



Been there, Dunst that

Not yet 30 but an actress for more than 20 years and a bone fide Hollywood star for ten, Kirsten Dunst once measured herself in terms of fame. Now, her own experience with depression is shaping her latest role and how she judges herself

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IT'S hard to know which Kirsten Dunst to expect before she arrives at our rendezvous. As an actress who has virtually grown up on screen with a generation of moviegoers, stitched into the pop-culture fabric for nearly two decades now, the obvious contender would be the sunny, sweet, winsome presence who has lit up everything from the *Spider-Man* trilogy to *Marie Antoinette* and made banal romantic comedies such as *Elizabethtown* and *Wimbledon* watchable. But there's a new Dunst in town too, a sad, haunted presence as epitomised in her latest film, the dark, mesmerising *Melancholia*, in which she plays a young woman gripped by severe depression, as Dunst herself was a couple of years ago – before seeking help to overcome it.

Although she's just a few months off 30, there's something of the teenager stuck in our minds, but she certainly looks all grown-up as she waltzes into Café Cluny, the busy brasserie in New York's West Village that she has designated as our meeting point. She's fresh from the uptown launch of Sofia Coppola's latest collection for Louis Vuitton. "It was a nice way to start the morning," says Dunst cheerily. "Usually, fashion shows you want to run out as fast as you can." And she's certainly dressed for the occasion, sporting a short, blue Vuitton dress with gold sandals in honour of her good pal's promotional jamboree. Appearing both fresh as a daisy and cute as a button, Dunst flashes the enchanting, snaggle-toothed smile that has always marked her out from her Hollywood peer pack as she introduces herself. At the start of her career, some not-so-wise owls suggested she should have her teeth fixed, including her own mother Inez, but Dunst wisely held firm.

It's a muggy summer day and the actress asks for a glass of tap water as soon as she's sitting down. She lives further downtown in TriBeCa, but picked Café Cluny for its mellow vibe. I suspect she also likes the fact that it attracts a regular celebrity clientele,

allowing her to blend into the surroundings that little bit easier; Julianne Moore was spotted having lunch here the day before and Matthew Broderick is seated at a table opposite. Running a hand through her shoulder-length blonde hair, Dunst quickly thumbs the menu. "Are you going to eat something? I ate while I was at Sofia's thing, but I'll definitely have a little something."

Going for chilled radish soup and an iced latte, Dunst launches into a bit of chit chat about how she has recently developed a phobia about getting deep-vein thrombosis. "I take children's aspirin before and after I fly, because it could happen to anyone at any age. So I have that new fear in my life." She laughs, adding, "The radiation from the sun is so much worse during the day so you should always try to fly at night." I tell her she should write a book on travel tips since she spends so much time in the air. She looks momentarily mortified, like I've just upbraided her for not having more engaging matters on her mind than blood-clot disorders. Not the intention at all, but she loosens up as soon as I bring up *Melancholia* and praise her performance as Justine, the blushing bride who sinks into a great depression right when the world looks like it's about to end.

Even if Cannes hadn't awarded Dunst their Best Actress prize, it would be a turn worth talking about because *Melancholia* unveils a richer, deeper side to the actress that bodes well for her future at a time when she needs a transition to a new, more adult phase of her career or risks facing irrelevance. Not surprisingly, she's still giddy about her win, recounting all the celebrating she has been packing in with family and friends. Dunst is a big one for celebration – she recalls that when director Lars Von Trier phoned her to tell her the part was hers, she squealed with delight, ran upstairs in her rented house in Montreal (where she was shooting an adaptation of *On the Road*), and started jumping up and down on the bed with visiting friends like a gaggle of Twihards who'd just spotted Robert Pattinson. "I was

such a little kid," is Dunst's apt description, an excitable image that could have been plucked from one of her films. "Opportunities like this don't come around very often," she shrugs. "I knew it was a huge deal."

Her mother and brother were reduced to tears when they found out she'd won, and Dunst feels "very proud". "I've been working in this industry for a long time. Even though I'm only 29 it has been 20 years of my life and it feels good to be awarded something. It doesn't give me any false confidence, I just feel proud of myself."

Nonetheless, when the festival asked Dunst to hang around for the closing-night ceremony, she thought she might be collecting a prize on behalf of Von Trier, unable to attend after being deemed "persona non grata" at Cannes following his bizarre rant about Nazism. Talking about his background at the press conference, he said he "was very happy being a Jew" but "then I found out that I was really a Nazi, you know, because my family was German". Referring to Hitler, he said, "I sympathize with him a little bit."

Dunst borrowed a dress from Chanel and turned up at the Palme d'Or shindig "very rationally, so that if it didn't happen, I wouldn't be upset. I remember someone getting a phone call while I was in make-up and my mind immediately went to the negative. I thought, 'They're phoning to tell me I didn't win.' And when I was speaking to Lars earlier that day, he was like, 'If I win for anything, please accept it and say that I'm a big idiot.'"

Dunst would have been within her rights to call von Trier an idiot, although she doesn't. Given that the Danish provocateur had taken her out the night before and apologised "in the way that Lars would apologise", it might have seemed churlish to chide his mistake, although she says, "I still can't believe he said those things".

Von Trier, who has sought out starry female stars for years (Nicole Kidman, Björk), had originally cast Penelope Cruz as Justine. When the Spanish star dropped out to do the fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, Von Trier turned to Dunst. "People were saying, 'He's obsessed with you!'" the actress giggles. "I was like, 'Great news!' I read the script, I felt like I could play this role and I was dying to work with Lars."

Melancholia is split into two chapters. In the first, 'Justine', Dunst's initially chirpy newlywed falls apart at her own lush wedding party, indulging in odd, impulsive behaviour to the growing disapproval of family and friends. In the second, 'Claire' (after her sister, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg), she's seized by a depression so severe that even taking a bath or eating breakfast require huge effort, before entering a state of



KIRSTEN TIME (Clockwise from top left) Dunst with Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise in *Interview with the Vampire*; in *Melancholia*; winning Best Actress at Cannes; in *Marie-Antoinette*; (below) with boyfriend Jason Boesel



grace as the mega-planet *Melancholia* thunders on an apocalyptic collision-course with Earth. "I feel like Justine was very romantic about love, but it's a lost love she's pining for," says Dunst. "Before her marriage she could manage her depression. But then you see her family, and her mother denounces the wedding... There are some people who feel that everything will be OK when they get married. But you can't change the person inside."

Von Trier has described Justine as a manifestation of his own battles with depression, and Dunst has first-hand experience as well. In early 2008, the actress checked herself into the Cirque Lodge Treatment Center in Utah to seek treatment after being gripped by depression. The timing coincided roughly with the break-up of her relationship with Razorlight frontman Johnny Borrell, and when rumours circulated that her hard-partying lifestyle had caught up with her and she was actually being treated for drug and alcohol abuse, Dunst decided to go public. Now she characterises her melancholy as something that struck her unexpectedly during a "growing" period in her life, but also something that she has completely overcome.

"I'm not anywhere near that now," she says. "I'm a very positive person, I'm not a depressive personality at all,

but there were a succession of things that happened to me that helped bring it on... I think it's something that all people go through at some point in their life. If you don't, that's not very human, that's kind of weird. There are so many facets to depression, and if you're not treated well it just gets worse and worse. It's something that changes you but it's also something that's very hard to figure out while you're in it."

Dunst pauses, unwilling to go further except to add, "Every film that I do should be a cathartic experience, and I should be able to take things from my life. That's the only way people feel truly moved by a performance, I think. It's hard to make a movie about depression. People get really embarrassed talking about it, so I hope that this film can connect with people who have been through something similar or are going through something now."

The actress entrusted herself entirely to Von Trier's vision. The only moments where she had pause was the film's nudity, in particular a scene where she lies outstretched on a riverbank, bathed in eerie moonlight. Not that Dunst felt shy in any way - "I have no problems showing my body." She just wanted to make sure the director handled those moments tastefully. But she did issue warnings to her family, who had yet to see *Melancholia* when we met. "My dad [Klaus] said the sweetest thing. I was



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like, 'Dad, you know I'm naked in the movie.' And he said, 'Yeah, but you have a nice body and you're beautiful and I know you would only do it in a tasteful, artistic way - I trust my daughter with that,'" says Dunst, who isn't really digging her chilled radish soup and pushes the bowl away ("I'm not a salt person, and it's so salty"). "I was like, 'You made the body so you should be happy!' Whereas my brother was like, 'Whatever, Keek... I'll close my eyes.'"

The way that Dunst has navigated the journey from bright-eyed child star to adult actress is a testament to her talent, the likeable warmth she projects on screen laced with a dash of rock 'n' roll edge (it's no surprise that she has frequently dated musicians, like current squeeze Jason Boesel, the drummer with US rock band Rilo Kiley), and the smart choices she has made. Or rather, the ones her mother made for her early in her career. Dunst was lucky off the bat that Inez agreed to let her play the precociously sexual child vampire Claudia in *Interview with the Vampire* when she was only 11, when other stage mothers were steering their daughters clear of the controversial role.

It was a formative experience. Besides being treated like "a little princess" by co-stars Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt, Dunst's coquettish performance was coaxed out of her with risqué scenes described in ways that a little girl could

relate to, for instance being told she was trying to hide her favourite toys from her brother. But Dunst's strongest memory is of being completely grossed out when she had to nibble on the neck of another actress. "The worst part of the whole shoot was having to bite into this woman's neck, and she was so sweaty and gross," she shudders. "I kept running up to Neil [Jordan] and going, 'It's so gross, she sweats so much!' I hated the taste of the fake blood too. But all the dramatic things, I would accept. It wasn't traumatising at all."

The film set the template for a career in which Dunst has always felt emboldened to take risks (for instance, working with Sofia Coppola on her debut *The Virgin Suicides*), while also fitting in the roles that keep her star profile high and Hollywood interested. Chief among those have been playing Spider-Man's flame-haired squeeze. "I knew me and Tobey [Maguire] had amazing chemistry right away," she says. The superhero trilogy granted Dunst the keys to global superstardom, and she's sad that her time as Mary-Jane Watson is now behind her. "It was such a benchmark in my life, I really miss the continuity of seeing those people every couple of years. We were a great crew," she sighs. There had been talk that she, Maguire, James Franco and director Sam Raimi would reunite for a fourth outing, until Sony Pictures

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decided to start afresh with a younger cast, headed up by Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone. It must be strange, I suggest, seeing something that's recent history for her already getting rebooted for the next generation. "Actually, maybe it's better it happens now because I still feel young and cute," she smiles. "Better than it happening 20 years from now when I don't feel that way!"

Dunst wants to look on the bright side, something she might have felt challenged to do in the recent past. She admits that the critical and box-office failure of Sofia Coppola's candy-coated biopic *Marie Antoinette* stung hard, and her last film prior to a two-year career hiatus leading up to *Melancholia* was *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* - enough to send anyone into rehab. But that break did her good. She moved to New York, went to art school and indulged in other creative past-times besides acting, because "I needed to do something creative that I didn't have to share with everyone else. That can be exhausting." It wasn't burnout exactly. "But sometimes I got tired of it... when you're so successful at a young age, you need to stand back sometimes and look at the career you're having. Earlier in my career, I relied too much on it fulfilling me instead of being fulfilled in an artistic way. I needed to take a break to do other things that I love."

For the past two years, Dunst has called Manhattan home. She sold her house in LA and much prefers the pace and, yes, claustrophobia of New York City life (she never felt comfortable on her own in a big, rambling house). Her brother, who's studying at New York University, lives around the corner, while both parents are on the West Coast. Relations were strained between Dunst and her mother for a while, but they're back on good terms and she often stays with her when she's in LA. She's also very close to her German-born father, taking a road trip with him across Germany earlier this year on her way to record additional dialogue for *Melancholia* in Copenhagen, stopping in Hamburg to visit her grandfather.

This summer, Dunst rocked up in Glastonbury with Boesel and holidayed in Florence, where sisters Kate and Laura Mulleavy (founders of US fashion label Rodarte) had an exhibition. "I feel like I definitely have a more European sensibility," says Dunst. "I love the United States. But I feel so comfortable in Europe. More relaxed in a way."

That's the mood that best describes Dunst as she reaches the end of her 20s. "I'm not ambitious in the way that I was before... I mean I want to push myself, I want to work with great people but I'm not obsessed any more with celebrity and being the most famous, being anything other than just in the radar so I can still do whatever I want to do." ■

Melancholia (15) is in cinemas from Friday