performance. And depression isn't an easy thing to portray on film. People get embarrassed talking about it, so I hope that people who have been through a similar thing, or are going through it, will get something out of it.” She adds with a smile, “It's funny when people ask me if *Melancholia* is a sci-fi movie, because it's not.”

With her mother of Swedish-Alsatian heritage and her father German-born, Dunst feels an affinity for Europe and makes regular sojourns to Germany to visit relatives. One of her biggest joys with *Melancholia* is the fact that her grandfather, who lives in Hamburg, is “getting all this attention in Germany now”.

“I feel like I have a European sensibility,” muses Dunst, “and I'm ambitious in the way that I want to do the best work I can do. I want to push myself. I want to work with great people.” But she isn't about to turn her back on the mainstream roles that have brought her so much recognition and success. She's worked with von Trier, but she's not about to dash into the film-making arms of any Tomas, Dirk or Milos who comes calling. “I like doing big films, and I miss doing comedies,” she vouches. “I've been crying too much on screen recently. I'm ready to have fun now, for a little while at least.” ■

***Melancholia* opens on 30th September in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian

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